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1-1-2011

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Honors Education at HBCUs: Core Values, Best Practices, and Select Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are fertile environments for shaping, cultivating, and solidifying human development. They are wellsprings for diverse cultures, behaviors, beliefs, and practices. Yet, they face the daunting challenge of fostering the intellectual growth, social enhancement, and professional development of students. Clearly, the tenets of the collegiate environment can directly influence—either facilitate or debilitate—the achievement of its students. This arena is also ripe with shifting paradigms and strategic priorities that often lead to revisioning, redefining, and reassessing. As a result, the educational institution simultaneously becomes a site of struggle and resistance, empowerment and encroachment. Although institutions change, priorities change, and curricula change, students remain the university's most valuable resource and asset.

So colleges and universities must face the difficult questions of how to address the academic, social, and cultural concerns of students; what ought to be the nature and character of the collegiate experience to which students have access; and, more specifically, what can be done to address the needs and unique challenges facing honors students. Successful efforts, whether institution-wide or at the department level, place a strong emphasis on cultivating academically engaging, socially relevant, and culturally inclusive learning environments for honors students. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in particular are increasingly sensitive to the strategic importance of having quality programs for honors students in the context of their current struggle for equity and equality. Even more than Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), HBCUs are confronted with educational issues that are historically and culturally deep.

Although HBCUs play an essential role in fostering intellectual thought and promoting academic, cultural, and social exchanges for its students, the challenges to honors students, staff and faculty are often muted concerns within this domain of academe. With this in mind, the investigators attempted to empirically examine core values, best practices, and select challenges of honors programs and colleges at HBCUs. This essay begins by situating HBCUs in a historical and social context that provides a richer understanding of the collective struggle of this group of educational institutions. Next, the investigators highlight some of the best practices of honors programs and colleges at HBCUs and identify some of the challenges and concerns of honors administrators at HBCUs. Culminating this article is a robust discussion of the major findings of this study.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF HBCUS

Regardless of the vicissitudes of life, education seems to be the common denominator for many Americans. “Education has long been recognized as an important—if not the most important—vehicle through which status attainment and upward mobility is achieved” (Deskin 35). Individuals often view education as “the way out,” the key to social mobility, or “the great leveler.” African Americans, realizing the value of education and wishing to maximize their opportunity for upward mobility, demand quality education (Schaefer 5). It is thus necessary to give special attention to the development and role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the historical and social context of educational institutions. As Williams and Ashley note, HBCUs, their graduates, and their educators have played an essential role in defining the cultural and political atmosphere of this country and the world, and even more compelling is the “indispensable role the HBCUs played in the creation of the U.S. public education system and its massive network of institutions of higher learning” (2).

Prior to the Civil War, education was a privilege afforded to wealthy and middle-class White men (Williams and Ashley 3). African American access to formal education was at the discretion of White Americans. Only under the most exceptional circumstances were African Americans able to create learning opportunities. African American students received little consideration in higher education because the numbers were so small—although not insignificant. According to Fleming, between 1850 and 1856 fewer than 5% of Blacks out of a population of 4.5 million could read or write (11). During this time, most Black people were not formally educated in traditional learning environments; they simply passed on the knowledge they acquired to other Black people. Only twenty-eight acknowledged Black students had graduated with baccalaureate degrees from American colleges by 1860

(Harris *et al.* 59). Those privileged few who were formally educated experienced immense discrimination and unequal treatment, yet their ambition reflected their “interest in higher education and . . . determination to obtain it at sacrificial odds” (Bowles and DeCosta 26). Above all, their success in higher education was the vanguard for what would take shape nearly a century later.

As the Civil War approached, African Americans still had many racist issues to hurdle. The period was notably marked by the exclusion of African American students from higher education. “[W]hite students and educational officials conveniently reasoned that the lower quality schooling that [B]lacks needed required less expenses than the higher quality education that was necessary for [W]hite students” (Fleming 13). Many Blacks, realizing that educational opportunities existed on a limited basis for Black students, had reached the conclusion that their best chance for higher education lay in establishing their own educational institutions (Fleming 13). Black colleges soon became the custodians of Black higher education opportunities. Some of the first higher education institutions for African American students include Cheyney University in Pennsylvania (1837), Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (1854), Wilberforce in Ohio (1856), and Fisk University in Tennessee (1866). The establishment of such schools ushered in a new challenge for officials in higher education.

The decision to establish Black higher education institutions, which would eventually become known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), spurred the rise of more African American students pursuing postsecondary education. It also helped to elevate African American students from social invisibility and became the most viable, promising option for educational advancement for these students. Unlike Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), HBCUs were designed to address the specific needs of African American students as well as the needs of the larger African American community. While history shows that African American students usually thrived socially and academically in these institutions, inadequate facilities, obsolete textbooks, limited resources, and lack of financial support often undermined their educational pursuits. Yet, the students persisted in spite of the meager support and imposed educational restrictions.

“Almost from their inception HBCUs have produced scholars and intellectuals who have shaped public opinion and showcased their cognitive prowess despite the dominant culture’s insistence that such a concept could not exist” (Williams and Ashley 81). The accomplishments of such greats as W.E. B. DuBois (Fisk University), Thurgood Marshall (Howard University), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Morehouse College), Rosa Parks (Alabama State University), Langston Hughes (Lincoln University), Oprah Winfrey

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(Tennessee State University), Ed Bradley (Cheyney University), and Tom Joyner (Tuskegee University) bespeak the long-standing commitment of HBCUs to educational excellence. But these prominent individuals are hardly isolated cases; history is replete with countless examples of African Americans who were formally educated at an HBCU and have subsequently parlayed their educational experiences into successful careers.

In the twenty-first century, feelings are mixed inside and outside of academia about the quality of education at HBCUs, but historically many of these schools have had stellar programs. For example, North Carolina A & T State University (Greensboro, NC) is the nation's largest producer of African American bachelor degrees and doctorates in engineering. Xavier University (New Orleans, LA) ranks first in the nation in placing African American students in medical schools. In 2007, Hampton University (Hampton, VA) launched a \$140 million weather satellite from Vandenberg Air Force Base to study noctilucent clouds in the ionosphere; with this feat, Hampton University became the first HBCU to have 100% responsibility and control of a NASA satellite mission (Harvey). When one looks at the breadth and depth of reputable, accredited programs at HBCUs, one can better appreciate the individual and collective value and contributions that HBCUs make. Undeniably, HBCUs contribute significantly to America's professional pool of experts, such as physicians, educators, engineers, scientists, and corporate executives, who impact society in remarkable ways.

METHODOLOGY

The following briefly summarizes the procedures and methodology for conducting the study. It describes the target population, the instrument, and the procedures used in collecting the results.

TARGET POPULATION

Eighty institutions identified as HBCUs comprised the target population for this study. A list of these institutions was provided by the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAHP). While some of these institutions were members of NAAHP, others were not. These institutions provide honors education to a large number of the minority population, and there appears to be a scarcity of empirical data describing their profiles, core values, and contributions to the honors education community.

INSTRUMENT

A survey instrument was developed to generate data for this study. The instrument, developed to be used on-line, consisted of thirty-one questions and was divided into two parts. Part I was designed to ascertain the following:

(1) institutional profile (i.e., size, support base, year of program establishment); (2) organizational/leadership structure of the Honors Program/College; (3) professional membership (regional, national, and state); and (4) entrance and retention requirements. The second part addressed “Best Practices and Special Honors Program/College Initiatives.” In this part of the instrument, administrators (i.e., deans and directors) responded to questions pertaining to core values, best practices, and program resources.

PROCEDURES FOR COLLECTING THE DATA

Honors program directors and deans from eighty HBCUs received the on-line instrument and an electronic cover letter that detailed the nature of the study and solicited participation. Because of the sensitivity of some of the requested data, the letter assured respondents of their anonymity. Further, respondents were informed that no institutional names would be used when reporting the data. After six weeks and several correspondences (e.g., telephone and email) with the target population, only 37.5 percent (30 of 80) of the surveys were completed and returned. Both researchers emailed and telephoned program directors and deans to solicit responses to the online survey.

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The survey results that follow are based on responses from thirty of the eighty honors deans or directors who completed the online survey. Results highlight institutional/program profiles, leadership/organizational structure, core values, program resources and challenges.

INSTITUTIONAL/PROGRAM PROFILE

Data generated from this study yielded background information regarding the profile of selected HBCUs that offer honors education. Although a similar study was conducted by Sederberg in 2008, no study has specifically addressed the profile of programs in the targeted institutions. Interestingly, 20% of the respondents in this study reported that their honors program or college was established between 1950 and 1970. The years 1986 through 2000 saw the largest increase with more than 50% of the programs established between these dates.

A review of similar research by Sederberg clearly indicates that many colleges and universities are beginning to transition from honors programs to honors colleges. Among the target group surveyed, only 20% have transitioned to honors colleges while 80% remain programs. However, follow-up conversations with several respondents at national conferences and by telephone have revealed that some institutions are in the planning phases of transitioning to an honors college.

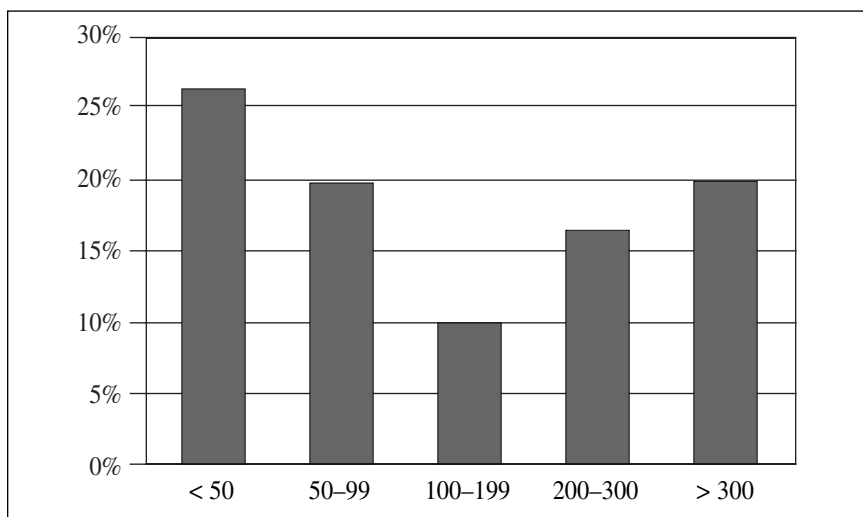
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Institutional and program enrollment was also reported by the target population. The data reveal that 50% of the programs are in institutions with student populations between 2000 and 4000. Only two of the honors administrators reported an institutional enrollment of 10,000 or higher. However, there were significant variances in program enrollment among the institutions represented as indicated in Table 1, which shows percentages of program enrollment in each enrollment category (i.e., less than 50, 50–99, etc.). The majority of programs reported enrollments of less than 200, and approximately 26% had fewer than 50 students.

Further, data reported under institutional profile revealed that most programs (57%) were in institutions that were considered public-supported while 39% were privately supported and 4% indicated that they were faith-based institutions.

This study also queried participants regarding their professional organizational affiliations. Data showed that all programs held membership in one or more organizations. Specifically, more than 90% cited membership in the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAAHP). Membership in regional honors associations was reported by 80% of the respondents. Those who reported affiliation in the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and state honors associations were evenly reported at 53% each. The data clearly suggest that students, faculty, and staff in honors programs and colleges at HBCUs are engaged in professional growth and development that extends beyond their campuses.

Table 1. Honors Student Body Enrollment



PROGRAM STRENGTHS AND CORE VALUES

Two questions were designed to identify program strengths and core values. The first question about program strengths provided options for respondent selection: (a) leadership development; (b) international experience; (c) debate teams; (d) mentoring; (e) service learning; (f) community service; (g) political activism; and (h) other. Respondents were asked to rank order their top three selected choices to define program strengths. Among the 30 programs represented, 67% indicated that leadership development was among the top three strengths of their programs. Second and third among the selections were mentoring (33%) and debate team (23%). Although program directors and deans selected community service and service learning as program strengths, these activities were not among the top three. In fact, only 18% selected community service as the first-ranked program strength while service learning was ranked first by only 11%.

It is not surprising that emphasis is placed on debate teams and selected as the third-ranked program strength. The NAAHP, in which 90% of the honors administrators indicated membership, has a debate competition at its annual conference. Therefore, it would seem reasonable that affiliated programs attending the conference would prepare and enter their students in debate competitions.

The second question addressed core values, and most directors and deans indicated that their programs promoted leadership. Critical thinking, service learning, and academic/intellectual excellence, respectively, also reflected the main core values promoted among the HBCU honors participants. Honors administrators selected service learning as a major core value but collectively ranked it lower.

Finally, fewer than four percent of the respondents cited the following as core values: social justice, economic empowerment, globalization, and research. Table 2 summarizes the core values of honors programs/colleges represented in this study.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS

Based on the data collected, the researchers were unable to determine a predominant line of supervision between honors administrators and their immediate supervisors. The responses were varied and showed that the administrators identified several reporting lines that included assistant/associate provost, dean of arts and sciences, and dean of undergraduate studies. One respondent reported directly to the university president.

Given honors administrators' responsibility for curricula and honors course offerings, the researchers also queried respondents regarding their

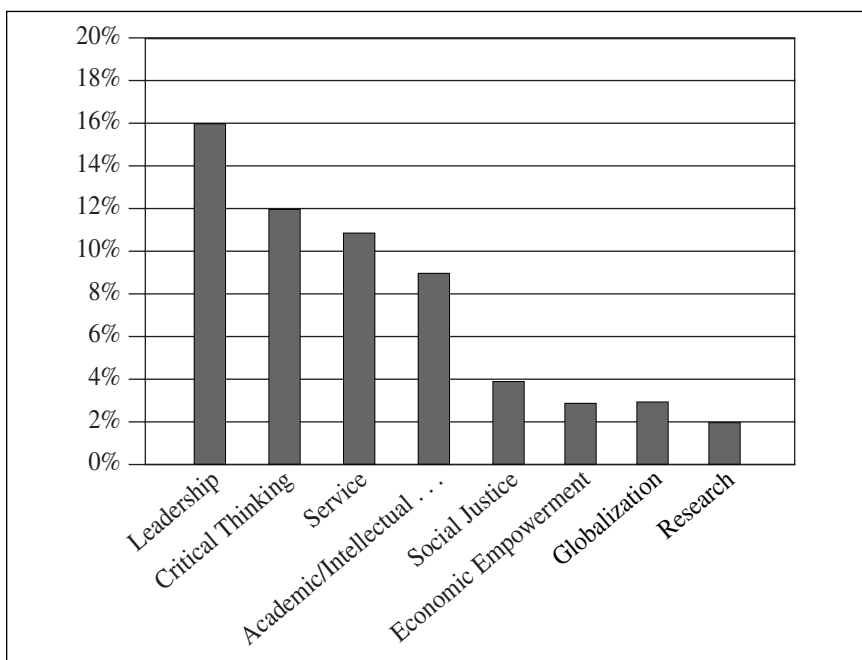
HONORS EDUCATION AT HBCUS

role in selecting and assigning honors faculty. Responses showed that fewer than half (48%) of the administrators indicated that they were directly responsible for the selection of honors faculty. More than half indicated that either a department chair (19%) or other university personnel (33%) made the selection.

The admissions and retention requirements of the HBCU honors programs and colleges were also investigated. It was apparent in this investigation that all programs and colleges represented had clearly delineated standards. Each reported GPA requirements for students entering the program that exceeded 3.0. Specifically, 40% reported that their GPA requirement was between 3.25 and 3.49; another 40% indicated a range of 3.5 and 3.74; fewer than 5% reported a GPA of 3.75 or higher; and approximately 5% required a minimum GPA between 3.0 and 3.24.

Students entering and completing the honors programs/colleges in this investigation appear to complete programs that require 20 or less total semester hours as noted by 45% of the honors administrators. The semester-hour requirement for 50% of the programs was between 21 and 35 hours, a range that is commensurate with most honors programs and colleges. One program administrator in this investigation reported a requirement that exceeded 40 hours; however, in a subsequent conversation, this administrator reported that the program was being revised to require 32 hours or less.

Table 2. Core Values Promoted by Honors Programs



When asked if their programs had a common core, nearly 70% responded “yes” and 30% “no.” Administrators provided the average number of required honors courses by level, and, among those responding, the average at the freshman and sophomore levels was six for each year. During the junior and senior years, only three core hours were required at each level. Most (70%) revealed that their honors program’s general education common core requirements were equivalent to the university’s general education core; however, 30% of the institutions reported a common core designed specifically for honors students. Finally, the study yielded the required common core hours for this population: 50% of the respondents reported between 12 and 15 hours while 4 to 12 hours was the requirement for 22%. With the exception of the one institution that reported a requirement of 40 hours, fewer than 28% ranged between 16 and 32 hours.

Because of budgetary constraints and insufficient honors courses, many administrators indicated that they relied on honors contracts to fulfill program requirements. The data showed that honors contracts were used by 60% of the programs represented in this study. Nearly two-thirds of the latter group reported that their programs imposed restrictions on the use of contracts; approximately one-third had no restrictions.

Most well-established honors programs and colleges have capstone experiences that require an honors thesis or project. In this study, nearly 80% of the administrators reported the requirement of a capstone experience while the remaining institutions reported none. Of the institutions reporting a capstone experience, the average required hours for an honors thesis was 6.1 while the average among honors administrators who required an honors project was 8.1.

Honors education not only engages students in an array of academic and enrichment activities, but also involves their members in the program governance process. Survey results showed that nearly all of the programs provided students a role in the governance process; 89% reported affirmatively while only 11% responded “no” to this question.

PROGRAM RESOURCES FOR MANAGING HONORS

Support for teaching honors courses was one of the resources addressed in the investigation. Respondents were asked to indicate the adequacy of support for teaching by selecting one of the following: funded very well; funding is adequate; funding level is inadequate; or other. The data showed that 35% of the honors administrators reported that their funding for teaching was “adequate” while fewer than 30% cited “inadequate” funding support. Only 10% of the programs chose “funded very well.” No attempt was made to quantify resources, so the results expressed the opinion of each administrator.

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The survey instrument also addressed administrators' perception of their operating budget, but, because of the sensitivity of this information, the investigators chose not to ask for budget figures. Nearly 47% indicated that the funding level for their operating budget was "adequate" while 30% perceived funding as "inadequate"; 3% reported "Funded very well"; and 10% chose not to respond to this question.

Because honors programs and colleges are designed to attract the best and brightest students to the university, scholarships are crucial to recruitment and retention strategies. Thus, the investigators queried honors administrators about their perception regarding the adequacy of scholarship support. Again, no effort was made to quantify the amount of scholarships available to recruit and retain their students. Among the respondents surveyed, 30% perceived that scholarship support was "adequate"; 20% selected "inadequate"; and only 5% felt that their scholarship program was "very well-funded."

Honors housing is another strategy for recruiting and retaining students. Many well-established programs/colleges have designated housing space for their honors students. This research, therefore, posed this question to respondents: Does your program have housing that is restricted to honors students? In responding to this question, only 40% reported "yes" while 60% indicated "no." Among the administrators who had honors housing, nearly 50% reported that the space available to honor students exceeded 200; the other programs reported figures that were far less than 200.

SELECT CHALLENGES OF HONORS ADMINISTRATORS AT HBCUS

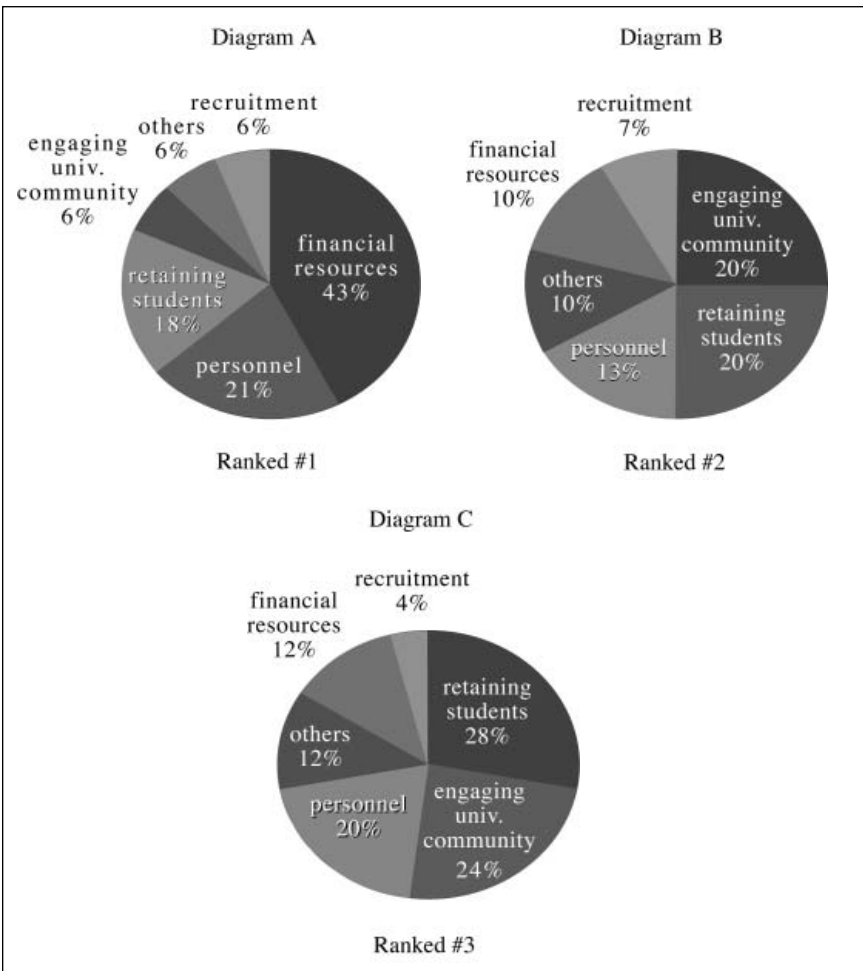
Honors administrators are privileged to engage the best and brightest students on their campuses. The nature of the position is multifaceted; honors administrators are faculty members, advisors, counselors, administrators, managers, recruiters, scholars, residence hall coordinators, and much more. Successful honors administrators must embody a passion for undertaking these many roles. However, given the economic climate and concern about resources, the desire to maintain a vital program can be thwarted by major hurdles. The investigators sought to identify the most salient challenges of honors administrators at HBCUs and designed a question in the online survey that asked administrators to identify the major challenges in managing their programs: "As an administrator (i.e., Dean or Director), rank order your top three challenges in managing your program with 1 being the top challenge." Respondents were given these choices: (a) financial resources; (b) recruitment of honors students; (c) retaining students in the honors program/college; (d) engaging the university community into honors; (e) securing enough

qualified honors faculty or staff; and (f) others. Results to this query are summarized and presented in the three diagrams of Table 3.

Diagram A shows the challenges ranked #1 by the 30 respondents; it indicates that 43% of the administrators felt that the lack of financial resources was the most significant challenge with insufficient personnel coming second in the first-ranked challenges. Diagram B shows the second-ranked challenges with “retaining students” and “engaging university community” tied at 20% each. Finally, Diagram C shows the challenges administrators ranked as their third most significant.

From the data presented in Table 3, one might conclude that financial resources are clearly the most significant challenge facing honors

Table 3. Program Management Challenges (Ranked 1, 2 and 3)



administrators at HBCUs. However, responses to the previous resource question, under *Resources and Program Management*, indicated that few respondents indicated that resources were “inadequate.” The investigators surmise that the manner in which the questions were asked may have influenced the outcome. Therefore, further investigation into the resource question may be warranted. Without quantifying the operating budgets, scholarships, and personnel, the data are subjective at best. However, further investigation into resource questions may be hampered by the sensitivity of such information and the reluctance of administrators to participate. Still, the subject of resource challenges and their impact on honors education is worthy of further investigation.

DISCUSSION

Research on honors education at HBCUs is scarce. In fact, the researchers were unable to identify any related studies that targeted these institutions in honors-related journals. Recent studies conducted on honors education have not focused specifically on these institutions and their programs. Thus, considering the scarcity of empirical research on HBCUs, the profession needs to address the uniqueness of these programs and the contributions they make to the student population being served. This study was an initial attempt to identify their profile, core values, best practices, and special challenges. Because the “n” was small (30), the researchers are cautious in generalizing to all HBCUs with honors programs or colleges. The programs/colleges represented in this study account for 30 (37.5%) of the eighty institutions that received electronic surveys. The researchers were comfortable with selected findings but realize the need for further investigation.

Overwhelmingly, the programs and colleges represented in this study provided an honors experience that was intellectually enriching, socially relevant, and professionally rewarding. The researchers found that this experience extended beyond the campus community. Active membership and affiliation with regional, state, and national honors associations is one measure of this engagement. For example, all represented programs and colleges are members of professional-related honors organizations with 90% citing affiliation with the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAHP), affording honors students at HBCUs opportunities to present their research and engage in other professional development activities. A unique feature among NAAHP participants is the debate competition, cited as a program strength by 33% of the administrators represented, so students not only perfect their professional skills locally but also on a national level through NAAHP.

Although honors programs and colleges at HBCUs represented in this study were more active in NAAHP, each also claimed membership in other regional, state, and national organizations. In fact, 80% cited membership in their regional honors associations, and 53% indicated that their programs were active members of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Still, the researchers were concerned about the inactivity of HBCUs as members in the latter organization given its recognition and status as an umbrella professional organization representing the national interest of all honors programs and colleges in two and four-year institutions. The researchers recommend that future investigations should include an examination of the inactivity among HBCUs as active members of NCHC. Similarly, with only 53% of the programs citing participation in their respective state honors associations, the researchers envision this level of inactivity as another concern that requires further investigation.

At the campus level, HBCUs subscribe to the professional practice of engaging their honors students in program governance. Nearly 90% of the honors administrators cited the existence of a student council or related student organization that was engaged in the governance process. By engaging their student members, honors administrators ensure that their programs/colleges amplify the voices of honors students while providing an honors experience that responds to the needs of its constituent groups.

In addressing core values, the investigators noted unique features of HBCUs that might be different from their majority counterparts. One such feature was the prominence of debate teams. Additionally, many of the honors administrators cited “leadership” as a major core value. Emphasis on “social justice” and “economic empowerment” as core values may also be unique to these institutions. Such core values are fundamentally linked to the origins and historical background of HBCUs. Other core values identified in this study may not necessarily define HBCUs only; these include critical thinking, academic/intellectual excellence, community service, service learning, globalization, and research. The investigators suspect that these core values are prevalent on many campuses regardless of their student body composition.

The results of this study, although focused on honors programs and colleges at HBCUs, suggest commonalities with programs in majority institutions. However, further investigation is needed. For example, it is unlikely that administrators would claim that HBCUs are unique in their challenge for financial resources. Given the current national economic conditions, the researchers surmise that this challenge exists among many honors programs and colleges in many majority institutions as well. Future investigations into resources might focus on institution size, support base, and other factors. As

this investigation suggests, reviewing quantitative data may better capture an understanding of resources as a challenge to both HBCUs and majority institutions.

CONCLUSION

Leafing through the educational literature is sobering for those trying to find research on honors education at HBCUs. This novel research study reflects an initial attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the breadth and depth on this subject, to give greater insight into both facilitators of and barriers to honors education, and to bring into sharper focus the concerns of honors administrators at HBCUs. At the center of this study is an empirical examination of the core values, best practices, and special challenges of this distinct group of educational institutions. Although quite similar to their majority counterparts, HBCUs may also be unique in their selected core values and program design. The researchers hope that this study will be a launching pad for additional research and that it will foster more conversations and publications critical to the success and advancement of high-ability students at HBCUs.

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