The story of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is often one that points to persistency in the eye of the storm. While some HBCUs have folded up over the years, the last to close its doors was Concordia College in 2018. The remaining 101 HBCUs have kept their heads above the water. Majority of the challenges that confront these institutions are the lack of funding and infrastructure. Beyond the foregone institutional challenges lies the uphill task of efficiently running some of these colleges tailored to minority students.

Despite the challenges that confront HBCUs, Stanley Nelson and Marco Williams, in their 2018 movie: Tell Them We Are Rising, shared that these institutions are rising rods in the skies of higher education. The resilience seen in HBCUs today embodies a long history that began with slavery and, subsequently, denial of access to education for Black men and women. The emergence of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania in 1837 as the first HBCU brought a significant change in the education trajectory for Black people in America. Cheyney University signaled
great hope for many Black men and women that yearned for higher education. The aftermath of Cheyney University saw the manifestation of other colleges such as University of the District of Colombia, which became the second HBCU in 1851, followed by Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in 1854 and Ohio-based Wilberforce University in 1856. The list of HBCUs grew for several years coming until many of them fell along the cracks as the challenges enumerated became tangible. Some started to fold due to a myriad of difficulties. A recent case in point is Cheyney University, which was on the verge of closing until the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) came to its rescue.

HBCUs have remained home education to many Black men and women in America, Africa, and the Caribbean. HBCUs have become a place of cultural, intellectual, social, economic, and political diversity as many students from diverse backgrounds gather to train. For example, the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, had the privilege of training at Lincoln University. Civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rev. Jesse Jackson, among many others, have all benefited from the legacy of HBCUs. One of the many things that draw most Afrocentric students to HBCUs includes some superficial but equally relevant features: the similarity in looks, hairstyles, skin tones, food choices, and the convergence of first-generation college students across these campuses. Attributes such as these keep many students together in pursuance of success in the HBCU environments—bonds established on HBCU campuses run deep through family ties that go back to generations. But a great awakening of some sort in the HBCU story has been how funding for higher education institutions is skewed towards non-HBCUs such as Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). While these historical institutions may not have envisioned the battles ahead, several HBCUs serve as shining examples of courage under challenging times.

INEQUITY IN FUNDING

The last American Council on Education (ACE) report outlined the scope of inequity in federal and state government funding and investment in HBCUs. In a snapshot, public HBCUs are more dependent on federal and state funding than non-HBCUs, while private HBCUs heavily rely on tuition. In addition, private HBCUs receive a smaller number of personal gifts, contracts, and grants. Data from ACE points to a great irony: while HBCUs continue to struggle financially, these historical institutions continue to experience a decline in federal funding. Moreover, HBCUs’ endowments are lower than non-HBCUs’, like PWIs, at least 70% behind.

THE MOREHOUSE EXAMPLE

HBCUs should be replicating the success stories of their own. The likes of Morehouse—an all-male college, have been a success story in STEM education. Morehouse remains a shining example that deserves all the accolades. The Atlanta-based college’s successes are attributed to capitalization on the nation’s competitive demand of scientists and the lack of African Americans in these academic disciplines. Like the many other HBCUs, Morehouse has produced very influential individuals like Spike Lee, Howard Thurman, Herman Cain, and Eddie Glaude, to name a few.

HBCU stories have been about denying Black men and women educational rights and about inequality in the funding of Morgan State University, Coppin State University, Bowie State University, and University of Maryland Eastern Shore—the four historically Black colleges and universities in the state of Maryland. But more importantly, the HBCU story is about the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) in science and mathematics at Morehouse that encourages and teaches young Black men to become scientists. The inspiration is all about how Morehouse is making these young men ready to live in a STEM world—a career path that hardly gets a front seat discussion in many African American homes.

The HBCU story is also about The Morehouse Mystique, which instills in students a character of leadership and a sense of comradery. HBCUs today aren't just a place to obtain knowledge. Recent police brutalities and the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have flipped the story to a reassuring chapter that tells stories of HBCUs as a safer place for higher education. The challenges of HBCUs may be far from over. However, opportunities like the recent rise in enrollment numbers of HBCUs call for strategic positioning of these historical institutions for a future that will capitalize on all funding sources available. HBCUs have been levers of social mobility and community shelters for Black people in America since the founding of the first institution, Cheyney University, in 1837.”
since the founding of the first institution, Cheyney University, in 1837. For more than a century, HBCUs have disproportionately supported the production of middle-class Black Americans despite severe underfunding and purposeful disinvestment. HBCUs consistently overproduce, accounting for only 3% of public and not-for-profit institutions, yet enroll almost 10% of African American college students nationwide, while yielding 17% of the bachelor's degrees and a quarter of the STEM degrees earned by Black students.

Despite their critical role in producing Black graduates, the state underfunding of HBCUs has been documented in various cases, including the recent landmark HBCU Maryland case which netted $577 million to the state's four public HBCUs. Even the Office of Legislative and Budget Analysis recently announced that the state of Tennessee withheld between $141 million and $544 million in land-grant funds to Tennessee State University between 1957 and 2007. But this is not the only sector that hasn’t invested in HBCUs, the gap in private gifts, grants and contracts between ultra-rich universities— institutions of higher education with endowments valued at more than $1 billion—and HBCUs in 2018 was $227 million, which is $100 million more than the gap in 2010.

This lack of investment in HBCUs is a lack of investment in their missions to serve underserved communities and students. In comparison to their peers, though HBCUs enroll 2.1 times more Pell eligible or students from low-income families, have a significantly higher population of first-generation students at more than 50%, and educate almost 75% Black student population, their graduates are 51% more likely to move into a higher income quintile after graduation.

Beyond that, HBCUs significantly contribute to the well-being of their students: HBCU graduates report higher social, purpose, community, financial, employee and physical well-being than their non-HBCU peers. The familial environment created to provide the wrap-around services required for under-resourced students also proves successful in producing graduates satisfied with their experience and prepared to be successful in the workforce demonstrated by their production of Black professionals including the creation of 80% of Black judges, 50% of Black doctors and lawyers, and 40% of Black engineers. This success is seen with HBCUs educating just 10% of the Black student population.

As we focus on equity and addressing the needs of the most underserved communities and people as well as uplifting society, HBCUs will be a critical component of any plan. The necessity of their role was highlighted as we continue to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, where the populations they are committed to serving were most affected. HBCUs mobilized to serve as testing sites, vaccination sites, provide shelter for students suffering from housing insecurity and to operate as food pantries. They were also particularly successful at preventing virus spread during on-campus instruction with HBCUs reporting significantly lower infection rates than their peers. Additionally, HBCUs’ success at producing Black doctors will be critical to addressing health disparities also extended by the pandemic.

HBCUs will play a significant role in reversing the recent economic downturn, particularly in the Southeastern US—where there are lower levels of economic well-being and where most HBCUs are located. In this area, they generate $14.8 billion annually in economic activity, producing positive economic benefits, critical for the recovery of our nation.

HBCUs continue to be indispensable for educational, economic, cultural, and societal gains for Black Americans and deserve more resources and an increased focus on their work for society. As we work towards creating more equitable outcomes for society, HBCUs remain pivotal to ensuring we achieve those endeavors.

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