

The Diversification of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Implications for DEI

Dr. Francine Edwards, PhD¹

¹Division of Administrative Services/ Delaware State University

ABSTRACT: Long before the pandemic, historically Black colleges, and universities (HBCUs) have been challenged by low enrollment, small endowments, and insufficient government support. The most obvious ways to address these challenges is to recruit a more diverse student population including a growing body of international students. For some institutions, the recruitment of diverse students is connected to accreditation, and the use of state and local funding. As a result, of the changing HBCU landscape, diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations have become more robust. Successful efforts do not focus exclusively on race and are designed to cast a wide net to attract a variety of students and staff who want to learn, grow, and be instrumental in addressing diversity issues. Creating an environment in which everyone is part of the discourse, despite how challenging is important HBCUs are serving more community needs, both Black and non-Black and the impact and the presence of these academic institutions play a significant role in identity, social development, and academic achievement. This article is significant as it explores the need for DEI as HBCUs continue to diversify and provides a salient discussion about the necessity to sustain HBCUs through a more inclusive campus culture.

KEYWORDS— black, diversification, equity, historically black, inclusion

I. INTRODUCTION

The function of historically Black college and university is undeniable. These institutions have always been the hallmark of educational inclusion and justice and notable for promoting Black identity and developing social and economic mobility. Initially, HBCUs were staffed by white administrative personnel and faculty but as more Black professionals earned terminal degrees, they returned to these institutions to teach contributing to the diversity of the faculty and staff. HBCUs were seen as diverse and were often viewed as a refuge from racial bias. Despite diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives popular today, there are those who contend that catering to subpopulations outside of the Black community creates marginalization and distraction from the historic purpose and legacy of HBCUs [1]. Others posit that the same philosophical belief that HBCUs should be a space of advocacy for Black students can be implied as relevant for other groups as community advocacy and social justice is vital for continued survival. Further is the thought that engaging diverse people in an academic environment helps to undergird intellectual growth and fosters a community of critical thinkers. While HBCUs provide a space for a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the Black population, economic factors make it necessary for predominantly Black colleges and universities to assess how they can maintain their unique identity but also embrace a global cultural shift that makes diversity a much-needed pillar of the higher education landscape.

Black students currently make up approximately 13% of the college population. The U.S. Department of Education reports that 7% of Black students attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and 53% attend PWIs [2]. While HBCUs have experienced a renaissance in terms of enrollment; partially due to the pandemic, racial unrest during 2020, and the election of the first HBCU graduate into the Vice Presidency, overall, HBCUs are still experiencing a downward enrollment trend. Students who choose to attend an HBCU

are looking for a welcoming safe space, a balanced African American experience and a mission that is committed to supporting students of color.

For public HBCUs, recruiting non-Black students is necessary to maintain accreditation and receive government funding. To meet racial diversity standards, they recruit at predominantly White and Latinx high schools and, therefore, tend to have larger numbers of non-Black students compared with private HBCUs [3]. Economically, HBCUs must acknowledge the fact that success is closely tied to the ability of the institution to appeal to a broader contingency of students. Some states are embracing the recruitment efforts more readily than others as the increasingly diverse population is driving students to their institutions. For example, Texas leads the charge in enrolling Latino and Asian Americans in three of its HBCUs, Texas Southern University, Prairie View A&M University and St. Phillips College [4]. Ask any university leader and they will tell you that attracting non-Black students to historically Black institutions is not just a financial matter. It is a matter of embracing the social and multicultural benefits of exposing Black students to a wide range of teaching and learning experiences that are relevant as they spend four years preparing to enter a multicultural workforce. Even beyond this, there is a need to redefine diversity in a way that considers the type of student that is entering today's institutions of higher education, including but not limited to students with disabilities, military students/veterans, non-traditional students, members of the LGBTQ+ community, those seeking certification, commuters, online and first-generation students. The needs of these students are different and complex and when colleges and universities admit students from a wider range of ethnic, economic, and cultural groups, this contributes to the growth of educated citizens who understand how the changing composition of the world can be situated alongside their own uniqueness and identity.

Regardless of one's disposition to HBCUs and their diversification, what is evident is that historically Black colleges and universities are looking for ways to reinvent themselves in times of financial and retention challenges [5]. DEI is one way of undergirding the foundation of these historical institutions but an understanding of the many underrepresented populations that find themselves being part of HBCU communities and allow them to add agency to the cause by way of their voices is an important part of reframing the importance of DEI.

II. Literature Review

2.1. Law of Unintended Consequences

Society becomes much more concerned about the racial and ethnic composition of collegiate student bodies, leading to a near obsession with diversity and inclusion. Wealthy elite colleges target high schools with large minority populations and offer large scholarships to eligible potential students. Lured by money and the promise of increased postgraduate earnings, many Black students take the opportunity [6]. Others are drawn to the traditions and legacies of HBCUs but there is still a demand that colleges do more to support diversity. Oddly, the assumption is that HBCUs have a good handle on making sure diversity, is a core value that is woven into the college experience, however, in looking at Vedder's suggestion about the law of unintended consequences, what studies have found is that student at HBCUs are not satisfied with diversity efforts and feel excluded.

Most HBCUs despite good efforts fail to find a balance between serving the needs of students of color and non-Black students. Non-Black students come for the opportunities but experience self-alienation as they find it challenging to engage in school activities outside of the classroom. Black students are wrought with frustration as they are seeking an education in a space that is all their own and feel disenfranchised by administrators who seek to have a robust enrollment of students from diverse populations [7]. In a 2020 BestColleges.com survey, over 750 undergraduates responded to questions pertaining to diversity initiatives on their campus. While 53% of the respondents reported wanting to participate in DEI efforts on campus, colleges are still not doing enough to incorporate students into the process of shaping DEI standards. Additionally, students are looking for more diversity in the classroom and additional resources while in college. Aligning with students and committing to initiatives that are less superficial is important. The goal is to not just fix a problem but to gain insight and perspective from stakeholders that allow everyone to be part of making the campus better, addressing injustices that impact underrepresented student groups and working to retain a diverse staff.

2.2. Culture-Related Extreme Expectations

Culture-related extreme expectations that make matriculating through college whether as a first-generation student or as a second-generation student more challenging. Oftentimes, there is an assumption that when students make the choice to attend college, they are equipped to navigate their own unique needs and engage in self-advocacy when inequities are presented. There is also the perception that students attending historically black colleges or universities have a built-in infrastructure that fully recognizes the unique set of circumstances that hinder the success of student of color but that is not always the case. Difficulties posed by these circumstances may be worsened when students lack a supportive social and mentoring network and face challenges to seek help[8].It is not uncommon for cultural norms to influence students (and staff)but they can also polarize. Factors associated with DEI can limit the impact of these expectations. For example, social support, cultural pride, the sense of belonging that comes from interacting with others with a similar cultural background, and resources on campus designed to assist students from all backgrounds can make a positive difference in their higher education experience [9].

2.3 Creating Global Citizens

Two major events have forced higher education DEI initiatives to move beyond surface-level, check-the-box programs typically targeted for underrepresented groups: the global pandemic and the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the groundswell of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. College students have always had unique needs and there is no one-size-fits all approach that colleges and universities can use but there needs to be specialized programs designed to engage students and in a way that promotes a better understanding of otherness.

On many campuses, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are often separate from global learning efforts—driven by unique missions and goals, centered around distinct courses and programming, and overseen by separate staff. It is rare to find collaboration between the two entities. DEI principles are typically domestically focused and usually revolve around social constructs such as racism, sexism, personal backgrounds and biases, and other individual factors.The complexity of DEI at an HBCU must take into consideration both local and global cultural norms, giving credence to the makeup of the student population. Both constructs are about understanding the self in relationship to the other. However, cultural competency means understanding varying perspectives at all levels, meaning staff, faculty, and student engagement. It is important to create a space for all learners (considering employees in the context of learners as well) as this helps to support inclusive decision making across throughout the college or university. Bridging the gap between DEI and global studies can help students to become more globally minded [10].Lastly, there is a moral imperative to equip students with the skills necessary to engage in global citizenry as this is the only way to build inclusive communities.

2.4 Supportive Social and Mentoring Network

A guiding principle for sustaining DEI efforts at HBCU is to engage various stakeholder groups. While pockets of DEI work may be done in respective units or departments, more individuals benefit when they are able to learn from multiple stakeholders. Opportunities for mentoring and social engagement are only possible if there is a welcoming environment. People need to feel like it is safe for them to join the conversation and that they are listened to, acknowledged, and that those around them are open-minded [11]. Additionally, the campus culture should be such that individuals are willing to take risks and view challenges as opportunities to grow.

DEI is a competency and an asset, but it can be difficult to share diverse perspectives. Expressing respectful agreement or disagreement with opinions, validating the knowledge of peers, or challenging their viewpoints in constructive ways is necessary in an increasingly global world. While organizations were quick to come together and respond in the wake of the pandemic, that only served to magnify the need to address inequalities even further. The pandemic also highlighted the need to focus on groups that were disproportionately affected and to ensure that issues of well-being were not only address with consideration of their future.

While there is a dearth of literature focusing on the success of DEI efforts at HBCUs, there is a significant body of work covering the relevance of DEI at HBCUs and the implication these efforts have in relation to globalization, social justice, and equity. HBCUs have a distinct opportunity to leverage history and a contemporary need for an inclusive academic environment.

III. Case Study: Delaware State University makes Diversity a Priority

3.1 Partnerships in China

In 2011 Delaware State University expanded its partnerships in China with agreements with three universities that made it possible for 100 Chinese students to attend Delaware State University and sent faculty members to teach in China. Students participated in the American Cultural Program, in which the students took English courses to improve their fluency and courses in American literature and history. University leadership understood the value of ensuring that students received a quality education and developed into socially responsible and globally competent, contributing citizens in a knowledge-based global society. This partnership also resulted in study abroad opportunities for Delaware State University students in China.

3.2 The Dream.US

In 2016, Delaware State University partnered with the TheDream.US to collaborate on the mission of supporting all Dreamer Scholars both matriculated at Delaware State University, and members of the Program. The Program, in collaboration with DSU faculty, staff, and administrators, render such services and support with the purpose to ensure Dreamer Scholars have a successful post-secondary education and a welcoming, inclusive, and successful transition at Delaware State University. Delaware State University is in the seventh year of its involvement in the Opportunity Scholarship Program. The first two cohorts (68 Dreamers) graduate in 2020 and 2021. Three of those graduates – Homar Rodriguez, Heydi Aguilera Quintanilla, and Marina Hernandez – continued their education at Delaware State University and each earned a master's degree in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

3.3 The Problem

While these agreements and programs continue to afford international students, an opportunity to get an education at one of today's top public HBCUs, many of the students entering Delaware State University, prior to 2017 only had The Office of International Affairs to rely on for support or the handful of faculty directly associated with their matriculation. Students often felt isolated and in the case of many of the Asian students there were one or two students fluent enough in English to serve as the advocate or representative for other members of the cohort. Navigating an unfamiliar administrative system on campus and an unfamiliar local community proved to be challenging. Attempts to celebrate the culture of the Asian students consisted of community-wide Chinese New Year Celebrations and a few events centered around traditional food in the Village Café. The first class of Dreamers came to Delaware State University excited about their opportunity but soon found themselves dealing with the uncomfortable feeling of being called (or labeled) as a Dreamer and the constant worrying about their family members facing deportation or stories of other Dreamers, despite their legal status still being deported. Their time was split between attending class, working, and meeting with legislative bodies in Delaware and Washington, D.C. What was missing was an integrative approach and a strategic plan for not only meeting the needs of the international students but support for programs and initiatives that would bring diverse students, faculty, and staff together in meaningful ways.

3.4 The Creation of the DE&I Task Force

In January 2017, then president Dr. Harry Williams ask for the formation of The Diversity & Inclusion Unit within the Office of Human Resources. The first charge of this new Task Force was to conduct a systematic review of diversity as an integral component of the University's mission and ultimately recommend and develop policy on how diversity should be incorporated and organized at DSU. The goal was to take a proactive rather than a reactive approach to addressing issues of diversity on campus. The first campus climate survey yielded significant findings:

- Concerted efforts needed to be made to promote a supportive and inclusive environment at the University. This could include the development of programs and initiatives on campus to explore cultural identity and enhance intercultural competence. There is also a need to strengthen positive relationships among diverse identity groups at the University.
- There is a need to identify challenges to the institution's physical compliance with the American Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and draw a road map at the University to improve physical access for persons with disabilities.

- To ensure a real commitment to customer service and its basic functions, training in telephone skills, and face-to-face service delivery should be implemented.
- Programs should be developed that provide education and engagement in the areas of LGBTQ+ space and the consequences of bullying and harassment.

Diversity has always been one of the university's pillars, however the execution of true diversity efforts needed to be strengthened. What Delaware State University learned is that while a single unit on campus could be limited by way of resources and staff, that partner with other units, clubs, and departments that have a similar interest in diversity to implement proactive initiatives such as promoting collaborative events, revamping recruitment strategy to make them more inclusive, including students at varying levels of decision-making, and conducting more student outreach.

The University also stepped outside of the campus to engage with partners who could serve as speakers at university forums, launched a professional development series and in 2018 with the culmination of the work as a task force the Diversity and Inclusion Unit was reestablished at the Diversity and Inclusion Council. In 2019 the name of the Council was changed to the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council. The DEI Council continues to create an inclusive campus culture by working with diverse student organizations to plan campus events, attending student-sponsored events, including students on the Council and sponsoring campus-wide professional development.

In the fall of 2021, the Council launched an eJournal *Dynamic Self Matters*. The purpose of the journal is to affirm our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for the entire campus. Articles, narratives, and research submissions focus on intercultural experiences, community service, travel, academic or sports accomplishment or interest, activism - internal or external of the campus, film, media or digital content critiques or substantive studies related to equity, social justice, and cultural dynamics. To date, there have been 19 articles published and the third volume of the journal will feature its first publication from an external contributor. The DEI Council values the importance of research and writing as we know it enhances the academic experience and provides an opportunity for discourse around topics that may otherwise be difficult to discuss.

Sharing in the human experience is foundational to DEI efforts at Delaware State University and what the council has learned is that international partnerships and support of protective programs like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which supports our Dreamers amounts to nothing more than a reactive approach to diversity. The charge to create a Task Force responsible for looking at the practice and promotion of diversity was the first step in creating an environment where everyone feels affirmed and welcomed. Additionally, the endorsement by university leadership showed the commitment to practical strategic engagement in which all stakeholders could be instrumental in gaining knowledge and learning skills that can be leveraged in a proactive manner and more importantly when challenges arise. The DEI Council continues to leverage engagement tools in a way in which stakeholders collectively develop our DEI intelligence thus making the university a stronger community.

IV. Conclusion

The pandemic underscored the fact that DEI efforts were not delivering in high impact ways. Diversity makes academic institutions stronger and in the HBCU space DEI efforts help to foster mutual respect and an appreciation for Black culture among a broader population. The question of HBCU significance in the promotion of DEI efforts goes without saying. DEI efforts at HBCUs have significant implications for helping to marginalized students but can also be instrumental in helping non-Black students realize the importance of their own identities. Multicultural efforts can be the backdrop for all students developing a consciousness for advocacy, activism, and inclusion beyond race. In today's academic environment, students need a safe space to understand themselves in relation to others. However, this can only be done with relevant events, curricula, professional development, and intentionality in educating global citizens.

The diversification of HBCUs will continue to be challenged by the ideology that HBCUs should remain sanctuaries for Black culture and the preservation of fact that these colleges and universities were founded to educate freed slaves after the Civil War [12]. HBCUs developed and survived as a place of access

and refuge for those locked out of other, predominantly White, educational institutions but today HBCUs are uniquely situated to be spaces for public discourse about DEI challenges. It is possible for HBCUs to focus on historical relevancy, the success, and achievements of Black students, and collectively work to continue a mission of educating a diverse student population in ways that have significant societal benefits. The ideation that diversifying HBCUs is important to DEI should be championed as a responsive, sustainable imperative.

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