A Need for Cultural Experiences for Black Students with Intellectual Disabilities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

This position paper examines the intersectionality of race and disability and the impact on inclusive postsecondary educational (PSE) opportunities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Based on a history of segregation and oppression those who are Black and those who have an intellectual disability (ID) share many of the same experiences. HBCUs continue to play a substantial role in the Black communities and higher education by providing educational opportunities, but also a cultural experience. Black students with ID have limited opportunities for an inclusive PSE experience at an HBCU therefore, forego this cultural experience. A closer is look is taken at the lack of inclusive PSE programs for Black students with ID. It is said that society is measured by how it treats those on the margin, living in the shadows. Can society commit to fundamental changes that will make inclusive PSE programs at HBCUs more of a reality for Black students with ID or continue to support attitudes and practices that deny opportunities to those who are already marginalized in today's society?

Keywords: HBCUs, intellectual disabilities, intersectionality, postsecondary education

Introduction

The Office of Postsecondary Education provided financial support through grants to institutions of higher education to create or expand the number of inclusive Postsecondary Education (PSE) programs for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) throughout the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Unfortunately, this financial support and opportunity did not increase the number of inclusive PSE programs for Black students with ID to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). This position paper examines the

intersectionality paradox of Black individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) afforded with limited opportunities of attending an inclusive PSE program at an HBCU.

Racial identity is very personal and up to the individual and the language used to refer and document demographically to a person's race reflects that preference. In this paper, the "b" in Black is capitalized in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity, culture, and community among people who identify as Black. Black and African American are not always interchangeable. African American is typically used to refer to descendants of people from Africa who were enslaved. Some people prefer the term Black because they do not identify as African and/or American, because they cannot trace their lineage back to Africa or because being Black is not just about race, it's an entire culture. (Helling & Chandler, 2021).

In this paper, individuals with disabilities are those students who qualify to receive special education and related services under the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004. In 2019-2020, 7.3 million students received special education services under IDEA's 13 categories (NCES, 2021). According to the racial/ethnic enrollment demographic data in 2019-2020, 17% of students with disabilities identify as Black, 9.5 % are Black students with autism, and 8.9% are Black students with an intellectual disability (NCES, 2021). Black students within the federal criteria of an intellectual disability which can include both individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities are the focus population of this paper.

The intersection of race and disability remains a particularly neglected area of research (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Intersectionality is a concept that recognizes the fact that membership in groups can make people vulnerable to forms of bias, but because individuals are members of various groups, complex identities can shape how bias is experienced (Gillborn, 2015). The movement of individuals with disabilities cultivated the "minority model" framework which emphasized discrimination as the primary barrier limiting the opportunities of people with disabilities (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Frederick & Shifrer (2019) further the concept that through the construction of the minority model, it established the similarity between disability oppression and the prejudice and discrimination experienced by racial and ethnic minority groups.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are institutions that were established with the principal mission to educate Black Americans. The first HBCU, the Institute for Colored Youth, now known as Chaney University, was established in 1837 by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker from Philadelphia (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). In 1890, the second Morrill Land-Grant Act, provided federal support for public HBCUs such as The Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negros, now Florida A & M University (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). HBCUs were given the HBCU destination because of the Higher Education Act of 1965. These institutions were developed from a history of oppression and constant challenges of legal segregation such as "separate but equal" provision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and "separate is not equal" in the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* in 1954 and still provided access to higher education to Black students after decades of exclusion (Allen et. al., 1991; Allen et. al., 2007; Killough et al., 2018; NCES, n.d.). HBCUs opened the educational opportunities for many Black students who were once legally denied an education and provided students with a nurturing environment to explore their collective identities and cultures upholding a history of scholarship in the face of adversity (Helling & Chandler, 2021). HBCUs are known for providing an education for many Black students who are first generation college attendees, from low socio-economic status, and/or from single parent households (Gordon, et al., 2021). Literature (Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Gordon et. al., 2021; Helling & Chandler, 2021; Killough et al., 2018) supports a positive effect of HBCU's on graduation rates. Furthermore, it has been established there is a correlation between college attendance and graduation on the employment outcomes of Black students (Gordon et al., 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). HBCUs offer a rich campus culture and a uniquely diverse and inclusive environment that provides students an education that is culturally relevant to their identity of being Black. Students are surrounded by people with similar backgrounds and experiences. HBCUs continue to provide a role in the Black community and in higher education by providing a culture of excellence (Cantey et al., 2013). This essence of culture is so valued at HBCUs that many schools mandate a course in Black history (Alston et al., 2020).

Individuals with Disabilities

Also challenged with adversity and exclusion are individuals with disabilities. The education of individuals with disabilities has also evolved over time. Many students with

disabilities were excluded entirely from any public supported education and confined to state-run institutions (Martin et al., 1996). In 1954, in the court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, it was ruled that segregation violated equal educational opportunity. While this decision was based on the injustice of racial segregation, it established a broad understanding that all people deserve equal access to an education (Yell et al., 1998). In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142, the *Education of All Handicapped Children Act* that completely changed the education of students with disabilities in the United States. P.L. 94-142 has been reauthorized and amended five times. The 1990 amendments renamed the law to *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) developing people-first language. The most recent reauthorization of IDEA occurred in 2004, PL 108-466, and is titled *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*. Over four decades ago, Congress identified the primary barrier facing individuals with disabilities as prejudicial attitudes based on a history of segregation and invisibility (Harris, 2019). Individuals with disabilities still experience profound forms of inequality and remain the most marginalized and discriminated against population in the world (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; International Disability Alliance, n.d.).

Comprehensive Transition Postsecondary Programs

Driven by the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA, 2008) and evidence that inclusive postsecondary education (PSE) positively impacts employment and adult outcomes of individuals with intellectual disabilities, comprehensive transition, and postsecondary programs (CTPs) have emerged. The HEOA (2008) includes provisions related to the eligibility of students with intellectual disabilities to participate in federal funding programs according to §34 CFR 668.233. Participation of students with intellectual disabilities in two- and four-year postsecondary programs is positively correlated with competitive employment (Moon et al., 2011), improved sense of independence (Neubert & Redd, 2008), and increased satisfaction in such domains as emotional well-being and personal development (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012). Hundreds of universities in the U.S. currently offer college experience programs for students with intellectual disabilities (Think College, n.d.).

A CTP has earned accreditation status from the U.S. Department of Education and may be a degree, certificate, non-degree, or non-certificate program provided by a Title IV-participating institution delivered to students physically attending the institution. The benefit of being approved by the U.S. Department of Education means programs adhere to rigorous

curriculum programming, inclusive practices, and accountability. More importantly CTPs provide federal financial assistance, (i.e., Pell Grants) for students who would financially not be able to attend a university-based program. CTPs are designed to support students with ID seeking to continue academic, career and technical, and independent living instruction at an institute of higher education to prepare for gainful employment. CTPs include an advising and curriculum structure where students with ID have at least half of their participation in the program focus on academic components taken along with students without disabilities. CTPs provide students with ID opportunities to participate in coursework and traditional college activities and events with students without disabilities (ThinkCollege.net). Not all PSE programs have earned CTP accreditation status. Among the students being served under IDEA within the ages 14-21 in 2019-2020, 12% identified as Black. This group of students was the greatest percentage of all race/ethnicity groups that exited high school by receiving a certificate of completion, modified diploma, or some similar document, confirming the fact they did not meet the same standards for graduation as those students without disabilities, therefore making them eligible for a PSE or CTP program (NCES, 2021).

Opportunities at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Comparing the number of HBCUs recognized by US Department of Education (2021) with *The Hundred-Seven* (2018) there are 101 HBCUs located in 21 states and the US Virgin Islands. Of the 101 HBCUs, 90 are considered 4-year institutions, four are community colleges, three are theological seminaries, two are medical schools and two do not offer undergraduate degrees or certificates. Alabama has ten HBCUs which is currently the largest number in one state. The number of HBCUs can fluctuate given data reporting constraints (Gordon et al., 2021). Using this data, 94 HBCUs will be examined in this paper. Cross-referencing the 94 HBCUs with US Department of Education Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary program data (2021) and Think College -College Search (n.d.), there is only one HBCU, Alabama A & M University, located in Normal, Alabama, that offers an inclusive PSE opportunity for students with ID. *The Bulldog L.I.F.E* (Learning Independence, Fostering Education and Employment*)* Program (Think College, 2022).

The Bulldog L.I.F.E Program is a 2-year College Campus Transition program (CCTP) administered by the Alabama A & M Rehabilitation Counseling program. The program goal is to provide students with intellectual disabilities a transitional linkage to increased self-advocacy,

independence, and person-centered employment. The Bulldog L.I.F.E. Program is certified by the US Department of Education therefore eligible students can receive federal financial assistance.

A Need for HBCU Cultural Experience for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The intersectionality between race and disability has been established and supported through current literature (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; Gillborn, 2015; Shaw et al., 2012). Those individuals who are Black and have ID have endured significant barriers and injustices ranging from limited access to educational resources, overrepresentation in poorly funded schools and negative post-school outcomes (Hughes & Avoke, 2010). Nichols (2004) and Allen et al. (1991) both identified the number one goal of HBCUs is maintaining the Black American historical and cultural traditions. HBCU cultural experience is an integrated pattern of knowledge, belief and behavior that depends on experience and social learning which are critical skills for all students but especially Black students with ID. Students with ID benefit from concrete learning tasks and authentic experiences that reduce barriers and enhance capabilities (Agarwal et al., 2021). Black students with ID should have the same opportunity to experience the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that are characterized at an HBCU. Even with massive political and legislative support having been established to secure educational equity, there is still a lack of opportunities for those Black students with ID to attend an HBCU to have the same cultural experience as those students without disabilities. Culture informs our way of being, it is what shapes belief and values as well as influences behavior.

Cultural competence implies the existence of a shared culture, respecting and valuing diversity in theory and practice (Sleeter, 2012). Cultural competence is a term used to describe a range of interventions used in diverse settings to increase the quality of services (Klotz, 2006). Initially, cultural competence focused on racial and ethnic differences. More recently, cultural competence has been expanded to other marginalized population groups who are at risk for stigmatization for reasons other than race and ethnicity such as disabilities (Javier, 2021). Furthermore, social responsibility is advocacy for the needs of others and program implementation that reflects a focus on social issues affecting contemporary global societies and communities. By this definition, as a society, we are socially responsible for the cultural competence and experiences of Black students with ID by affording them the opportunities to attend an inclusive postsecondary HBCU program; therefore, there is an immediate need to

establish such programs. What role can you play in increasing the inclusive PSE programs at HBCUs? Increase your knowledge on inclusive PSE programs. Identify key stakeholders that could have an impact on establishing an inclusive PSE at an HBCU or have been impacted by an individual with a disability. Reach out to HBCU alumni about starting a program on their campus. Align with advocacy groups who have an interest in advancing the postsecondary opportunities for Black students with ID.

The past has taught us about segregation, discrimination, and inequality in education. The present is teaching us about acceptance of differences and the value of cultural competence. The future can provide opportunities for Black students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to share the same cultural experiences and postsecondary education at a Historically Black College or University while preparing to become contributing members of society and reducing the negative outcomes of the intersectionality of being Black and having an intellectual disability.

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