

## **The Experiences of a Latino Male Media Professor Working in HBCUs**

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**ABSTRACT:** The lived experiences of Latino males working as faculty members in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been rarely documented in academic journals. This article presents a first person account of a Latino male media professor and his reflections about being a minority faculty member in a minority university (HBCU) whose majority student population is composed of African-Americans students. A higher degree of respect and sense of community along with higher education appreciation from students of color indicate that the experiences of the Latino male media professor working in HBCUs was very positive.

**KEYWORDS** -Higher Education, Latino Diaspora, Minority Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, HBCUs

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as a non-African-American faculty member is a unique experience that has taught me invaluable life lessons that I would never have learned while working in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The visible inequalities, lack of funding to advance the mission of the organization (Williams & Davis, 2019), and the results of years of oppression is clearly seen and felt in black universities to this day. Despite these former challenges, my experience serving in the capacity of faculty member and unit head in two HBCUs has been quite rewarding and definitely life changing. The number of students who I have mentored and taught, along with their successes, have made my experiences as a Latino male in a non-Latino institution worth writing about.

It has been my experience that African-American youth is much more respectful and appreciative of a college education in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) than their white caucasian counterparts in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). It has also been my experience that black undergraduate and graduate students respect college professors and authority figures significantly more than mainstream white students, despite the fact that some may be Latino males working in a black school. Historical perspectives on family structure and value for seniority (Wylie, 1971) provide a potential theoretical justification explanation for this phenomenon. I must add as a caveat that my teaching methods, which follows the teaching model once introduced by Hawkins (1970), accounts for the quality of the relationship between the teacher and black students in classroom offerings as a variable for success.

My rate of eye contact with students in HBCUs are much higher when compared with students from white universities. Classroom disruptions are kept to a minimum making it easier to teach a college course from an instructor's standpoint. In my four years working in HBCU's, I haven't experienced reticence or any defiant behavior expressed by an African-American student in my courses. I have had, however, at least a few cases of reticences in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in all white schools I've taught at — public, private, christian and secular. Clearly, my experiences in HBCU's have overall been quite positive and worth pursuing it despite the fact that technology challenges are for real and funding is scarce.

In this article, I am going to write about in some detail what it is like to be a minority faculty member in a minority institution in both public and private not-for-profit HBCUs, the large disparities that exist between PWIs and HBCUs as it related to funding (Smith, 2017) from a Latino male point of view, and the unperceived classroom behavior of African-Americans undergraduate students in a mass media studies classroom. I am going to write this piece comparing and contrasting HBCUs with PWIs as a means to generate discourse and academic comparison.

## II. BEING A MINORITY FACULTY MEMBER IN A HBCU, WHAT'S LIKE?

According to Dr. Andrew T. Arroyo from Virginia Commonwealth University, students who attend a HBCU learn from a more diverse body of faculty than they do if they attend a PWI (Morris, 2015). I concur with Dr. Arroyo's observation. In my career in higher education, I have seen more non-African American faculty members working for Talladega College than African-Americans working in all of the other non-HBCU schools I have taught combined. I feel very comfortable working at Talladega College as I did working at Jackson State University, despite the fact that I'm not an African-American scholar. It is very rewarding to go to work in a system where you know that your efforts make a difference in the lives of students who, for the most part, need their college education the most. I have a multitude of students who are intelligent, eager to listen and excited to learn how to be media professionals in my current position in Alabama. Because a number of our students are at risk, I plan and deliver my courses in an extra professional classroom fashion that is purposeful and not neutral (Franca, 2019). It is rewarding to be helpful and to compensate for any deficit in education opportunity and access that my students might have had before joining my class. I am aware that a number of my undergraduates who may have been trained in high schools where teachers might have been less qualified in terms of levels of education, certification, and expertise in the areas that they teach (Darling-Hammond, 2016). My colleagues respect me for taking this caring stance which is a recognition that I appreciate it very much.

HBCUs do a much better job at understanding the role that diversity and inclusion plays in the college experience of students of color. Dr. MaryBeth Gasman, Executive Director of the RUTGERS Center of Minority Serving Institution (CMSI) has once written, "I always tell people that HBCUs have the most diverse faculty," however, diversity and inclusion understanding is still an area that needs further development even in HBCUs. I am a Latino minority faculty member in a predominantly black serving institution. I am bold to say, though, that I am now doing part of the much need it diversity-change work in my current position as Chair of a black school. It is sometimes tough to accept that some of my colleagues don't trust or accept me for who I am, which has happened in my career. Diversity, equity and inclusion is tough! The statements made by Brown in (Morris , 2015) is accurate, "They felt the weight of the work, of doing diversity-change work, just as I'm sure African-American or Hispanic faculty feel sometimes [at PWIs]."

It has also been my experience that Latino males working in African-American institutions (HBCUs) must first build trust with university stakeholders and students in order to potentially gain respect and acceptance and therefore make true change. In reality, issues of trust is not different from my experiences with predominantly white universities' (PWI) stakeholders in this regard. Working in HBCUs feel a lot like ministry to me, almost a calling. In fact, Dr. Mario Azevedo, former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Jackson State University once stated in a personal conversation that, "Teaching in a HBCU is a calling for the few who want to make a real difference in the lives of African-American youth." I see my role in HBCUs as both a teacher and parent/mentor, which is an experience that I fully embrace and enjoy. Being a minority faculty member in a minority institution in both public and private not-for-profit HBCUs has been quite rewarding but not free of quantifiable difficulties, like in any other organization.

The HBCU system can be slow to change and operate. It is hierarchical and too formal sometimes but I don't feel that the system is slow to change and operate just with me as a Latino minority. It's clearly a system-wide issue not targeted at any one group in specific. Despite my many years of experience in higher education, I feel that I still need to prove myself in the HBCU system in order to reduce the potential anxieties that might exist in some of my peers because of being new in the organization. I was a voice of change for diversity, inclusion equality and access in PWIs. I am now serving in this same capacity in HBCUs. The work is different but it has similarities.

However, I must emphasize that being a minority faculty member in media in non-white universities have been a much less stressful environment for me. I would even go further to state that the HBCU system is almost like a big "family like." In addition, it appears to me that HBCUs have a better sense of community and are slower to release members of the organization regardless of whether the employee is a Latino, white, black or asian. My experiences as a Latino male in these historic institutions concur with the findings once proposed by Winn et al. (2018) that HBCUs are legacy organizations who take the issues of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion very seriously. I most definitely agree with Winn his research associates.

### **III. THE LARGE DISPARITIES BETWEEN PWIS AND HBCUS**

Years of economic inequality and what critical scholars refer to as separate and unequal (Arnett, 2015) policies have created what Jonathan Kozol refers to as Savage Inequalities (Kozol, 1991) in the school system of the United States, including colleges and universities. Historically speaking, public and private HBCU endowments taken together represent a dismal fraction of .3 percent when compared to those that aren't HBCUs (Amour, 2020) which by itself is evidence of a macro-system that has disregarded the needs of the oppressed (Freire, 1970) for many decades. HBCU endowments, even in more prestigious black universities like Howard and Tuskegee Universities, are exponentially lower (Coupet and Barnun, 2010; Smith-Barrow,2020) than their predominantly white institution counterparts such as Harvard or Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. As a consequence, the overall state of HBCUs and the future sustainability of the system is at risk of ceasing its much important and necessary mission of educating the African-American youth because of funding scarcity. In fact, much funding needs to be acquired from external sources, e.g., funds from the United Negro College Fund

(UNCF) or the National Science Foundation (NSF) in order for HBCUs to stay in good financial standing in the 21st century.

I was aware of the unequal distribution of wealth given to black institutions in contrast to the funding allocated to its white counterparts. What I wasn't aware was the severe impact that 'fraction funding' policies had on the overall state of black universities and its' facilities including classroom conditions. The lack of resources, especially in education technology, are *de facto* real challenges in HBCUs which often result in an imminent systemwide IT crisis that could have been avoided with more funding. My experiences, in regards to the inequality that exists between these two systems, is one of struggle. It is much more complicated to train students of media in HBCUs than in PWIs because of the drastic difference in funding that exists between them. In a semester working for a HBCU, I taught a class of fifteen students without a functional lab and only one Mac computer which happened to be my own machine. I must admit that the experience of being a Latino male teaching multiple media courses without a computer lab in a HBCU was challenging to say the least. The differences in technology funding between the HBCUs that I've worked for and the PWI's where I was a member of, are drastically different and had an impact on how I conducted my classes not always for the better.

#### **IV. AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT BEHAVIORS IN THE CLASSROOM**

I currently serve as the Department Chair of Mass Media Studies at Talladega College, a small private not-for-profit HBCU in rural Alabama with a student population of about thirteen-hundred students. Even though I bring PWI and HBCU leadership and media experience in production to my current appointment, I have come to quickly realize that not all HBCUs are made equal and that the disparities between PWIs and HBCUs were much more severe than I thought, sometimes in quite unpredictable ways.

What I have been witnessing at both Jackson State University and Talladega College is that African-American students are much more behaved in my mass media classroom than students in PWIs. My rate of eye contact with black students is significantly higher than they were while teaching courses at Lee University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania where the majority of my students were white caucasians. It has also been my experience that students pursuing a college degree in a HBCU are much more appreciative of their education on average. I have not experienced silent reticence or a defiant behavior response towards me perhaps due to a perceived shift in power dynamics and status (Ladson-Billings, 1999) that exists in black culture. Much on the contrary. In HBCU's, my student disruption classroom rate is dismal approaching zero values. In PWIs, I don't recall ever teaching a class where I didn't have at least a couple of disrespectful students disrupting class.

Without a shadow of a doubt, African-American Mass Media studies students are much more respectful of their minority professors than students pursuing a media degree in PWIs. Power and status, as Landson-Billings (1999) points out, is perhaps why white students display higher levels of reticence in the classroom than black ones, especially against a faculty member of color, which leads me to believe that African-American students have a higher degree of maturity than white ones. The behavioral differences between races — white and black — in the classroom are drastically different because of the treatment they receive in secondary education. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, African-American children are punished at a rate three times higher than whites (Kimbal, 2019). Jayanti Owens, Brown University's Assistant Professor of Sociology and International and Public Affairs, when speaking about the racial gap relating to school suspensions and expulsions, stated that two kids of different races might misbehave in similar ways but one gets a slap on the wrist. The other gets suspension — white and black, respectfully (Owens, 2021).

The former is perhaps one of the main variables that explain their drastically different displays of behavior in my classroom. It has been my experience that white college students pursuing a bachelors and masters degree in PWIs tend to be less appreciative of the education they receive and act with higher levels of defiant behavior, sometimes acting in silence towards the minority classroom instructor especially when their perceived thoughts and opinions are questioned for content validity or lack thereof. Black students pursuing the same education in HBCUs are significantly more appreciative of the education they receive and act with much lower levels of defiant behavior.

## **V. CHANGE FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

Organizational bias isn't the only challenge that African-American youth experience growing up. College students of color face a daunting challenge for often lacking a solid family structure in their lives growing up. The Kids Count Data Center, published by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, has illustrated this pressing issue numerically for the past fourteen years. Among white non-hispanic households, the percentage of children who don't grow up with two parents at home is 24%. Among Hispanic children, this number grows to 42%, a growth from 36% since 2005 which is also alarming. African-American children grow up in a single-parent family household 64% of the time (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2019). Asian children rank the best at 15%. The former is perhaps why only 36% of African-American males graduate from college compared to 44% of white applicants. Hispanic males rank between whites and blacks with 40%, according to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2016. The former is precisely why I mentor and coach a number of African-American male students in topics relating to leadership, active responsibility, conflict resolution, time and stress management, study habits and strategies, and project completion and resilience every semester. My office is literally a small center for the development of the African-American youth. My students feel included, equal and respected and understands the need for change.

Being immersed as a light skin Latino male in two HBCUs has completely changed the way I perceive life challenges to be and my role in the academy. I most definitely act as both a classroom instructor and a parent figure to dozens of African-American youth, particularly males because of the position that I hold.

Indeed, my experiences in HBCUs have been quite unique especially because of my own ethnic background, as a seasoned faculty member and leader in a college campus where the majority of the students, faculty and staff are African-Americans. Being a Latino male working in a private HBCU has allowed me to learn important cultural facts and lessons about diversity and inclusion that I would probably not have learned vicariously. PWI's have much to learn about diversity and change from HBCUs and so does the K-12 system.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Being a Latino male in a Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) has been a unique experience worth writing about. Although I am still one of the few Latino minority faculty member on campus, I am respected by my peers at work in rates much higher than PWIs. From my Latino male perspective, the difference between HBCUs and PWIs is a drastic one. Decades of injustice and oppression (Freire, 1970) against people of color in the United States has created an economic divide between white and black schools in America, which overtime has had an impact in endowment growth, overall facilities and acquisitions. As far as classroom teaching is concerned, I rarely experienced students' acting in a defiant manner in all my HBCU classrooms because students seem to respect the elderly more along with the fact that I work hard to get to know my students by their first and last name and help them where they are. I have found that trust is key for new incumbents wanting to make a living working in black colleges and universities. Incoming Latino male scholars must first build trust with university stakeholders and students before trying to make a significant contribution to their organization. In order to potentially gain respect and acceptance for being different, Latino males must first respect the many HBCU traditions prior to proposing big plans, which in this regard is not any different from my experiences working in predominantly white universities.

African-American students are, by far, better behaved in the classroom than its white counterparts in primarily white institutions, I've come to observe. The fact that I am a Latino male had little to no impact on how I teach my courses which has been a refreshing experience since my experiences teaching in white schools have always been challenging especially in my first semester. After four years teaching in HBCUs, I can attest that teaching in these institutions have been a delightful experience overall. The many technological challenges that I experienced in HBCUs were offset by a much more humane caring culture of black universities.

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