

Stories Untold:
Counter-Narratives to Anti-Blackness and Deficit-Oriented
Discourse Concerning HBCUs

Krystal L. Williams – The University of Alabama

Brian A. Burt – Iowa State University

Kevin L. Clay – Rutgers University, Newark

Brian K. Bridges – Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute

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Abstract

Although there is empirical evidence concerning the value of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), broader narratives about these institutions too often overemphasize challenges and depict them from a deficit perspective. We argue that such depictions elide the benefits of HBCUs within the higher education landscape and are rooted in a form of institutional anti-blackness—persistent imagery and discourse that construct Black colleges and universities as institutions devoid of value. In response to such silencing, this study employs counter-narratives rooted in a critical race methodology to illuminate the modern contributions of HBCUs as told by their chief executive officers—HBCU presidents. These contributions include: transforming today’s learners into tomorrow’s leaders; a commitment to serving low-income students that is unencumbered by their financial strains; and tapping the potential of students who were marginalized in prior academic environments.

Keywords

Anti-Blackness; Critical Race Theory; President; HBCU; Minority Serving Institutions

Comments

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Krystal L. Williams, Ph.D. (*Corresponding Author*)
The University of Alabama
301 Graves Hall
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
Krystal.L.Williams@ua.edu
(205) 348-2823

Brian A. Burt, Ph.D.
Iowa State University
2625 Lagomarcino Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011
burt@iastate.edu
(515) 294-4466

Kevin L. Clay, Ph.D.
Rutgers University- Newark
Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies
47 Bleeker Street
Newark, NJ 07102-1801
Lowell1988@gmail.com
(609) 505-4537

Brian K. Bridges
United Negro College Fund
Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute
1805 7th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
Brian.Bridges@unconf.org
(202) 810-0246

Biographical Sketches

KRYSTAL L. WILLIAMS, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the Educational Leadership, Policy and Technology Studies Department of The University of Alabama College of Education. Her research explores the use of public policies to promote college success for underrepresented students, with an emphasis on the interplay between policy initiatives and students' various psychosocial factors. Recently, her work has focused on these issues as they relate to (1) broadening participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics for underrepresented groups, and (2) reducing students' role strain in college.

BRIAN A. BURT, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at Iowa State University, National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow and a National Science Foundation Early CAREER Award recipient. He studies the experiences of graduate students in STEM, and the institutional policies and practices that influence students' educational and workforce pathways. He also investigates participation in research experiences (i.e., the science of team science).

KEVIN L. CLAY, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral associate at The Cornwall Center of Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers University- Newark. His program of research is broadly situated within the study of youth political identity, political education, youth activism, and the renderings of "justice" and "progress" espoused by diverse stakeholders in urban educational contexts. His dissertation project examines the political identity development of Black and Latinx youths in relation to issues of race/ism, inequity, and social change, paying attention to how they negotiate their political views in a neoliberal society.

BRIAN K. BRIDGES, Ph.D., is UNCF's Vice President of Research and Member Engagement and leads UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute (FDPRI) and the Institute for Capacity Building (ICB). He serves as UNCF's chief research officer, principal editor and contributor for FDPRI's publications, and the manager of internal and external projects involving capacity building, evaluation and assessment. Bridges also leads the UNCF Career Pathways Initiative, a project funded by the Lilly Endowment, to improve job placement outcomes at HBCUs and PBIs.

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Stories Untold:

Counter-Narratives to Anti-Blackness and Deficit-Oriented Discourse Concerning HBCUs

I think it's interesting that the question [about relevance] continues to even be posed to HBCUs. We don't question Catholic institutions or Jewish institutions, or women's colleges. The diversity of our higher education system is the hallmark of the American higher education system. We're the envy of the world because we have lots of different kinds of institutions. Different shapes and sizes. I think HBCUs are simply one of many wonderful opportunities for our kids to learn.

—President Beckwith, president of Walker College

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are dynamic institutions founded to address the educational needs of Black communities. However, these institutions increasingly serve a diverse student population (Gasman & Nguyen, 2015; Lee Jr., 2015), and recent statistics suggest nearly a quarter of all students at HBCUs are non-Black (NCES, 2017). As noted in the quote by President Beckwith, president of Walker College (a pseudonym), leaders of HBCUs are constantly forced to defend the current relevance of these institutions despite the contributions they make to diversifying the higher education landscape. This general disregard for HBCUs reflects deficit orientations about these institutions despite their overall contributions to higher education. While scholarship notes some of the contemporary challenges that HBCUs encounter and the need to address such issues for continued institutional progress (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013; Clay, 2012; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Mobley, 2017), many studies concerning HBCUs note their strengths and the benefits that attendance affords to Black students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Brown & Davis, 2001; Gasman, Nguyen & Commodore, 2015; Palmer et al., 2016; Richards & Awokoya, 2012; Shorette & Palmer, 2015). Although there is empirical evidence concerning the value of these institutions, broader narratives about HBCUs—not unlike the narratives attached to Black Americans in general—too often depict them from a deficit perspective, without balanced or nuanced

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consideration of their assets.

To take one example, HBCUs are often omitted or overlooked in mainstream news media and academic discourse about higher education, rendering them largely invisible. When HBCUs are discussed, deficit-laden discourse is often used, and occasional press is traditionally marked by stories that negatively position these institutions. Except for media outlets specifically tailored to Black education and social issues in general, HBCUs are typically absent from mainstream media until tumultuous circumstances arise (Jacobs, 2015; Nocera, 2016). Because of the negative framing often employed, there is a need for counter-narratives which highlight the strengths and underemphasized success stories of HBCUs without obscuring the inequitable terrain these institutions and their students must navigate. This study seeks to better understand the modern contributions of HBCUs as described by their chief executive officers—HBCU presidents. Building upon existing scholarship concerning the HBCU presidency (Freeman, Commodore, & Gasman, 2016; Freeman & Gasman, 2014; Gasman, 2011) and the contributions of larger, public land-grant HBCUs (Esters & Strayhorn, 2013), this research focuses specifically on smaller, private HBCUs. Accordingly, this work expands the current literature concerning HBCUs and contributes to a more holistic understanding of this diverse group of institutions. This study employs a critical race theory framework (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and focuses on the condition of antiblackness (Dumas, 2016; Bashi, 2004) to understand the marginalization of HBCUs. This research complements existing educational scholarship that promotes equity (Croom & Patton, 2011; Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011; Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012; Pasque, & Pérez, 2015). Moreover, building upon existing anti-deficit and strength-based scholarship concerning communities of color (Bowman, 2006, 2013; Harper, 2010; Williams, 2014a, 2014b; Williams, Burt & Hilton, 2016; Burt,

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Williams & Palmer, 2018; Burt, Williams & Smith, 2018; Yosso, 2005), this article uses counter-narratives from HBCU presidents to highlight the underemphasized assets these institutions possess.

A Brief History of HBCU Development and Historical Marginalization

The founding of HBCUs is rooted in historical racism and apartheid within the United States (Albritton, 2012; Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009). To clarify the current and forthcoming discussion concerning HBCUs—institutions specifically established to address the educational needs of Black people—a note concerning language is essential. While the terms “Black” and “White” are often used to describe physical characteristics of people from African and European descent, respectively, within this study we acknowledge race as a social construct that goes beyond personal phenotypic qualities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). In addition to its descriptive properties, we note that race operates as an instrument of racism, which advantages White people while disadvantaging non-White people in general, and Black people specifically (Smedley & Smedley, 2012). This long-standing social construct has implications in various domains including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Klopfenstein, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). It is within the context of the historical oppression of Black people that HBCUs emerged. Similar to the social position of Black people, HBCUs have been historically marginalized within American higher education. This phenomenon underscores the significance of this study’s focus on counter-narratives regarding Black higher education institutions and their strengths. HBCUs are defined as,

Any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by

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a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.

(Higher Education Act of 1965, 2012)

While a couple of HBCUs were founded before slavery was abolished and educated freed Black people, most were established after the Civil War (Albritton, 2012; Gasman & Tudico, 2008; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The need for Black education institutions emerged due to the history of racism in the United States which 1) legitimized the enslavement of Black people in this country, 2) made educating this population illegal, and 3) once educating Black people became legal, relegated it, primarily, to segregated institutions (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001). Accordingly, HBCUs have historically played a critical role in filling educational gaps within Black communities due to large barriers to educational opportunity. Although these institutions undoubtedly helped to expand educational opportunities for Black populations in America, a brief glance at their early development illustrates their historical marginalization.

One manner in which HBCUs were marginalized during their early development was with regard to questions of institutional quality. Many early Black educational institutions were colleges in name; however, their curriculums did not focus on collegiate offerings (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007). By law, enslaved Black people were forbidden from learning how to read or write in slaveholding states prior to Emancipation (Allen et al., 2007; Bracey, 2017; Jewell, 2002). Therefore, in meeting the educational needs of the masses following the Civil War, it was important that secondary and college preparatory materials were offered even at Black “colleges.” However, the need to provide a college and pre-

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college curriculum and extensive non-college level offerings jeopardized early Black colleges' ability to acquire accreditation (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Furthermore, early public HBCUs were strategically underfunded in order to compromise their development relative to historically White institutions, and to invoke questions of comparable quality between these types of institutions (Albritton, 2012; Allen & Jewell, 2002; Bracey, 2017; Harper et al., 2009; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

White paternalism was another tool of marginalization (Allen & Jewell, 2002). While some Black churches were instrumental in supporting the development of Black colleges, the limited financial resources of formerly enslaved Black people, insufficient numbers of qualified Black teachers, and threats from racist White supremacists made it impossible for these institutions to be supported exclusively by the Black community (Allen et al., 2007; Allen & Jewel, 2002; Anderson, 1988; Jewel, 2002). Thus, assistance from White missionary groups was essential (Allen et al., 2007; Anderson, 1988; Allen & Jewel; Harper et al, 2009; Jewel, 2002). However, this support was not without consequences. Although many of the White northern missionary groups that helped establish private HBCUs saw this as a continuation of their support for the abolitionist movement (Allen & Jewell, 2002), some viewed their efforts as a way not only to educate freed slaves, but also to civilize them (Harper et al., 2009; Allen & Jewell, 2002). The White paternalism which suggested a need to civilize formerly enslaved Black people ultimately influenced curricular developments at these institutions (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Despite larger debates at the time about the primary curriculum that HBCUs should offer, and whether or not it should focus on practical skills (Albritton, 2012; Allen & Jewell, 2002; Allen et al., 2007), HBCU curricular developments were largely determined by the White power structure, including state government, philanthropists, and other major funding agencies—not the

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Black community (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Bullock, 1967). Accordingly, the initial curriculum at many of these institutions often aligned with larger efforts to devalue non-Western thought and promote industrial education. Although some private Black colleges were more focused on liberal arts, the interpretation of a liberal arts education varied (Allen et al., 2007) and often included courses that privileged Western and Eurocentric thought while demeaning the non-White world—particularly Africa (Allen & Jewel, 2002; Harper et al., 2009).

White paternalism was also employed by Northern philanthropists who used their financial leverage to promote a focus on vocational education at HBCUs that would relegate Black people to a labor-intensive social status proximal to their previous enslaved existence. History notes that Booker T. Washington's advocacy of self-help, industrial education and a continuation of the existing racial caste system fostered philanthropic support for the Hampton/Tuskegee model—a model focused on industrial or vocational education (Albritton, 2012; Allen & Jewell, 2002; Allen et al., 2007). Moreover, the Hampton/Tuskegee model helped shape the curricular development of many public HBCUs after the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Accordingly, White paternalism not only influenced what was taught and how at many private HBCUs, but also shaped a framework for the development of public HBCUs that would focus more on agricultural and technical training to support a continued pipeline of Black people into positions of manual labor post-slavery. Coupled with questions of institutional quality, these historical artifacts illustrate how the marginalized position that HBCUs have occupied hearken back to their earliest existence.

Modern Instruments of Institutional Anti-Blackness: HBCUs, Deficit Framing and Invisibility

Anti-blackness scholarship provides a useful lens for understanding the current

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marginalization of HBCUs within the context of American racism. This body of work suggests a longstanding and persistent cultural disregard for Black people in America (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Furthermore, existing anti-blackness literature interrogates society's preoccupation with and striving toward Black "social death," i.e. the erasure of Blackness from all forms of social life, as Black people are positioned as the "embodiment of problem" (Dumas, 2016, p. 15). Blackness signifies an otherness that not only renders one other than White, but also other than human (Dumas, 2016; Wynter, 1979). This otherness is rooted in the historical markers of Black people as property (i.e. slaves) in America. While traditional chattel slavery has ended, anti-blackness assigns permanence to the affiliation between Black and slave—an association that permeates the cultural fibers of the United States (Sexton, 2010).

Although most research has explored anti-blackness as a condition structuring the lives of Black people in ways that deny and attempt to dispossess them of their humanity (Wynter, 1979), anti-blackness is used here to describe the persistent imagery and discourse that construct HBCUs as institutions devoid of value; anti-blackness is a force against which historically Black institutions must also contend. As noted by Allen and colleagues, "HBCUs have been profoundly shaped by the circumstances (historical, economic, political, and cultural) that define Black lives and communities in America" (Allen, Jewel, Griffin & Wolf, 2007, p. 263). Just as Black people were historically understood to inherently "lack intellectual faculties" (Wynter, 1979), HBCUs were conferred a devalued status, thereby justifying their separation from institutions attended by White people (Anderson, 1988). Anti-blackness in this context illuminates the structural-historical forces that have, over time, maligned HBCUs in an attempt to erase them from American higher education.

Previous education research helps explicate how anti-blackness functions in the context

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of HBCUs. Dumas (2016) examines how anti-blackness manifests in school desegregation to render invisible the harm Black folks endured as a result of desegregation processes. He notes how the liberalizing language of desegregation proselytizes racial-mixing and “multiculturalism” while obscuring the erasure of Black school-communities when Black schools are closed and their students are sent to White districts. Additionally, Dumas (2016) notes how desegregation precipitated the mass unemployment of Black educators and violence suffered by Black students who integrated hostile anti-Black school climates. In similar ways, anti-blackness works through the liberal ideologies espoused by HBCU critics who decry their unique commitment to Black students and ignore or are unaware of most of these institutions’ foundation in the post-emancipation South—educating Black students who were historically barred access to most predominantly White institutions of higher education. Even as Black students face increases in racial insensitivity (Fernandez & Perez-Pena, 2015; Jaschik, 2016; Pearson, 2015; Tate, 2017), threats of violence (ADL, 2017; Jaschik, 2016) and even death at predominantly White institutions (PWI) (Bauer-Wolf, 2017), HBCUs are still often regarded as antiquated relics of a “bygone” era of racial division.

This article situates institutional anti-blackness vis-a-vis the invisibility and deficit framing of HBCUs as critical to understanding these institutions within the context of American higher education. As a complement to the earlier discussion concerning the historical marginalization of HBCUs, the following sections discuss how deficit framing and invisibility are often leveraged as instruments of institutional anti-blackness in the modern context.

HBCUs and Deficit Framing

Deficit narratives are in no short supply, and blackness continues to be associated with low academic expectations (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). The pervasiveness of

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deficit-framing of Black students has been extensively critiqued by scholars who point out the proliferation of research that only engages Black students' perceived failures or shortcomings (Milner, 2012). For example, Ladson-Billings (2006) notes that one of the most consistent subjects of inquiry in education—"the achievement gap"—is problematically framed as an investigation of what is wrong with Black and other students of color, when the gap, she argues, actually reflects an unequal opportunity structure and the debt owed to students of color for years of educational injustice. Similarly, Baldrige (2014) describes how deficit-oriented research often positions Black youth, saying,

Such rhetoric is not new...and often leads to an abundance of “damage-centered” scholarship (Tuck, 2009) that perpetuates a cycle of deficiency and pathology about marginalized communities. This deficit framing disregards the assets that Black and minoritized youth bring to educational spaces, thus ignoring their agency—and thereby limiting the ways they are imagined, engaged, and educated. (p. 440)

In the same way that young people's strengths are often overlooked, HBCUs are often scrutinized through a myopic lens that neglects their discernable value and suggests some deficiency. A cursory search of recent headlines in popular news outlets yields several results in support of this argument: “6-year Graduation Rates at Many HBCUs Lower than 20 Percent” (AJC, 2018), “Next Time Your HBCU Asks for Money, Open That Wallet” (Johnson, 2017), “Struggling HBCUs Look for Help from the Trump Administration” (Camera, 2017). These stories had been published recently in a major national or regional news outlet when this study was penned. While an exhaustive media content analysis is beyond the scope of this article, the presented headlines point to commonly noted challenges at HBCUs, such as low levels of alumni giving (Johnson, 2017; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman III, 2010), a need for

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improved overall graduation rates (AJC, 2018; Sharpe, 2018; Clay, 2016), and accreditation renewal uncertainties (Camera, 2017; Winston, 2016). They also illustrate deficit-laden depictions of HBCUs that influence public perceptions. These stories suggest institutional fragility or a lapse in judgement by HBCU leadership. Such depictions can be detrimental given existing research that notes the media's proclivity to unjustly project challenges at individual HBCU campuses onto all HBCUs in a way that stigmatizes this segment of higher education (Gasman, 2007).

A seminal piece regarding news stories about Morris Brown College (MBC)—a liberal arts HBCU founded by the African Methodist Episcopal Church—illustrates this point. In a study of accreditation issues at MBC, Gasman (2007) noted how the negative depictions of one HBCU shaped opinions about all of these institutions for important audiences including politicians, policymakers, academics and the general public. As Gasman observed,

A content analysis of the media's coverage of Morris Brown College's situation suggests that the media has made and continues to make generalizations about Black colleges based on the faults of a few. These generalizations call into question the very existence of Black colleges. (Gasman, 2007, pg. 131)

The author also questioned whether such negative discourse is indicative of a larger agenda to besmirch Black colleges and cast doubt on their relevance.

Indeed, media depictions of HBCUs have lasting effects, and these portrayals reveal the extent to which these institutions are vulnerable to marginalization typical of the Black experience in the U.S. Deficit framing circumscribes opportunities for individuals and institutions alike. Baldrige (2014) notes, "How we imagine youth is not just how we envision or think about them, in their present circumstances, but also how we view what is possible for their

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lives” (p. 440-441). Just as Black students’ educational futures are often couched in the language of risk and precarity, which can impact the degree to which some educators are willing to invest in them (Taylor, 2008; Ferguson, 2001), deficit discourse concerning HBCUs can foster low expectations concerning the future of and need for these institutions.

HBCUs and Invisibility

One phenomenon resulting from racialization, and racial marginalization specifically, is that it renders some groups invisible. Similar to deficit framing, invisibility is a form of silencing that is powerful and often used against HBCUs from an institutional anti-blackness perspective. Deficit framing and invisibility function as co-existing forces that ultimately shape perceptions of HBCUs and disregard the assets of these institutions. Theorizing silence, Carpenter and Austin (2007) offer the following insights:

The silences are not just those gaps in speech that occur between two people when there is nothing to say. Rather, they are spaces that are inhabited by so much more that could be said... It is what remains unsaid and what is drowned out by what is said. (p. 662)

“Silencing” in this article refers to a social-structural power rather than an individual silencing: a power to both create and “drown out” narratives about whole groups and institutions. Invisibility subsumes minimizing narratives of historically Black institutions that align with the public’s racial common sense, eliding these colleges’ and universities’ self-definition. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) reflect on the role of silencing in racial marginalization, arguing that “majoritarian stories” do the work of “decenter[ing] and dismiss[ing] communities of color” (p. 36). They describe a majoritarian story as “[a]story [that] distorts and silences the experiences of people of color. Using ‘standard formulae,’ majoritarian methods purport to be neutral and objective yet implicitly make assumptions according to negative stereotypes about people of color” (Ikemoto,

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1997, p 29). Collins (1990) offers additional insights about silencing when discussing how hegemonic discourse and imagery conspire to control narratives around oppressed peoples (Black women in particular). Elaborating on the power that these tropes hold, she writes:

Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mummies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (p. 5)

HBCUs have endured a similar history of ideological violence (Dubois, 1903; Gasman & Hilton, 2012; Woodson, 1933). Under the veneer of objectivity, a hegemony of misrepresentative images is constructed to obscure the good work done by and through HBCUs and simultaneously overlook the unique and compounded external barriers they face. For example, critiques about outcomes at HBCUs compared to other types of institutions often overlook HBCUs' historical dedication to serving students from families with limited financial resources and the barriers to academic preparation many of these students must overcome in college (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016). These contextual realities have a substantial impact on student success at the institutional level.

Misrepresentative images of HBCUs are also prevalent in policy discourse. A recent comment from Betsy DeVos, U.S. Secretary of Education, illustrates this point. In a statement concerning educational opportunities for underserved students, Secretary DeVos likened the founding of HBCUs to the advancement of school choice by suggesting that these institutions

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were founded because “there were too many students in America who did not have equal access to education.” She further explained: “[HBCUs] saw that the system wasn't working, that there was an absence of opportunity, so they took it upon themselves to provide the solution. HBCUs are real pioneers when it comes to school choice” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The positioning of HBCUs as school choice pioneers not only dismisses the history of exclusion that Black communities have confronted with regard to gaining educational access, it also denies the history of racism that fostered the need for HBCUs when access to most other institutions was neither an option nor a “choice.” Disregarding the socio-political climate that necessitated HBCUs and the continued educational opportunity gaps that impact many of their students renders key characteristics of these institutions invisible. The devaluation of HBCUs has served to justify excluding them in various ways, including but not limited to challenges in securing state and federal support (Association of Governing Boards, 2014; Stratford, 2017).

Taken together, the concurrent practices of invisibility and deficit framing relegate HBCUs to a position of obscurity. Given the specific nature of anti-blackness with which HBCUs must contend, it is crucial to destabilize the “majoritarian stories” that construct these spaces as devoid of value. One of the most useful scholarly tools for resisting “majoritarian discourse” is counter-storytelling, which is situated within critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Conceptual Framework:

A Counter-narrative Approach to Resisting Institutional Antiracism

The power of deficit framing and invisibility as tools of institutional anti-blackness underscores the importance of alternate depictions of HBCUs. Such depictions can offer insight into the layers of deep educational commitment that make HBCUs invaluable institutions to their

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students. Critical race theory (CRT) provides a useful lens for understanding the specific ramifications of institutional anti-blackness for HBCUs, as well as the value of narratives that disrupt deficit orientations.

While the condition of anti-blackness provides a backdrop for understanding the persistent and pervasive devaluing of Black people and, by extension, Black institutions, CRT underscores the benefit of and need for counter-narratives told by those most closely connected to those institutions. CRT is rooted in legal scholarship and has been used within various social sciences, including education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Similar to anti-blackness research, CRT provides a critical lens for understanding racial issues and the continued marginalization of people of color in America. While this theory rests upon several primary tenets concerning racism and the privileges afforded to Whiteness (e.g. the normalization of racism in America; the important role of interest convergence; race as a social construction; differential racialization; the insufficient pace of liberal legal action in addressing racism; Whites as primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation) (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998), the aspect most germane to this study is its emphasis on the importance of storytelling, or counter-narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Counter-narratives offer a useful tool to combat deficit storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and to unearth unexplored and underexplored ‘truths’ to complicate or disrupt existing narratives, ultimately exposing and critiquing dimensions of racial inequity, and uplifting marginalized perspectives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Resisting the urge to assign counter-narratives an inflated value in social justice scholarship, it is important to note both their usefulness and their limitations. The *empathic fallacy* is a reminder that counter-narratives

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against anti-blackness cannot, alone, change hearts and minds by simply offering an alternative perspective on race matters to which listeners and readers will gravitate; rather, their purpose is to expose the limits and contradictions of our common sense of race—a common sense that is constantly reinforced through the hegemony of mainstream images (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Furthermore, the counter-narratives offered here are not meant to suggest that HBCUs are beyond critique. Like other institutions of higher education, HBCUs have challenges that deserve further attention. However, the need for storytelling that counters pervasive deficit narratives about these institutions remains (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Although HBCUs continuously battle marginalization, they have accomplished feats that are too often unacknowledged or underacknowledged. For instance, a recent Gallup poll suggests that, compared to Black students at other types of institutions, those at HBCUs report feeling better prepared for life post-graduation, higher levels of engagement at work, and greater overall well-being, especially in terms of their finances (Gallup, 2015; Seymour & Ray, 2015). Research also suggests that HBCUs have higher graduation rates than other institutions serving a large percentage of low-income students (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017) and contribute more to the upward mobility of lower-income students compared to other types of institutions (Reeves & Joo, 2017). In addition, there is evidence that HBCUs help students succeed via a number of institutional factors: support from faculty and peers (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010), role models (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010) and social capital on campus (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). In fact, the history of HBCUs' Black college student success has informed a conceptual model for adaptation at other institutions that serve this population (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). These positive outcomes generally speak to the value of HBCUs in terms of the production of Black college graduates, students' social mobility, and their experiential outcomes. Despite these

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accomplishments, a void remains in common discourse and media about the strengths of HBCUs because of their historic position as “other.” This void underscores the need for counter-narratives to offer competing insights about the value of HBCUs.

This study explores the underacknowledged contributions of HBCUs to American higher education. It highlights the counter-narratives of HBCU presidents as they not only reflect upon the marginalization of HBCUs in the higher education landscape, but also provide information about the contributions of these institutions to students from traditionally underrepresented communities, as well as to the general postsecondary landscape.

Methods

Because the goal of this study was to challenge deficit-centric notions about HBCUs, we employed qualitative methods to identify and illuminate counter-narratives to the deficit-oriented framing often used when discussing them. In doing so, we highlight the benefits of HBCUs, including their contributions to society. We draw from Solorzano and Yosso’s (2002) critical race methodology (CRM) to consider the marginalization HBCUs often experience, and to provide asset-based discussions of these institutions as told by their leadership. Certain key features of CRM are most germane to this study: exposing and critiquing research about people of color that is deficit-laden, advancing social justice in education, emphasizing the importance and legitimacy of marginalized groups’ experiences with racial subordination, and highlighting the value of methods such as storytelling, family histories and parables as methods of gaining knowledge about these experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Data Collection

The principal investigator (i.e., this study’s lead author) conducted seven interviews with HBCU presidents between July 2016 and May 2017 to elicit their insights about

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underacknowledged HBCU contributions and current HBCU challenges. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify potential study participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). HBCUs differ on a number of dimensions (e.g., enrollment, governing structures, funding). We assumed that based on how HBCUs vary, selecting presidents by institutional type would capture key similarities and differences across institutions. We decided to focus this exploratory study on presidents of one type of institution, private HBCUs. To identify potential participants, scholars, practitioners, and administrators familiar with HBCUs were consulted to identify presidents known for their leadership as well as their range of professional experiences (e.g., fundraising, institutional branding and marketing, administrative experiences at various institutions).

Because college presidents have multiple responsibilities and busy schedules, we were also mindful of the potential availability of administrators at such a high level. Interviews were one-on-one and semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This allowed us to ask each president the same questions, but also provided the flexibility to probe deeper as necessary. Interviews were either in person or via phone, according to each president's availability. Each interview was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim (most were professionally transcribed). Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, although additional time was provided as needed.

We designed the interview protocol around common topics often depicted as challenges for HBCUs in the literature and media (e.g., retention, graduation rates, financial resources) (AJC, 2018; Camera, 2017; Richards & Awokoya, 2012). Interview questions invited the HBCU presidents to reflect on those challenges, and on how their institution has responded to them in productive ways. In addition, the presidents were asked to provide insights about under-told or under-emphasized successes of HBCUs that are too often silenced. Some examples of questions we asked include: Which of these challenges is most pressing for HBCUs currently? What

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experiences have you had with this challenge as the president of your institution? What strategic approaches have been taken to address this challenge at your institution? What contributions do HBCUs currently make in higher education?

We were cognizant of the presidents' limited time. Therefore, while not intending to prime them to respond in particular ways, we aimed to keep our discussion focused around common HBCU challenges. To help orient the presidents to our conversation, we provided them with a document highlighting the topics (i.e., common HBCU challenges) and examples. See Table 1 for the topics and examples shared with the presidents.

Table 1

List of HBCU Challenges Presented to College Presidents

Topics	Examples of Challenges
Alumni Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alumni giving
Enrollment and matriculation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connecting with alumni postgraduation• Decreases in enrollment over time• Low retention
Limited financial resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low graduation rates• Lower faculty salaries• Limited budget for facility improvements
Making the case for HBCUs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less funding for student scholarships• Questions concerning their current value• Debates about the relevance of HBCUs in a post-racial America• Arguments that Black institutions promote segregation
Accreditation challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Challenges responding to accreditation requirements

Note. HBCUs = historically Black colleges and universities.

Meet the Presidents

The seven presidents in this study represent institutions in different geographic regions and states, highlighting their roles in navigating state-specific social and political climates. See

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Table 2 for *select* background information on study participants; to maintain confidentiality, each participant and his or her institution are referred to by pseudonyms. The total sample was almost evenly split between females (three) and males (four). Participants also varied in their years of experience working on an HBCU campus; four presidents had between 1 and 10 years of work experience at an HBCU, whereas three had experiences covering more than a decade. Thus, the sample allows insights from those new to HBCUs, as well as those who were more seasoned. In addition, at each institution, at least half of the undergraduates are Pell Grant recipients—an indicator that these students come from low-income families; however, for most institutions, the overwhelming majority of their students receive this award and, therefore, come from families with limited financial resources. In addition, most institutions provide both undergraduate and graduate training. As is generally true for most HBCUs, each president leads an institution that has a smaller student enrollment relative to a number of colleges and universities that are not HBCUs.

Table 2

Background Information on Study Participants

Pseudonym	Institution (pseudonym)	Attended*	Years of Service (range)**
President Beckwith	Walker College	No	1-10
President Brawley	Thompson College	Yes	10+
President Court	Wells University	Yes	1-10
President Holmes	Smith University	Yes	1-10
President Merner	Jones University	No	10+
President Paschal	Benjamin College	Yes	1-10
President Simon	King College	Yes	10+

Note. HBCUs = historically Black colleges and universities.

* Attended an HBCU for undergraduate studies; ** “Years of Service” represents the range during which the participant has professionally served at an HBCU in any capacity (not exclusively in the role of president)

Data Analysis Procedures

Basic qualitative data analysis techniques were used to inductively analyze the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). First, the PI read through each transcript to refresh her memory of the conversations had with presidents. The initial read also provided an understanding of the range of information embedded in the transcripts. During the second read, the PI began labeling small chunks of information (i.e., codes) that offered explanations of the contributions of HBCUs and responses to HBCU challenges. To aid in the development and scrutiny of codes, the PI created a codebook in which each code was listed, followed by thoughts about inclusion and exclusion (i.e., what unique characteristics are associated with a particular code). These processes (i.e., of reading the full transcript, coding text) were done for each individual transcript. Codes were continuously scrutinized by the PI and the third author to ensure that each code held its own unique definitions. After codes were generated per transcript, codes across the codebook were again scrutinized by the PI and the third author to ensure that each code across transcripts was distinct from the others. Some examples of initial codes and their definitions were: resisting deficit depictions (i.e., combating negative portrayals of HBCUs and changing the narrative); institutional misrepresentations (i.e., the underestimation of HBCU outcomes and success stories); and, institutional self-authorship (i.e., understanding the HBCU story as articulated by HBCU representatives). After identifying an initial set of codes, the PI began combining similar codes into categories. This process of condensing codes into categories began moving the data closer to themes. For instance, the three codes previously described coalesced to form the category “telling our story.” That is, the category “telling our story” was an amalgamation of pervasive challenges experienced by the presidents: “resisting deficit depictions,” “institutional misrepresentations,” and “institutional self-authorship.” According to

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the presidents, it was these challenges that gave rise to innovative practices and policies implemented during their tenure. Other examples of categories and their codes include: building students up (high expectations, familial institutional environments, cultural responsiveness and affirmation); and, societal and educational contributions (expanding access and opportunity, community outreach, leadership development).

After identifying categories, the PI and third author revisited the transcripts to verify that the thematic categories offered understandings of HBCU contributions and responses to HBCU challenges. During this process, they also searched for additional examples of the thematic categories not identified during the initial coding process. Although they used a priori codes during this phase of analysis, the researchers remained open to identifying new codes that could be included in existing categories and/or generate new categories. Finally, the researchers iteratively discussed relationships between categories, relative to this study's research questions. The categories were then combined to develop three themes (for example, the theme "Transforming Today's Learners into Tomorrow's Leaders" included the category "societal and educational contributions" and the codes "expanding access and opportunity," "community outreach," and, "leadership development"). Based on the data, the themes identified by the researchers provide counter-narratives to deficit conversations about HBCUs.

Role of the Researchers and Ensuring Quality

When conducting qualitative studies, it is important that researchers are sensitive to how they engage each aspect of the study and how they could potentially introduce and mitigate biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Milner, 2007; Peshkin, 1988). First, all authors of this article identify racially and ethnically as Black and/or African American. All authors also conduct scholarly work on the experiences of historically marginalized students and on organizations that

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serve and policies that impact historically marginalized students. As members of historically marginalized groups, we acknowledge our unique interest in this study's topical area and how it is informed by our larger racial and sociopolitical positions. In addition, the lead author attended an HBCU for undergraduate studies, providing her with a deeper, experiential understanding of HBCUs (including the persistent critiques of HBCUs and underacknowledged benefits of HBCU attendance). These personal and professional details are important to acknowledge because the participants in this study work at HBCUs and HBCUs were explicitly designed to serve Black and African American students. While our personal and professional backgrounds could be sources of bias, we strove not to overlook disconfirming data in efforts to paint HBCUs in brighter light. Additionally, we engaged in constant conversations about various aspects of the overall study, especially interpretations of the data and the ultimate findings. Despite the threat of bias, we believe that our shared racial and ethnic identities serve as a source of pride through which we were better able to identify counter-narratives that may have been lost on researchers with different identities (Burt, Williams & Smith, 2018; Green, Creswell, Shope, & Clark, 2007; Warren & Vincent, 2001).

Finally, two of this study's co-authors were employed by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) at the time of data collection. The UNCF is a non-profit philanthropic organization focused on providing financial support to private HBCUs. This professional affiliation with HBCUs helped us gain access to HBCU presidents. Without this professional affiliation, we may not have gained access to the presidents, given the large demands on their time. In addition, it is likely that the presidents agreed to participate in this study given our professional affiliation. This extension of trust may not have been granted to other researchers not holding a similar HBCU affiliation.

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Steps were taken to ensure the overall quality of the study. For instance, because the majority of the recordings were professionally transcribed, we reviewed the transcripts to verify their accuracy. Additionally, we iteratively revisited the audio and transcripts during the data analysis process to verify that what was said during interviews was accurately captured in our interpretations of the data. For example, there were moments when solely reading the transcriptions rendered flat and lifeless interpretations of the data. The text came back to life when re-listening to the audio, more strongly illuminating speakers' passion to tell their untold stories from an asset perspective. Relatedly, while two of this study's authors primarily focused on data collection and/or data analysis, the other two authors—both of whom are skilled qualitative researchers—served as peer reviewers of the interpreted analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This system of peer briefing offers credibility because the findings have been scrutinized by those who were not involved in data collection and analysis processes. Finally, an audit trail was created to inform future research procedures on similar topics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Our audit trail includes analytic memos written throughout the study to capture initial insights about the data collected, key aspects of each interview, and initial alignments and misalignments across the data.

Limitations

The study has a number of limitations worth noting. First, the seven HBCU presidents are not a representative sample of all HBCU leaders. Such representation was not the intent of this study. Instead, the objectives were to gather insights from HBCU presidents about the institutional challenges and depictions they encounter in their daily work, better understand the contributions of these institutions as told by key leaders, and illuminate the overlooked institutional assets of HBCUs, thereby complicating monovocal narratives that frame these

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institutions from a deficit perspective. To this end, the sample of presidents used in this study provides many useful insights. Similarly, this study's focus on private HBCUs—a subset of all HBCUs—should be considered. That is, because HBCUs, like PWIs, vary based on a variety of dimensions (e.g., enrollment, governing structures, funding), it should not be assumed that the counter-narratives of presidents from public HBCUs would be identical to those advanced by this study's presidents.

Second, it is important to acknowledge the role that our priming of the presidents (with the document highlighting the common HBCU challenges) played in our interviews. That is, if the presidents had not been primed with a list of potential challenges cited in the media and higher education literature on HBCUs, it is possible that they may have raised other challenges that are not regularly covered. Allowing them to more organically generate their own set of institutional and context-specific challenges might have revealed new insights.

Finally, this study only reports presidents' voices. Their perspectives are valuable because they hold a bird's eye view of the institution, its priorities, its global challenges, and its constituents' needs. Additionally, as the leaders of their institutions, presidents are more likely to confront and respond to questions about HBCU relevance. However, presidents are not the only players in the success of HBCUs; we acknowledge the important roles that all constituents (e.g., students, staff, administrators, community members, trustees) play. Other constituents might have provided different perspectives and/or more depth regarding the challenges and benefits of HBCUs.

Findings

In this study, the counter-narratives shared by HBCU presidents emphasized the critical contributions of HBCUs to the educational advancement of Black students, as well as their

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broader societal benefits. Three themes emerged: cultivating students' leadership abilities and development; expanding opportunities for students with financial barriers; and tapping the potential of students with prior academic challenges. The following sections highlight the voices of HBCU presidents concerning these institutions' substantial contributions in these areas and offer counter-narratives to the negative discourse regarding these institutions.

Transforming Today's Learners into Tomorrow's Leaders

The counter-narratives offered by the HBCU presidents in this study emphasized how these institutions transform today's learners into tomorrow's leaders. These counter-stories manifest in sharp contrast to pervasive institutional anti-blackness sentiments that question the relevance of HBCUs implicitly or explicitly. President Paschal, the president of Benjamin College, offered the following perspective about how HBCUs are undervalued:

[HBCUs] have proved time-and-time again that they do add value and they are able to transform learners into leaders. That's something that I think is underrated, especially considering that the students that we bring in ...they're not at a level playing field with their peers... who are at PWIs. So the type of transformation that we've been able to do in the HBCU realm, we don't get enough credit for doing it well.

Similarly, President Court, president of Wells University, remarked about the underemphasized role of HBCUs in creating educational opportunities for Black students while also fostering leadership development:

Our Student Body President this year [is] a single father, raised his daughter, graduated with honors, and served as Student Body President while he was a student here at Wells.

Those are the kinds of positive stories that don't get told.

As exemplified by Presidents Pachal and Court, each of the HBCU presidents in this study were

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acutely aware of the negative framing often cast upon these institutions, as well as the positive stories that often go untold.

HBCUs have a longstanding history as the bedrock of leadership development for students of color. These contributions have not only had a substantial impact on the Black community, but also on society at large. President Beckwith shared the following thoughts about the historical impact of HBCUs:

If you think about African Americans of note in our country... you will see that the vast majority...have come through an HBCU, whether it's at the undergraduate level or it's a graduate level...It's sort of a look to your left, look to your right, everybody in the room is connected to an HBCU in some way. You see it in entertainment, you see it in the arts, you see it in the sciences, you see it in sports. Our world is filled with success stories, and yet we never really connect them back... What would this world look like without us? It would be a very quiet place without... the entrepreneurship and the arts and the skills and the technology and innovation that we're seeing.

In the previous passage, President Beckwith notes the historical contributions of HBCUs and their African American graduates. This president notes how the contributions of HBCU graduates are often rendered invisible by a general failure to “connect them back” or, stated differently, to acknowledge the connection between “African Americans of note” and historically Black educational institutions. It is important to note that the HBCU presidents in this study often used “Black” and “African American” synonymously to represent individuals of African descent—the demographic for which HBCUs were historically founded.

The student development efforts and success stories alluded to in the previous excerpt also manifest today, as President Court notes in the following statement about HBCU graduates:

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A high percentage of [Black] Masters and PhD recipients in this nation have as a foundation Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I think without a doubt, we contribute to that as well as to the general intellectual capital of the nation.

Empirical data provides additional insights about the transformative contributions that HBCUs continue to make in higher education today. President Brawley, the president of Thompson College, shared the following statistics when asked about HBCU contributions to the higher education landscape. These estimates highlight key aspects of the current HBCU value proposition:

If we just isolate the HBCUs... and just look at what contributions they have made. For example, in the context of all of the [4-year] colleges... they're such a tiny segment, 3%... but over-performing in terms of conferring baccalaureate degrees at 18%. Even more so when you look at the students in the STEM disciplines—25% of African Americans that get degrees in the STEM disciplines are coming out of these historically Black colleges.

The estimates provided by President Brawley are supported by recent analyses concerning HBCU outcomes (Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, 2017). Furthermore, these comments highlight how, despite representing a small segment of higher education, HBCUs make a substantial contribution to baccalaureate degree attainment for Black students.

Leadership in STEM. With regard to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), Black professionals are drastically underrepresented and HBCUs are helping to foster diversity in these fields with their production of STEM graduates (National Science Foundation, 2017). The previous quote from President Brawley notes how these institutions are making important contributions to bolster the representation of Black STEM professionals. President Merner, the president of Jones University, further articulated HBCUs' contributions to Physics in

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particular, and the need for these institutions to take an active role in disrupting existing deficit narratives:

We've got to really be able to figure out how we're going to change the narrative in terms of things that we're doing and doing well and then identify those clearly so when there are agencies that produce reports, for example, there's American Institute of Physics, that lists where Black [students] who have been earning graduate degrees in Physics comes from. The vast majority come from HBCU's, so people have to say that... It's knowing the data, knowing our stories. I don't think we really know our stories well. Where have we exceeded? What are those exceptional stories and accomplishments and then how do we forcefully tell people about those kinds of things?

In these remarks, President Merner shares the important role that HBCUs must play in changing the narratives about these institutions. Furthermore, the president emphasizes existing institutional limitations with using data in a way that captures success stories. This sentiment is echoed by President Beckwith, who offered the following when discussing how this president's institution uses data to strategically emphasize its assets: "We contextualize that discussion by using data. That's been a very effective use for me, but I'm cognizant of the fact that I just got lucky. I have a solid [institutional research] office. Many of my peers do not." As President Beckwith noted, despite the benefits of using data to shape public opinion, many HBCUs lack the resources to produce tailored analyses to offer a different perspective about these institutions. Nonetheless, as mentioned by President Merner, HBCUs have made substantial contributions to policy-relevant STEM disciplines. Research notes the major role these institutions play in supporting the pathways of Black students successfully into and through STEM fields (Gasman, & Nguyen, 2014; Palmer, Davis & Thompson, 2010; Gasman, Nguyen, Conrad, Lundberg, &

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Commodore, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Perna, Gasman, Gary, Lundy-Wagner & Drezner, 2010; Toldson, 2013; Perna et al., 2009; Upton & Tanenbaum, 2014). This underscores how HBCUs are helping to support broader efforts to diversify STEM via their primarily Black graduates.

Leadership in social consciousness and diversity. In terms of cultivating tomorrow's leaders, HBCUs approach this responsibility in a manner that values students' development into socially conscious global citizens. The HBCU presidents pointed out that it was not only important that students be equipped with the tools necessary for leadership, but that their responsibility to promote global progress also be nurtured. This is another common feature of HBCUs that is often under-acknowledged or silenced in institutional anti-black contexts.

President Simon articulated this emphasis with the following statement:

All of us must see things as much bigger than ourselves. Our students, in order to succeed in college, must see they're more beneficial than just what impacts them... I tell them they're going to have to step into history, because fifty years from now they'll be talking about them and what they've contributed. They're called to really continue to make the world a better place and to be productive in their time. That's bigger than just what they're doing here in the classrooms today. It's what impact they're going to have on tomorrow and the changing world, and how important they are, and how much we need them... I believe that that is the essence of education.

Indeed, many of the presidents in this study noted the importance of cultivating graduates primed to be world changers.

As part of their commitment to molding tomorrow's leaders, HBCUs approach this charge with a dedication to promoting a more diverse pool of educated citizens. Such an emphasis is important given current and projected demographic changes in the country. Current

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demographic forecasts highlight the importance of improving educational opportunities for a diversified student population. By 2020, the Census Bureau projects that over half of all children in the United States, will belong to a racial/ethnic group other than non-Hispanic White (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Similarly, projections suggest that the majority of the U.S. population will be people in a racial/ethnic group other than non-Hispanic White by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). These demographic shifts further emphasize how important it is that the structural barriers that hinder educational preparation for students of color be dismantled. This is not only critical for individuals' well-being and from a social justice perspective, it is also essential for the continued advancement of the country. As President Simon of King College observed, "The minorities today who are studying in our institutions are going to be majority population and we need them educated." President Brawley elaborated with the following perspective about HBCU contributions to an educated and diverse populace:

I think if you begin with the fact that this country has set a goal of being number one in terms of education attainment, college level educational attainment, in order to reach those targets, I think all of the institutions that we have will need to be preserved and taken advantage of. The historically Black colleges included. If we also look at ... the goals going forward... and look at the demographics, and look at the fact that we are trending toward minority majority students, what about those institutions that have this proven track record of access and success with such demographics?

This and similar remarks illustrate not only a commitment to educating students of color, but the critical role of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) such as HBCUs given the demographic shifts underway. The leadership of the United States should reflect the population. Therefore, as the country becomes increasingly diverse, it is essential that students of colors' leadership skills and

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talents are cultivated. As President Brawley noted, the failure to acknowledge the successes of MSIs like HBCUs, and the need to preserve them, illustrates the invisible space that these institutions occupy. Their unique and timely contributions remain invisible despite the fact that MSIs will be instrumental to the country's future success given the students they serve and their continued commitment to transforming today's learners into tomorrow's leaders.

Pushing Beyond Financial Constraints: Serving Students with Financial Barriers

In addition to developing leaders of tomorrow, another key aspect of HBCUs that is often silenced is that they offer a pathway into higher education not only for thousands of Black students, but specifically for Black students from lower-income backgrounds. Current estimates suggest that, on average, about 70 percent of students enrolled at HBCUs are from low-income families (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016). To be sure, HBCUs are not monolithic, and there is variation across institutions with regard to student demographics. However, in general, HBCU enrollment is comprised of a high percentage of students with financial difficulties. Moreover, lower-income students are more densely populated within HBCUs compared to many predominantly White institutions (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016). Research has found that such financial barriers can have deleterious effects on students' college success (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016; Williams, 2014a, 2014b).

The counter-narratives offered by HBCU presidents illuminate the financial challenges that many bright and talented students face that can negatively impact their college experience. President Holmes of Smith University points out that students' financial strain often impedes their enrollment behaviors, specifically their ability to attend school full-time:

[Our students are] not from "monied" backgrounds. I think 85%... are Pell eligible, so

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that tells you something right there...they were doing the best they could in generating the resources and trying to take as much of a full load as they could.

President Court shared similar sentiments: “[We] have students who have to work at various points. That has an impact on the retention rate as well as the graduation rate, because they may have to stop a semester or come back.” These insights illustrate the tension between students’ financial obstacles and their enrollment behavior. Financial barriers can be problematic even for students who are academically prepared for college. President Brawley shared the following perspective:

I tell my board of trustees that for a classroom to be competitive going forward that we have to make raising dollars for scholarships a priority because that is really what it's going to take to bring in the students that we want... not only in terms of attracting the best and brightest students, but also in terms of educating those students that may have great potential... if they're first-generation low-income students it takes more resources to educate those students.

President Brawley further explained the objective and psychological strains that many low-income students at HBCUs must endure because of limited financial resources, which manifest even after they are awarded various forms of aid:

If they're low income there's a wide gap. Even after you've included the Pell, even the loans, there's still a gap that you've got to fill in order for those students to matriculate and they go from semester to semester wondering can I get that gap filled again. Those students have a high probability of dropping out....

Black families are consistently more likely to face precarious financial circumstances (Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Pew, 2016). This reality was not far from the minds of the presidents

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we interviewed, as illustrated in comments by President Merner: “The hardest part of this time of the year is you get all of the students saying, ‘Hey, I don't have any money to come back to school. My parent doesn't want to fill out the loan form.’” President Merner further described how financing and personal debt issues are a significant constraint for families that lack personal savings, which is part of a larger pattern of systemic challenges this population of learners faces:

It's a complex problem because as a nation we're at historic or really low levels of personal savings... [I ask students,] “What have you saved?” “No, I haven't saved anything,” so they have to take out these loans. When you start looking at debt, you're going to see higher debt levels, particularly in students at HBCUs because they didn't have anything to begin with.

President Merner continued by describing the tensions that emerge between the institution and the federal government due to high student debt levels. The president also outlined some of the complexities regarding families’ responsibility to prepare for college while hindered by financial and racial wealth disparities:

The federal government says, “Your loans are too high.” It's like, “Yeah, but you won't increase payouts so the people who really need the money can get to go.” They're taking out a loan because they have to because they haven't saved anything... They're going to have to take out a loan if they go [to college] and the blame then, comes back onto the institution. It's a really complex set of problems ... Everybody points fingers and say, “it's this person's fault. It's this person's fault,” when in fact, it's a lot of people's fault. Everybody's got to own their share of it. That includes the families... but then that becomes complicated when you start looking at income and wealth and equality and then

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that impacts the people that we serve the most.

In general, Black college graduates have higher debt levels resulting from both their undergraduate and graduate enrollment (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016). In addition, Black parents of college students have to pay back more in student loans (Braga, 2016). It is possible that racial/ethnic differences in student debt levels are a result of larger racial/ethnic differences in assets, overall net worth and wealth (Census Bureau, 2018; Asante-Muhammad, Collins, Hoxie, & Nieves, 2017). Moreover, the return for a college degree on the job market for Black Americans today, while significantly better than the salary for those without a college degree, does not compare to the return that White college graduates receive (Gould & Cooke, 2016). Indeed, institutional racism and the history of White welfare (e.g. redlining, FHA backed mortgage subsidies, etc.) have created clear disparities in access to private capital. Research shows that White high school dropouts have accumulated more wealth than Black college graduates (Fletcher, 2015), and that White individuals with a criminal record are more likely to get job callbacks than Black individuals without a record (Pager, 2003). It follows that White students are more likely to graduate from college with less student loan debt and, oftentimes, the security of generational wealth, and without the added burden of facing racial discrimination on the job market. This is not the case for most Black students and HBCU leaders are cognizant of their role in helping students prepare for this reality. Such lessons are an essential part of the holistic education offered at Black colleges that goes underemphasized when viewing these institutions from a deficit perspective.

As previously illustrated, the HBCU presidents in this study are acutely aware of students' financial challenges and how they may impact their college experiences. These insights are supported by other research which notes how students' objective financial challenges and

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subjective responses to those challenges can reduce their chances for college success (Williams, 2014a, 2014b). Furthermore, existing research provides some insight about the financial strain of many HBCU students. Recent analyses suggest that HBCU students generally have more financial constraints than those at other types of institutions (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016). Recognizing these financial challenges, presidents endeavored to help students see beyond them and focus on the opportunities that college can afford. President Simon explained this orientation:

I think research also shows you've got to have the right kind of support services when you're dealing with populations that most of our HBCUs deal with... They are lower income students. They're often first in their families to go to college, and we have to take a different approach with them to show them the possibilities, not the obstacles. They have to see the possibilities and opportunities and not get sidetracked by what their perceived obstacles are in life.

In an attempt to create a space where students can avoid getting “sidetracked” by financial obstacles, specifically, HBCU presidents have ventured to find creative ways to secure additional funding to offset costs; to offer employment opportunities to students; and to accomplish each of these things in a manner aligned with the overall mission of the institutions. Describing one such way, President Paschal said:

I thought for some while that we needed a different business model... I proposed to the board of trustees [that] we create what I'm calling an industry-based model in which we create businesses and operate them as a means of bringing in supplementary revenue to our institutions. So the businesses had to be mission compatible; it had to give us a place where we could employ students, because once again, that assistance supports

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persistence... and it had to be something that would bring us revenue that had nothing to do with tuition. So...we went out and began looking and talking to our business community and we found out there were some franchises that we could purchase to operate here in [our region of the state]... Those are operating now and that additional revenue is what helps us do the other things we want to do with faculty salaries and with increases in raises and all of those kinds of things...

As HBCU presidents resist deficit-laden narratives and own the process of telling counter-narratives, they focus on the key roles that HBCUs continue to play in college access for low-income students. The creative funding strategies highlighted above illustrate the desire to reduce financial barriers to college success, and the un- or under-appreciated commitment that HBCUs have to their low-income populations.

Given the growing percentage of low-income students who are in the pre-college pipeline (Suitts, 2015), and decreases in low-income students' college enrollment (Hartle & Nellum, 2015), improving these students' college trajectories should become a national priority. To make this happen efficiently, the critical role of HBCUs and other institutions that have a history of serving these students in productive ways must be appreciated. Recent research notes that HBCUs that serve a high percentage of low-income students have higher graduation rates for Black students than non-HBCUs that serve students from similar economic backgrounds (Flores & Park, 2015; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017; Richards & Awokoya, 2012). This evidence underscores HBCUs' prominent role in serving students who battle financial strains and emphasizes their importance given the rising number of low-income students in the pipeline.

Taking Advantage of the Potential: Serving Students Marginalized in Prior Academic Environments

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Another often-silenced key contribution of HBCUs is the educational advancement opportunities they provide to students marginalized by structural academic preparation barriers in prior K-12 academic environments. Various studies note the systematic educational challenges that Black students too often encounter within secondary education (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby 2008). Many Black students are concentrated in schools that lack adequate resources and the educational infrastructure necessary for competitive college preparation (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2002). For example, Black students are often underrepresented in advanced placement courses that help students to be more competitive college applicants (Klopfenstein, 2004; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Ultimately, the educational opportunity structure for Black students puts many at a disadvantage once they begin the transition from high school to college, if that even occurs. Recent statistics suggest that about 42 percent of Black high school graduates do not immediately enroll in college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). For other racial/ethnic groups, the percentages of high school graduates who do not immediately enroll in college are drastically lower: approximately 22 percent, 30 percent and 8 percent for Hispanic, White and Asian high school graduates, respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

A little under 80 percent of HBCU enrollees are Black students (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016), many of whom come to their institutions having encountered the academic barriers previously discussed. Accordingly, HBCUs serve as beacons of opportunity for a number of students who have been underserved within American public school systems. Furthermore, recent statistics suggest that over 40 percent of students at HBCUs are the first in their families to attend college (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016). Therefore, these students cannot draw

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essential college knowledge from their immediate families. President Holmes stated, “Many of our students, like many other HBCUs, are first-time college students. They're finding their way.” Indeed, the literature notes that many at HBCUs are *finding their way* after being tragically underserved in their prior educational experiences (Saunders, Williams & Smith, 2016; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Kim & Conrad, 2006). The HBCU presidents in this study spoke candidly about students’ academic challenges. They also acknowledged how misinformation about HBCUs and their students can render the day-to-day realities of these institutions invisible. President Beckwith shared the following perspective about recurring policy debates around developmental education:

The argument [is that], if a student graduated from high school and passed the graduation exam, that they were competent to go to school and that institutions were simply milking them by giving them remedial classes...the truth is 96% of our kids need at least one remedial class. We're not teaching remedial education because it's fun or that we enjoy it, it's because those students need it to be able to go to the next level.

As noted by President Beckwith, the fact that HBCUs serve a large number of students who were underserved in K-12 puts them in a precarious position given ongoing debates about the value of developmental education in college. Despite their students’ academic challenges, these institutional leaders do not view the students from a deficit perspective. Instead, they perceive an opportunity for encouragement and uplift. President Simon reflected on the types of students served at HBCUs and the high expectations established for them:

By and large most of our institutions do well with the populations of students because we draw from the public schools of America. We have to do a lot....to bring students up to the academic rigor. Not lowering your standards, but bringing people up. I think that's

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been the challenge for [my institution]. That's our command, too, is that we may get you here, but we're going to bring you up. We want to be a value added... That's what we strive to do every year is to be the value added.

President Simon's comments underscore an institutional orientation that emphasizes providing a "value added" experience and bringing students "up." This president also discussed various mechanisms that were put into place to help students succeed. While the institution set high expectations, it coupled those expectations with appropriate support systems. These systems often manifested in a team-based manner, rooted in collaboration across various institutional units. President Simon offered the following insight about the team-based approach implemented on campus to help foster "value added":

[We] have a great faculty that care about the students. It's a team approach here where we try very hard not to allow our students to fail. We have an alert system where if students miss class we have staff people or faculty [and] security that will go into the dormitories, and knock on their doors. It surprised a couple of freshmen a few weeks ago. They didn't go to class, so they said, "I can't believe they came to the dormitory and got us."

This quote illustrates the concern and care for student success coupled with high expectations at President Simon's institution. While proactive advising has been found to improve student outcomes (Rodgers, Blunt & Tribble, 2014; Thomas, 2017), this example illustrates that some HBCUs are using other proactive techniques to help students succeed.

In addition to the example offered by President Simon, other presidents also discussed the critical role of alert systems and reflective university practices to help students who were battling prior academic marginalization. In the following quote, President Holmes discussed the steps that one institution took to improve institutional hiring practices and "reinvent" the Center for

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Student Support (CSS) to better assist with academic challenges.

Here is a pattern that I discovered when I became president... and when I say this, it's not to denigrate secretaries... I'm really looking at the functional impact of a pattern that I found at [my institution]. Secretaries would work at [King College], and over time, they would get the jobs that their bosses vacated... When we have a proliferation of secretaries who have now taken director positions, the problem lies in exposure and imagination... So we have ceased that now; that's what was happening at the center for student success ...I pretty much have halted that process because I don't think it serves the long-term interests of the institution.

President Simon continued by describing the new direction instituted within CSS to promote student success:

We reinvented [positions in CSS], and we recruited outstanding academics who were known for their ability to help students improve and to succeed, and so we took the chair of the social work department and made her the director of the Center for Student Success. She immediately put in a kind of a case tracking system with early alerts etc., to help students matriculate and to get help when they actually need it. The thing I noticed immediately in that area was that the people who couldn't get the attention of the faculty, the former crew, now the new crew has their attention fully engaged because, frankly, it's one of them... She talks about helping students succeed, they listen to her because she's one of them.

This counter-narrative is important given ongoing critiques of HBCU student academic outcomes (AJC, 2018; Johnson, 2017), and the need for a more holistic understanding of how these institutions are becoming better equipped to respond to students' needs. Moreover, it

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illustrates institutional attempts to improve responsiveness to academic challenges via improved hiring and faculty involvement. Overall, this discussion illustrates how HBCUs function as a crucible of innovation related to serving students' needs with limited resources. As suggested by President Holmes, HBCUs are thinking through ways to improve institutional practices and leverage their current resources to help promote better outcomes for students—particularly those in need of additional academic support. One approach entails improving hiring strategies and employing the expertise of faculty with successful pedagogical track records to not only spearhead initiatives to improve student outcomes, but to do so in a way that motivates other faculty members' participation and engagement.

Promoting post-college success. In addition to advancing students' educational experiences, college presidents recognized the need to foster successful outcomes after college as well—especially with regard to employment. In doing so, they made strategic administrative decisions about institutional offerings to ensure that students would not occupy a marginalized position in the labor market akin to the educational marginalization many confronted prior to college. President Beckwith provides an example of some of the innovative steps institutions are taking to align curriculum with job market opportunities:

[We're] really re-tooling our institution from top to bottom as it relates to program development. Our largest major for example is criminal justice. The reality is that graduates from criminal justice programs have pretty distinct pathways. They can go to the military, they can become police officers, they can work at a prison, they can do all of those things without a college degree. It is morally wrong to encourage students to pursue a degree for which the outcome is little more than they would be able to earn if they didn't have the debt or the lost opportunity costs associated with going to college. What

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we're doing is forcing the issue. Our criminal justice will turn into a cyber-security degree... Our students will have to be well-versed in technology and infrastructure.... There are 200,000 vacancies a year in this country for cyber-security professionals...so if we want our kids to be employed at a high level, we have to offer degrees that are competitive at a high level. We're kind of taking that choice away and enhancing our criminal justice program with enough cyber-security skill sets that those students become very marketable on their way out the door. If they choose to be police, that's wonderful and admirable, but if they choose to go into the FBI and study white collar crime and cyber-security, they can do that too.

In this quote, President Beckwith illustrates the ways in which some HBCUs are analyzing labor market demands and making strategic decisions about institutional offerings and programs to help students be competitive in the search for employment. President Beckwith emphasizes that these institutions are not only prioritizing students' future trajectories, they are also being responsive to students' current needs. This is done by understanding the financial obligations and opportunity costs associated with college attendance and the need for degrees to lead to employment opportunities that would not otherwise be available.

In addition to sharing stories about students' experiences and institutional decisions to promote successful outcomes in college and beyond, one HBCU president also reflected on experiences as an HBCU alumnus who did not have access to competitive academic training before college. President Brawley offered personal details about the opportunities that attending an HBCU afforded:

At a majority institution... if [incoming students] didn't have a particular profile, meaning you hadn't taken calculus in high-school, you can't be an engineer. You cannot even get

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access. In the HBCUs, we'll take you. I must say that I was good at mathematics but, just looking at the courses that I had taken in high-school, many majority institutions never would have allowed me to major in mathematics. It wasn't my fault. I took every math course my high school had. They never heard of calculus in my high school and the like. I would have been denied, whereas in an HBCU we bring those students in, take advantage of the potential, and educate those students.

This example illustrates the general orientation of many HBCUs to embrace students' potential despite their current circumstances. It also highlights the history of college access at HBCUs, and how these institutions continue to offer opportunity to generations whose educational needs were not properly addressed in the K-12 system. These historical patterns continue to shape HBCUs' contemporary commitment to promoting postsecondary education for Black students. The under-acknowledgement of such a long-standing commitment in attempts to emphasize HBCU challenges from a deficit perspective reflect larger institutional anti-blackness perspectives about Black colleges and efforts to silence the contributions of these institutions.

Discussion

This study elevates the voices of HBCU presidents and presents narratives about the attributes and assets of HBCUs that counter persistent and pervasive deficit-centric depictions of these institutions. As a complement to other research concerning marginalized communities, this study is informed by anti-blackness scholarship to foster an understanding of how and why HBCUs often experience marginalization (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Bashi, 2004). The counter-narratives presented disrupt and complicate pervasive negative depictions of HBCUs and foster a more nuanced understanding of their modern contributions. This research emphasizes the voice of a key administrator—the HBCU president—in an attempt to offer a

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perspective that is informed by HBCU leadership. By highlighting the voices of HBCU presidents, this research illuminates the important contributions of these institutions in three key areas—1) Black leadership development for an increasingly diverse U.S. populace; 2) expanding educational pathways for students with financial challenges; and 3) serving students who have been marginalized in prior academic environments. The following discussion highlights a number of implications for this research. We specifically outline a path forward for addressing institutional anti-blackness in public policy and countering this perspective with institutional practice. We also recommend areas of future research to highlight HBCU contributions and reshape common discourse concerning these institutions. While this discussion offers suggestions for countering institutional anti-blackness sentiments, the authors offer these recommendations with an understanding that this orientation is rooted in structural deficit perspectives about Black people and Black institutions. Accordingly, we do not infer that this perception of HBCUs is a function of their actions or inactions. However, we recommend the following steps to help institutions traverse this environment in strategic ways that may help reprogram the public imagination.

Addressing Institutional Anti-Blackness in Public Policy

The findings from this study note that institutional anti-blackness has muted the contributions of HBCUs for Black students with financial challenges and those who have endured systematic academic preparation barriers prior to college. As highlighted by the presidents in this study, a large proportion of HBCU students come from lower-income families and many were underserved in the K-12 system. Despite these background characteristics, the HBCU presidents discussed their institutional commitments to maximizing these students' potential from an asset-based perspective that did not circumscribe students' futures based upon

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their pasts. Furthermore, most HBCU presidents mentioned the substantial contributions of these institutions to Black leadership development—a contribution that remains important given the need for leadership that better reflects the increasingly diverse nature of the population. Each of these HBCU attributes should be noteworthy to policymakers for several reasons.

Recent statistics suggest a current and future need for a greater emphasis on serving students from a variety of backgrounds. For instance, current data notes that sixty-five percent of low-income students enroll in college following high school completion (NCES, 2017). Furthermore, future projections suggest that there will be a continued increase in low-income student enrollment. (NCES, 2017). It follows that higher education institutions will need to be increasingly better equipped to address the needs of students from families with limited financial resources. Also, given the high percentage of students within higher education who must take developmental classes (Chen, 2016), it is likely that providing additional academic support once students enter college will continue to be a primary concern for many institutions. It is also important to note current population statistics, which indicate that people of color will soon be the majority within the United States (Frey, 2014). Given these demographic projections, it is imperative that policymakers at the state and federal levels have a greater appreciation for institutions that cater to the needs of various types of students. Moreover, it is also important that policymakers make purposeful investments in colleges and universities that have a historical and current commitment to serving students of color, lower-income students, and students who need academic support once enrolled. This includes HBCUs, other minority-serving institutions, and community colleges—all of which often sit on the margins of broader discussions concerning higher education in America.

This study also highlights a need for a stronger line of communication between HBCUs

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and policymakers to ensure appropriate representation of these institutions by key education decision-makers. This would also provide an opportunity for HBCUs to keep policy actors abreast of various institutional accolades and accomplishments. Better communication streams will not only help to build relationships between HBCUs and those crafting educational policies that impact these colleges and universities, it will also help institutions combat 1) less favorable depictions in the media and 2) the ability of such imagery to shape general perceptions about HBCUs. These types of interactions could be partly facilitated via collaborative efforts with organizations that currently work closely with HBCUs and policymakers, such as the United Negro College Fund, the Thurgood Marshall Foundation, and the Association for Public Land-Grant Universities. Such an approach will likely be especially important for smaller HBCUs, which may have limited resources to engage government relations.

Countering Institutional Anti-Blackness with Institutional Practices

To combat institutional anti-blackness and reshape the perspectives of policymakers, as well as the general public, it is also important that institutional practices regarding strategic communication are bolstered at HBCUs. As noted by President Beckwith in the opening passage, HBCUs continue to encounter questions about their current relevance in what is often depicted as a post-racial American society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Smith, 2014). In response to such queries, and to take proactive steps to counter future questions about relevance, a number of the presidents in this study pointed to the need for HBCUs to spearhead initiatives to change the narrative about these institutions. While some institutions have been able to employ resources such as campus institutional research offices to develop communication strategies, many HBCUs with fewer resources have had less success engaging this process. Accordingly, this study highlights a need for a concerted and systematic approach for the reclamation of the HBCU story

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as told by the direct stakeholders within these institutions.

One approach for developing a strategic communication effort is to hire a communication specialist or use existing human resources on campus to streamline and centralize institutional communication. This person or team could be charged with curating strength-based messaging that notes the institution's historical contributions, as well as its current accomplishments and points of pride. This person or committee would also develop a campus-wide strategy for advancing and disseminating this message on various platforms, including social media, marketing materials, recruitment medium, etc. These efforts could feed into or align with other institutional branding strategies.

In addition to individual institutional efforts, there may also be a need for cross-institutional endeavors, given the ways in which these colleges and universities are often seen and treated as monolithic. While it may be uncommon to think of shared strategic communication and messaging for separate institutions, the collective perceptions of these institutions may make such an approach beneficial. To counter deficit depictions of HBCUs, institutions may combine resources to develop a larger campaign to showcase success stories across campuses (i.e. faculty innovation, student accomplishment, institutional recognitions, etc.). This would allow a coordinated inter-institutional effort to combat deficit notions about this segment of higher education. To broaden reach, such efforts could be coordinated with other social media outlets and online platforms such as www.HBCUpridenation.com, HBCUStory.org and www.hbcugrads.com, which are dedicated to promoting positive imagery and messaging about HBCUs.

Institutional Anti-Blackness and Future Research

While this study explores HBCU contributions as described by campus presidents and

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how these counter-narratives contradict HBCU institutional anti-blackness views, there remains a need to better understand HBCU contributions as articulated by other constituents. This includes garnering insights from other key administrators, students, faculty and staff. These voices can provide a holistic understanding of the contributions of these institutions from multiple vantage points. There are multiple fruitful pathways to address this gap in the literature. For instance, a future HBCU institutional case study could provide a closer examination of the assets of a particular institution. Such a study could include campus observations and interviews with other university stakeholders (e.g. administrators, students, faculty, staff, and community members, etc.) to gain a more nuanced understanding of an institution's strengths, including its strategies for success. In addition, a future quantitative study could also be a valuable tool to assess the benefits of attending an HBCU. For example, surveying alumni about their experiences could provide valuable information about HBCU contributions from graduates, including a better understanding of graduate outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, civic engagement, economic returns, social and cultural capital accumulation). While some recent research has started to explore these questions (Gallup, 2015), more is needed.

There is also a need to further explore and conceptualize the ways in which institutions that specifically serve marginalized populations can also be marginalized within the broader higher education landscape. This study juxtaposes anti-blackness as not only an orientation that Black people have to resist, but also, by extension, a phenomenon that manifests an at institutional level and afflicts colleges and universities founded in the same history of oppression and designed to create opportunities for Black students. Accordingly, we argue that anti-blackness operates not only as a perspective that impacts Black individuals, but also an orientation that has lasting effects on Black institutions. Future research should continue to

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explore the parallels between the experiences of Black people and Black institutions in America.

Conclusion

Anti-blackness literature notes the persistent cultural disregard of Black people in America and the ways individuals within Black communities are situated as a problem (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Wynter, 1979). This scholarship also notes that this phenomenon has historical markers rooted in American racism (Sexton, 2010). A similar reflection was offered by W.E.B. Dubois (1903) at the dawn of the twentieth century when discussing the experiences of Black people in America shortly after Reconstruction. Dubois (1903) shared the following insights in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folks*:

BETWEEN me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require.

To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (pg. 1)

Indeed, the devaluing of Black people in America, and the positioning of these individuals as a problem, has a longstanding history, as illustrated by both modern and historical texts.

The anti-blackness sentiments that situate Black people in America as a problem have also afflicted Black institutions of higher learning. Just as anti-Blackness orientations marginalize Black individuals, institutional anti-blackness situates HBCUs as devoid of value by consistently framing them in deficit terms and rendering their contributions invisible. Like the

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history of Black people in America, this deficit-centric orientation concerning Black institutions of higher learning has a longstanding history rooted in American apartheid. While such narratives are not new, they are especially problematic in the current context, given attempts to diminish these institutions while privileging many historically or predominantly White institutions where Black students and other students from marginalized communities are often the targets of abuse and objectification. On the heels of a presidency that many argue has galvanized a typically covert White supremacist constituency into action (Gray, 2017; Lind, 2017; Milbank, 20018; Schreckinger, 2017), there has been an onslaught of highly publicized incidents on a number of predominantly White college campuses where students from marginalized communities—particularly Black students—have been victims of racism, isolation, and general mistreatment (Fernandez & Perez-Pena, 2015; Hinton, 2017; Jaschik, 2016; Pearson, 2015; Tate, 2017). Given that PWIs have enjoyed ubiquitous support and validation in the public imagination despite the social and academic violence many students of color have endured in these spaces, it is now critical that we challenge the taken-for-granted depiction of these institutions as well as deficit-laden discourse concerning HBCUs. The longer that the anti-Black deficit narratives and invisibility that silence Black institutions remain unquestioned, the less likely that HBCUs will be able to obtain the kind of broad support necessary to sustain these institutions.

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