Upholding Black Excellence: The Vital Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and a Call for Support

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are founded on the mission of providing education to Black students amidst a time of racial segregation, Jim Crow laws, and rampant systemic oppression. Thus, HBCUs have long been pillars of opportunity, excellence, and empowerment for this marginalized student population. While today segregation has ended, modern Jim Crow laws remain and are upheld by continued systemic oppression that disadvantages Black communities. With Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts currently under attack the importance of these institutions cannot be overstated and is pivotal to the higher education landscape.

A study by Gasman and Commodore in 2014 found that HBCUs enroll a higher percentage of Black students than any other type of institution and are more successful in graduating these students at comparable and/or higher rates. HBCUs have produced a disproportionately high number of Black professionals, leaders, and trailblazers in various fields, including business, politics, science, and the arts. The Biden-Harris administration highlighted from the U.S. Department of Education in 2023 that, “despite representing only 3% of colleges and universities, HBCU graduates play an outsized role to support the economic mobility of African Americans” They produce 40% of all Black engineers, 50% of all Black teachers, 70% of all Black doctors and dentists, and 80% of all Black judges. Research conducted by Dr. Robert Palmer of Howard University, emphasizes the critical role of HBCUs in promoting access to higher education for marginalized communities. These institutions serve as bridges to social mobility, offering pathways for Black students who have historically faced barriers to entry in traditional higher education settings. HBCUs have a dual responsibility to position and prepare their students for future success. They are also obligated to meet the same curriculum standards as predominantly white institutions while simultaneously offering Black students an education that is culturally relevant. HBCUs define their mission as encompassing not only the welfare of their students, but the interests of society.

Further beyond their academic importance, these institutions serve as hubs for community engagement, social and civic mobilization, and preservation of culture. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are essential in fostering a sense of belonging, pride in identity, and access to affordable education. An additional research study by Gasman further highlights how HBCUs are safe spaces for nurturing leadership, activism, and cultural awareness for Black and students of color. These spaces enable opportunity to empower these students and be agents of change in their communities and globally. HBCU networks provide leadership development,

long standing relationships, and access to professional affiliations such as Black professional associations, student leadership organizations, and Black greek letter organizations.

With all of these important advancements and efforts from these institutions they continue to face a series of challenges. Most notably financial support and stability that causes extensive resource constraints. According to a 2019 report by the United Negro College Fund, most HBCUs receive less than one-fifth of the funding allocated to other public universities. Additionally, many HBCUs struggle to attract and retain students due to limited resources and access to financial aid. According to the U.S. Secretary of Education and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, in 16 states there has been a 12 billion dollar disparity in funding between land grant-grant HBCUs and their non-HBCU counterparts between 1987 and 2020. This has resulted in forcing many HBCUs to operate with inadequate resources and delaying investments in campus infrastructure, student support services, research development, and more. Despite the signing of a Presidential Executive Order increasing federal funding to HBCUs in 2017, the Congress HBCU PARTNERS bill of 2021, and recent private donations in excess of $800 million to minority-serving institutions including several HBCUs, the financial gap between HBCUs and PWIs is still extensive. HBCUs tend to have smaller endowments, receive less state funding than larger PWIs, and depend heavily on fundraising. Unlike other institutions that may find themselves in similar situations, HBCUs cannot compensate for these funding drawbacks with tuition increases that are incompatible with serving minority, first-generation, and low-income students.

Ultimately, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have shown great resilience and ability to do so much more with less. However, this should not be a continued expectation or reality for these institutions nor an unfair hardship that goes unnoticed and unaddressed. It is imperative upon policymakers, philanthropists, and stakeholders in higher education to recognize the importance of HBCUs and commit to providing them with the resources, funding, and support they need to continue their public interest missions. This includes increasing federal and state funding, expanding scholarship and grant opportunities for HBCU students, investing in infrastructure and technology upgrades, and strengthening partnerships with industry, government, and community organizations. As an HBCU graduate myself, I can personally attest to the success and invaluable experience gained from attending this type of institution. With DEI and seemingly everything true and Black currently under attack it is our duty as higher education stakeholders to protect and support Historically Black Colleges and Universities for the sake of progressing equality, equity, and social justice.