

Historically black colleges and universities have made an impressive comeback in student enrollments since the mid-1980s, although future challenges remain for this revitalized group of institutions.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Making a Comeback

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Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have made great strides in providing educational opportunities for African Americans. From their humble beginnings in the early 1800s, these institutions have grown to make significant contributions to American society and to provide educational opportunities for low-income and academically disadvantaged students who would have otherwise been denied a higher education. HBCUs have achieved this success despite discrimination from state and federal governments, severely inadequate funding, economic and enrollment downturns, and lack of support from most political leaders and the general public.

This chapter provides an overview of the history of HBCUs, looks at the current funding and enrollment trends, and examines the issues, challenges, and struggles that continue to threaten the existence of these colleges.

Early History

Federal law (20 USCS 1061) defines historically black colleges and universities as institutions of higher education “whose principal mission . . . is the education of Black Americans.” Although providing higher education opportunities for African Americans has been the primary goal of these institutions, they have enrolled and graduated many students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or income level.

Many of these institutions were established during the mid- and late-1800s. The first HBCUs, however, were founded in the pre-Civil War years. The Institute for Colored Youth (later renamed Cheyney State University) was founded in Pennsylvania in 1837; this was followed by Ashmun Institute

(now known as Lincoln University of Pennsylvania) in 1854 and Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856. These institutions, which were established by white philanthropists, provided religious education and limited training in basic skills to African American youth. The educational success of these institutions was limited during the Civil War years, because they were poorly financed and because most African Americans were enslaved during that time.

After the Civil War, more HBCUs were established to provide for the education of the newly freed slaves. Most of these institutions were established in the southern states under the auspices of the federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (more commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau), black churches, and white philanthropies. The Freedmen's Bureau helped to establish several colleges, including Howard University (Washington, D.C.), Atlanta University (Georgia; now known as Clark Atlanta University), St. Augustine's College (North Carolina), Fisk University (Tennessee), and Johnson C. Smith University (North Carolina). Churches such as the American Missionary Association, the Disciples of Christ, and the Methodist Episcopal Church founded colleges for religious education and training, such as Tougaloo College (Mississippi), Dillard University (Louisiana), and Talladega College (Alabama).

The first HBCUs were private, nonprofit institutions; that is, they were established and funded without state government support. Two federal laws helped to establish and finance publicly funded black colleges. The first, the National Land-Grant Colleges Act of 1862, or the First Morrill Act, provided land and federal dollars to the states for the establishment of colleges that would provide higher education to lower- and middle-income Americans. The first black public college established with Morrill Act funds was Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (later renamed Alcorn State University), founded in Mississippi in 1871.

Most of the institutions established by funds authorized under the First Morrill Act enrolled white students exclusively. But the public college education of African Americans was significantly enhanced when Congress passed the Second Morrill Act in 1890. This law required all states that maintained dual segregated higher education systems for white and African American students to provide at least one land-grant college for African Americans, and the funding used to establish and maintain the black college had to be equal to that of the white college. Eventually, nineteen black colleges were established under this provision of the Second Morrill Act. These institutions included Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College (Louisiana), North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, most public and private HBCUs taught religious education and manual trades and did not grant degrees. They sought to develop social skills such as speech, dress, and etiquette. Much of the training they provided was at the basic-skills level. Because most of the teachers and administrators at these institutions were white, they generally sought to teach their students codes of conduct that were acceptable to white society.

By the early part of the twentieth century, there were thirty-three “private and higher schools for colored people” in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1996b). Some of these colleges were “normal” schools that provided training for African American teachers in public elementary and secondary schools. During the 1910s, these normal schools educated more than half of the nation’s African American teachers. Despite the provisions of the Second Morrill Act, funding for these institutions was very low and inequitable in comparison to white land-grant colleges. In many instances, black churches and a few wealthy white philanthropists and foundations provided the primary support for both the public and private HBCUs.

The 1910s and 1920s brought major changes to the HBCUs, as African Americans began to expand the offerings at these institutions. By 1915, Howard University and Meharry Medical College had established professional schools for medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy, and Howard offered law degrees. In addition to these professional degrees, Howard and Fisk began and expanded offerings in undergraduate and graduate programs. About 40 percent of the students at Fisk University were enrolled in scientific fields in 1915 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996b).

Other HBCUs dropped their teacher education and training programs; expanded their course offerings in liberal arts, sciences, and other subject areas; and began to offer college degrees. These trends were in response to the large number of African American World War I veterans who sought higher education opportunities. African Americans also began to seek leadership roles in these institutions. In 1926, Mordecai Johnson became the first African American president of Howard University.

By 1927, there were seventy-seven HBCUs, with a combined enrollment of nearly fourteen thousand. Despite the economic depression of the 1930s, enrollment at these colleges grew by 66 percent and total expenditures rose by more than 100 percent (in inflation-adjusted value) from 1929–30 to 1939–40 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996b).

HBCUs continued to expand throughout the 1940s. By the end of World War II, African American veterans accounted for about one third of the enrollment at HBCUs. In addition, several philanthropic organizations—such as the United Negro College Fund, the Peabody Educational Fund, and the Julius Rosenwald Fund—helped to aid further increases in the number of institutions and enrolled students. Federal and state governments continued to provide funds for the establishment of publicly financed HBCUs. For example, Mississippi founded Jackson State University in 1940 and Mississippi Valley State University in 1950.

Recent History and Trends

By the early 1960s, as much as 70 percent of all African American college students were enrolled in HBCUs (Williams, 1993). The 1950s and 1960s brought about new challenges, however, for the black colleges. These challenges

were precipitated initially by the Supreme Court's decisions in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions of 1954 and 1955, and by passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It became unlawful for states to operate segregated public education systems. In response, segregated colleges in the south and border states slowly began to admit African American students. Congress also passed the Higher Education Act of 1965, which provided funds for low-income students to attend postsecondary education institutions.

These legal changes helped to increase the number of African Americans enrolled in college. But as more formerly all-white institutions enrolled African American students, the number and percentage of these students enrolled at HBCUs began to decline. By 1968 only 36 percent of these students were enrolled at HBCUs, and by 1976 only 17.8 percent of all African American college students attended these schools (Williams, 1993).

Due to these declines and the continuing lack of adequate funding from states and other sources, some HBCUs closed or merged with other institutions, while others struggled to survive. In response, a small group of these colleges began to shift their focus and emphasis; for example, West Virginia State College, Lincoln University of Missouri, and Bluefield State College experienced a shift in their student populations from predominately African American to predominately white (Sink, 1995).

The 1980s and 1990s, however, saw a resurgence in the enrollments of HBCUs. As Table 3.1 shows, from 1976 to 1984 enrollments of black students at HBCUs declined by about 5 percent, from approximately 190,300 to 180,800, but from 1984 to 1994 (the most recent year of available data), enrollments increased by 27.3 percent.

Enrollments at institutions such as Morehouse College (Georgia), Spelman College (Georgia), Xavier University (Louisiana), and Hampton Univer-

Table 3.1. Total Fall Enrollment of African American College Students, and Enrollment of African American Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Fall 1976 to Fall 1994

	<i>African Americans</i>		
	<i>Total Fall Enrollment (thousands)</i>	<i>Fall Enrollment in HBCUs (thousands)</i>	<i>Percentage Enrolled in HBCUs</i>
1976	1,033.0	190.3	18.4
1980	1,106.8	191.0	17.3
1984	1,075.8	180.8	16.8
1988	1,129.6	194.1	17.2
1990	1,247.0	208.7	16.7
1991	1,335.4	218.4	16.4
1992	1,329.9	231.2	17.4
1993	1,412.8	231.2	16.4
1994	1,448.6	230.2	15.9

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996b, tables 6, 10, 11, 12, 15, pp. 24, 36-38.

sity (Virginia) led this surge. From 1976 to 1994, however, total African American enrollment at all colleges grew by 40.2 percent. This means that an increasing share of African Americans were attending higher education institutions other than HBCUs.

The total enrollment at HBCUs increased by almost 26 percent, from approximately 222,600 in 1976 to 280,100 in 1994. Ironically, as Table 3.2 shows, much of this increase was due to the rise in the number of white students, which grew by nearly 71 percent. The total enrollment trend also masks other significant changes. The number of women enrolled at HBCUs rose by 41 percent during this time, while the number of males increased by only 9 percent. The number of part-time students and the number of students at public colleges also increased substantially during this period, while enrollments of full-time students and students at private colleges grew by a smaller percentage.

Increased federal support for HBCUs also helped to improve these colleges. In 1986, Congress added a new program to Title III of the Higher Education Act. When passing this law (P.L. 99-498), Congress found that “States and the Federal Government have discriminated in the allocation of land and financial resources to support Black public institutions . . . and against public and private Black colleges and universities in the award of Federal grants and contracts. . . .” Funds authorized under this new title were to be used to “establish or strengthen the physical plants, financial management, academic

Table 3.2. Total Enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, by Selected Characteristics, and Percentage Change in Enrollment, 1976–1994

	<i>1976 Total Enrollment</i>	<i>1994 Total Enrollment</i>	<i>Percentage Change</i>
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			
African American	190,305	230,162	20.9
White, non-Hispanic	21,040	35,963	70.9
Other	11,268	13,946	23.8
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	104,669	114,006	8.9
Female	117,944	166,065	40.8
<i>Type of Institution</i>			
Two-year public college	13,308	18,785	41.2
Four-year public college	143,528	187,735	30.8
Two-year private college	2,288	1,289	-43.7
Four-year private college	63,489	72,262	13.8
<i>Attendance Status</i>			
Full-time	180,059	214,889	19.3
Part-time	42,554	65,182	53.2

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996a, table 202, p. 207; 1996b, tables 6, 10, 11, 12, 15, pp. 24, 36–38.

resources, and endowments of the historically Black colleges and universities” in order to redress the discriminatory treatment the colleges suffered (20 USCS 1060). Due in part to this law, total federal funds provided to HBCUs increased by nearly 31 percent in inflation-adjusted value, from \$550.2 million in 1987–88 to \$719.9 million in 1993–94. In the same period, federal aid to all higher education institutions increased by 18 percent in inflation-adjusted value, from \$18.7 billion to \$22.1 billion. Presidential executive orders also sought to expand and strengthen the capacity of HBCUs, to establish a board of advisors on HBCUs, and to increase opportunities for HBCUs to participate in and benefit from federal programs.

Current Status and Contributions of HBCUs

According to a recent report on HBCUs from the U.S. Department of Education, there were 103 accredited HBCUs in 1994 (the most recent year of available data). These institutions include 40 four-year public colleges and universities; 10 two-year public colleges; 49 four-year private, nonprofit colleges and universities; and 4 two-year private, nonprofit colleges. Many of these institutions are very small: the average enrollment at the HBCUs in 1994 was 2,720, and 34 institutions had total enrollments of less than 1,000. A high percentage of students at these institutions come from low-income families. Data from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities show that in academic year 1994–95 approximately 48 percent of the undergraduate students at HBCUs received federal grant aid for low- and moderate-income students. Nationally, only about 29 percent of all undergraduates received federal grants (College Board, 1996).

Despite their small size and the low income levels of their students, the HBCUs have made tremendous contributions to the education of African Americans. Although these institutions account for only 3 percent of the 3,688 accredited postsecondary education institutions in the United States, they collectively enroll about 16 percent of the total number of African Americans in higher education (see Table 3.1).

Furthermore, as Table 3.3 shows, these institutions produce a large share of African American degree recipients. In academic year 1993–94, 28 percent of African American bachelor’s degree recipients, 14 percent of master’s degree recipients, 9 percent of doctoral degree recipients, and 15 percent of those who were awarded first professional degrees received their degrees from HBCUs.

Overall, about 18 percent of all African American degree recipients in 1993–94 graduated from HBCUs. In several fields of study, however, the percentage of African Americans with degrees from HBCUs is substantially higher. About 52 percent of African Americans who received pharmacy degrees received their degrees from HBCUs, nearly 30 percent of the students who received dentistry degrees graduated from HBCUs, and 27 percent of those with degrees in theology received their awards from HBCUs.

Table 3.3. Total Degrees Conferred on African Americans, and Percentage of African Americans Who Received Their Degrees from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, by Type of Degree, Academic Year 1993–94

<i>Type of Degree</i>	<i>Degrees Conferred on African Americans</i>		
	<i>Total Number</i>	<i>Number by HBCUs</i>	<i>Percentage by HBCUs</i>
Associate	46,451	1,466	3.2
Bachelor's	83,576	23,434	28.0
Master's	21,937	3,187	14.5
Doctorate	1,393	130	9.3
First professional	4,444	688	15.5
Total	157,801	28,905	18.3

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996a, 1996b, tables 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, pp. 39–43.

One recent study (Solorzano, 1995) found that 57 percent of African American males who received doctoral degrees in science and engineering fields from 1980 to 1990 received their bachelor's degrees from HBCUs or institutions where African Americans were the majority of students. In addition, data from the Department of Defense show that about 20 percent of the African American officers in the U.S. Air Force received their bachelor's degrees from HBCUs. Furthermore, data from the 1989–90 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study show that 77.1 percent of African Americans enrolled in undergraduate programs at HBCUs said they hoped to receive a master's or doctoral degree, compared to 70.6 percent of those who attended higher education institutions other than HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Despite their low income levels, African Americans who attend HBCUs generally have very positive and successful academic experiences. African American students at these colleges have lower dropout rates than those at predominately white institutions. HBCUs foster environments that are more supportive of African Americans than the environments of other institutions. Because of this, the students at HBCUs have been found to be more confident, more involved with campus activities, and more involved with faculty than are African American students at other schools (Constantine, 1994).

Due in part to these factors, graduates from HBCUs have in general been successful. One study (Constantine, 1994) found that the average wages of African American graduates of HBCUs are 38 percent higher than those who graduated from other types of colleges. Many HBCU alumni have also made valuable contributions to American society. Alumni from these institutions have significantly affected many fields, including law (Thurgood Marshall), civil rights (the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.), and medicine (Charles Drew). These and many more alumni from these colleges have had a highly significant and positive effect on American life. In 1986, members of Congress recognized

the efforts of these colleges when they wrote, “the historically Black colleges and universities have contributed significantly to the effort to attain equal opportunity through postsecondary education for Black, low-income, and educationally disadvantaged Americans” (20 USCS 1060).

Future Concerns

Despite these contributions, the future of HBCUs is very unclear. Currently, three major issues threaten their existence: inadequate funding, recent Supreme Court decisions, and efforts by states to restrict admissions to public colleges.

By every standard, many of the HBCUs are badly underfunded, despite increases in federal aid. From academic year 1976–77 to 1993–94, total current fund revenue at all HBCUs barely kept pace with total expenditures, as revenue increased by 42.5 percent in inflation-adjusted value while total educational and general expenditures rose by 41.7 percent. Furthermore, educational and general expenditures per student at public HBCUs were about 12 percent lower than the average at all public colleges. At private HBCUs, average per-student expenditures were 14 percent lower. The average salary for female faculty at HBCUs was 14 percent less than the average for all female faculty members, while the average for males was 21 percent less (U.S. Department of Education, 1996b).

The overall revenue and expenditure figures mask the fact that many HBCUs are operating with large deficits. Howard University, for example, recently had to reduce faculty positions and administrative staff in order to reduce its debt. Several HBCUs have had to close, due in large part to funding concerns. According to the Department of Education, the number of accredited HBCUs declined from 109 in 1976–77 to 103 in 1993–94. Several other colleges may close or reduce faculty and staff if revenues do not increase significantly. Unfortunately, these funding concerns may adversely affect the quality of education that students at HBCUs will receive.

Because of these funding concerns, some state legislators are also questioning the necessity of continuing support for HBCUs, despite the successes of these institutions. Some have argued that the programs offered at black colleges are too expensive and that they are duplicative of the programs offered at predominately white institutions. Because white institutions cannot legally prohibit the enrollment of African Americans, it would be more efficient financially for states to close their public HBCUs and transfer their programs to the other colleges.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in its decision in *U.S. v. Fordice* (112 S.Ct. 2727, 1992), made some of these arguments when it found that the college admission standards used by public colleges in the state of Mississippi were in violation of its order to desegregate public education. The Court charged that these admission standards were “remnants of the dual system with a continuing discriminatory effect” because admission criteria for the state’s five pre-

dominately white public colleges and universities were higher than those used by the state's three publicly financed HBCUs. These differing standards, the Court believed, caused an overwhelming majority of the state's African American students to be unfairly excluded from attending the five white colleges, and caused them to attend the state's three HBCUs. The different admissions criteria were unlawful even if they were "race-neutral" (that is, they applied equally to African American and white students), were adopted in good faith, and were used by both HBCUs and predominately white institutions.

The effect that the *Fordice* decision will have on HBCUs is unclear, although the Court does hint that closing these institutions and merging them with majority-white colleges is a viable option: "Elimination of program duplication and revision of admission criteria may make institutional closure unnecessary. *However . . . this issue should be carefully explored by inquiring and determining whether retention of all eight [public colleges in Mississippi] itself affects student choice and perpetuates the segregated higher education system, whether maintenance of each of the universities is educationally justifiable, and whether one or more of them can be practicably closed or merged with other existing institutions*" (112 S.Ct. 2727, emphasis added). The Court therefore strongly suggests that the only way it will accept a new admissions system in Mississippi is for the state to merge its HBCUs with predominately white colleges. Ironically, the petitioners in *Fordice* did not seek to increase African American enrollment at white institutions; instead, they argued for increasing the state funding of Mississippi's three public HBCUs as a remedy for the inequitable admissions standards in the state's public higher education system. The Court ruled this out as a remedy, saying that the state "has not met its burden under [the *Brown* decisions] to take affirmative steps to dismantle its prior [segregated public college] system when it perpetuates a separate but 'more equal' one. Whether such an increase in funding is necessary to achieve a full dismantlement under the standards [the Court] has outlined, however, is a different question" (112 S.Ct. 2727).

Some HBCU supporters believe that this language in the Court's decision will encourage Mississippi and other states to close their land-grant HBCUs and merge their programs with white institutions. Black colleges, they argue, "should not be sacrificed to promote desegregation efforts that define success solely in terms of the percentage of African American students enrolled in White institutions" (Ware, 1994). Other proponents believe, however, that increasing the state's funding to HBCUs will make these institutions the "equal" of their white counterparts and encourage more white students to enroll at these colleges, thus making it less likely that they will close. Either way, it is highly likely that the *Fordice* decision will change the number, characteristics, and missions of HBCUs in Mississippi and other states in the near future.

Other states also have begun to examine their admission criteria for public colleges. Georgia, for example, recently introduced a new plan that would make students who do not complete a high school preparatory curriculum ineligible for admission to any of the state's four-year public colleges. Instead,

these students would be required to enter a remedial program at a community college. Once the remediation work is complete, the students would be eligible to transfer to four-year colleges (Healy, 1995).

African American leaders in Georgia argue that such a plan would have a devastating effect on the enrollments of freshmen at the state's three publicly funded HBCUs, because a high percentage of these students do not meet the admission standards. At Georgia's public HBCUs, more than 50 percent of the freshmen who entered in the fall of 1993 would have failed to meet the state's standard and been unable to attend college. State officials argue, however, that very few of these students graduate within six years of enrolling in a four-year college; at the three Georgia public HBCUs, less than 20 percent of the "developmental studies" students received a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college. Mississippi and California are among other states that are considering changes to their admission standards.

It seems very clear that changes in admission criteria will ultimately affect HBCUs because these schools have had a long history of educating academically and financially disadvantaged students. If the HBCUs are not allowed to admit these students, where will these students go to obtain postsecondary education opportunities and achieve success? Using the six-year graduation rates as a barometer to measure the success of HBCUs in educating academically disadvantaged students is inappropriate because these students usually take much longer to complete their studies. It is very likely that fewer of these students will receive bachelor's degrees if they are not allowed to begin their studies at HBCUs.

These concerns should not minimize the important contributions of HBCUs. Collectively, these institutions have succeeded despite segregation, inadequate funding, and other major challenges. They continue to educate financially and academically disadvantaged students of all racial and ethnic groups. Many of their alumni have become community, business, scientific, and military leaders. Although the future may seem unclear for some of the HBCUs, many others will continue to survive and thrive during the years ahead.

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