

A backward glance forward: Past, present and future perspectives on historically Black colleges and universities.

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## **A Backward Glance Forward: Past, Present and Future Perspectives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

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The Review of Higher Education

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 25, Number 3, Spring 2002

pp. 241-261

10.1353/rhe.2002.0007

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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*The Review of Higher Education* 25.3 (2002) 241-261

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# A Backward Glance Forward: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Walter R. Allen and Joseph O. Jewell

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The American dream lies at the very heart of the American cultural ethos. At the center of the American dream is the emphatic conviction that, in this society, education opens the door to success. The belief that even the poorest American can achieve greatness with talent and hard work is one of this society's cherished cultural ideals (Hochschild, 1995). In most instances, talent is equated with educational attainment. African Americans have embraced these beliefs to the extreme. Dating back to when Black slaves were **[End Page 241]** forbidden to learn to read and write under threat of physical harm or death, we have invested education with mythic qualities, seeing it as our hope and salvation for the future. No matter how much education African Americans achieved, they still suffered discrimination based on skin color. Nevertheless, Black people have continued to crave and to embrace education as the ultimate solution. Despite the paradox of societal stereotypes of Blacks as lazy, ignorant and mentally inferior—even as America developed history's most elaborate institutional barriers to deny African Americans equal access to learning and knowledge—Black people continued to pursue education. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) grew out of and were shaped by this striving of African Americans for education. These institutions have embodied the hopes and frustrations of a people seeking the Promised Land.

Education has long been seen as an essential foundation of democracy. The extent to which individuals are afforded the opportunity to obtain knowledge speaks volumes about openness and power relations within any society. Yet for African Americans, the centuries-old struggle for access and parity in higher education has been emblematic of their larger fight for equality and group recognition in America. As direct outgrowths of this struggle, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) embody the African American quest for education. In the face of numerous obstacles, HBCUs have functioned as multifaceted institutions, providing not only education, but also social, political, and religious leadership for the African American community. While rooted in a long, rich tradition of achieving against the odds, they are now presented with new challenges as well as opportunities for growth and change. HBCUs are called upon to continue effectively serving a community that is itself in the grip of profound change. This article looks at the past, present, and future of HBCUs, examining the contributions, key issues, challenges, and trends in their development.

## The Freedmen's Education Movement, 1865-1877

From their very beginnings, HBCUs were faced with outright opposition to their existence. In the years following the American Civil War, African Americans, no longer constrained by the bonds of slavery, seized every **[End Page 242]** opportunity to formalize and expand upon the clandestine educational practices that had functioned in slavery. Indelibly marked by their slave experience where they had been forcibly kept in a state of ignorance, Blacks invested education with great importance. Formal education was a chief means for African Americans to distance themselves unequivocally from slavery and their subordinate status in society. Education also enabled African Americans to achieve social mobility while "defending and extending" (Anderson, 1988, p. 3) their newly gained rights as citizens. Thomas Webber (1978), James Anderson (1988), and V. P. Franklin (1992) characterize the efforts of African Americans to gain and secure educational access through institution building and legislation as a social movement. By working to establish a system of universal public education, which included poor Whites as well as Blacks, in a region where education had largely been the privilege of the White upper class, African Americans were in essence attempting to transform the Southern social order.

African Americans were not alone in their struggle to secure educational access. In addition to the fierce drive for Black institutional development, the post-Civil War years also witnessed the en...

*The Review of Higher Education*

Spring 2002, Volume 25, No. 3, pp. 241–261

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