Preface

In the 21st Century, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are competing more directly with Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for African American and others students from the African diaspora. Until the 1970s, HBCUs provided the primary and often the only option for African American and other Black students to obtain an affordable education. Until now, HBCUs had nearly a guaranteed pool of students with competition mainly among themselves. Now many PWIs have aggressive campaigns to recruit and financially support this diverse pool of students. PWIs often have more resources and stronger infrastructures than many HBCUs. Most PWIs are not meeting the cultural, psychological and social need of their African American and other Black students. Thus a conundrum exists.

While all institutions of higher learning must continue to strive to improve retention and graduation rates while being more financially efficient, the need to improve the efficiencies at HBCUs is often greater in order to maintain their records of strong graduation rates and entrance into graduate and professional degrees. Therefore, the need to rethink HBCUs’ operations to ensure sustainability, retention and delivery to better serve their historic and new markets becomes even more critical. First, how do we expand HBCUs or enhance them physically, academically and financially? Secondly, how can HBCUs innovate to stay competitive?

One of the main problems with some HBCUs is that they struggle with balancing progressive approaches verses historical approaches, which at times are considered antiquated in a number of different areas including recruitment, academic offerings, professor’s pedagogy and classroom environments. Market forces are causing many funders and politicians to rethink the classification of HBCUs and the impact of what this means for this group of institutions. Do HBCUs still need this institutional classification and/or do the requirements to keep the classification need to be redefined? This has implications on a number of different levels from private and public support, to degree attainment and financial stability.

Forthrightly addressing these questions should help HBCUs improve and more importantly better serve their students, faculty, staff and communities. HBCUs must continue to build strategic plans that capture a true essence of their missions through forward thinking and innovation. While academic leaders, often from the Baby Boomer and World War II Generations, steeped in the history of HBCUs, have led the discussion, it’s time for new voices, particularly Millennials and GenXers to set the agenda for determining how these institutions should innovate to stay relevant in today’s society. These younger generations are known for constantly looking for ways to be efficient, innovative without compromising quantity over quality. Not only are Millennials and GenXers the next set of leaders but also they come with diverse and meaningful experiences. They are the next generation of college executive administrators, i.e. deans, provost, and presidents. HBCUs and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) must
deal with these issues now, but they must seek new voices to guide this process and invite these younger cohorts to help fix these problems. The need for such a call from millennials and GenXers makes the level of discussion presented in these chapters more pertinent than ever before.

This book is necessary because of the need to produce more research and engaging dialogue that will impact the success of HBCUs. Since the inception of this book in the winter of 2014, HBCUs have been receiving mixed reviews. Regardless of the institution, HBCUs are relevant. This book is not here to address HBCUs’ relevance – though relevance is a reoccurring topic of conversation. This book specifically addresses student engagement and retention and the support systems and philosophies needed to help HBCUs thrive and deliver on their historic reputation.

As administrators at a prominent HBCU, we found it difficult to find benchmark studies and best practices from an HBCU perspective that would provide important information for implementing strategic university-wide initiatives. We know from our personal experiences that HBCUs have innovative and effective programs at departmental and university-wide levels. Yet, many HBCUs do not effectively tell their stories. The reporting of information as it relates to student engagement, persistence, retention and graduation rates is also scarce. It is easier to make assumptions about the issues and problems these institutions face when the information is ambiguous and left up to a variety of interpretations.

An example of disheartening interpretation of success of HBCUs was from the late Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, who has been considered by many one of the most important legal minds of a generation. Yet, his statement regarding the Fisher v. University of Texas, which relates to its affirmative action admissions policy, set off a storm of controversy. He said:

*There are those who contend that it does not benefit African-Americans to get them into the University of Texas, where they do not do well—as opposed to having them go to a less advanced school, a slower-track school where they do well … One of the briefs pointed out that most of the Black scientists in this country don’t come from schools like the University of Texas. They come from lesser schools where they do not feel that they’re being pushed ahead in classes that are too fast for them.* (de Vogue, 2015)

His comments can be interpreted in several ways, and many feel his comments are racist for attacking both Black students and most likely HBCUs. But he is also criticizing University of Texas’ inability to support Black students holistically. Scalia is correct in one point that disproportionately, Black students excel at colleges and universities like HBCUs which are very different from University of Texas, a flagship state school. Likewise, University of Texas has a poor track record of graduating African American or Black students. However, his criticism that HBCUs are lesser is problematic. Are they under-resourced? Often yes, but so are many PWIs leading to recent closures of some. Can they improve their approach to teaching and learning? Yes, but so can PWIs. Are they lesser schools? No, and the image of such needs to change. Do they have different missions than University of Texas? Yes, most HBCUs are not comprehensive, research doctoral granting universities, and those that are still do an outstanding job graduating undergraduates in multiple disciplines who obtain employment.

On the one hand, this is a very racist statement. However, the statement is quite clear. There is nothing surprising about this statement since the Justice was referring to other reports that have made the same assertion. Aren’t African American students better off at HBCUs? African American students can excel anywhere. However, having worked at PWIs and an HBCU, the evidence is clear with a few exceptions. Something is special about the nurturing and support students receive at HBCUs. The problem speaks to the larger issue that HBCUs do not do a good job, compared to other institutions, of telling
their story and really show not only their necessity, but achievements and outcomes. We must control our narrative, share our narrative and continue to improve our narrative through demonstrated progress to meet our missions.

Therefore, HBCUs need to start out the same way that the editors and authors of this book have decided to do. We need to share more of “the secret sauce” and share how new ingredients can and have been added to improve the recipe for success for the next generation of African American students. The need to start this dialogue is more important now than it has ever been. This book is a call to action. All HBCU alumni, faculty, students and administrators need to find the opportunity to promote HBCUs. Find ways through recruitment, social media engagement and research to tell the story of the good that HBCUs are doing and have done. This call to action is very critical. It is clear that something needs to be done and must be done with immediacy. This book is not the end game; innovations happen daily. Many issues exist that need to be addressed by a format like this book. One of the most important aspects of all of these issues is persistence, retention and graduation. Hence the title being specifically targeted to student engagement and retention.

Student engagement is important because one of the main tasks of a university is to provide a service to students through meaningful engagement inside and outside of the classroom. Engagement is used broadly since it comes in multiples forms from mentorship, advising, university programming, student support services and classroom management. Particularly, students need different types of support during the college experience. First-year students need different types of engagement compared to sophomore students. Students who are preparing for medical school versus those preparing for graduate school need different types of engagement. Regardless of the type of engagement, the fact remains that students need to feel a part of a community that is invested in their development. This community involves all aspects of the institution from recruitment, admissions, faculty, staff, alumni, administration and university communication working collectively to evoke positive innovative change to not only engage students but to retain them.

Retention is another key component that is a major issue that must be addressed. With all of the scrutiny and new evaluation systems honing in on the number of students that enter, persist and graduate, retention has become a hot topic in the field of higher education. Therefore, it was important that the book addresses this particular issue as most HBCUs’ rates vary greatly. If HBCUs not only want to stay relevant but be competitive, they must work very hard in this area on their campuses. While retention isn’t new, it now has been put on a bigger stage, where accreditations and funding are being tied to it. When this happens, there is a ripple effect that takes place because policy makers, legislatures, consultants and other stakeholders start to figure out ways to attach financial incentives to address the issue. With HBCUs, financial support and funding is key and cannot afford to be affected negatively.

Ultimately, this book is a product of the call to action for HBCUs. The following chapters, in their respective volumes, represent only a fraction of the ideas that are currently being generated. There are so many more ideas that need to be published, and they need more platforms like this one to do it. It is just a start. The process for having a call for chapters for this book yielded a mass influx of interested authors who want to publish their works, resulting in two volumes. It is imperative that there be more opportunities to publish works about HBCUs. The beginning of more projects to come and the hope that this will make an impact at various institutions across the country. The book may state for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, but these kinds of ideas can be used with Minority Serving Institutions and potentially PWIs. Through this larger body of institutions, comes a common reality that is experienced by all; student engagement can improve and retention efforts need to increase.
THE BOOK

The original manuscript for this edited book has been divided into two separate publications. This book examines how retention can be improved at HBCUs focusing specifically on the academic affairs component. The other one, Administrative Challenges and Organizational Leadership at HBCUs, examines the way HBCUs can use their administrations, organizational change and leadership to impact student engagement and retention. Each of these books have one goal they are both trying to achieve: improving student engagement and retention. Both of these topics are very important to the field of higher education. It can be argued that for HBCUs, it is one of the most important priorities. With all of the challenges they face, student-centered goals and objectives will dominate many strategic plans and compelling priorities institutions develop. Therefore, this book will showcase how many institutions are tangibly working to improve student engagement and retention at their respective institutions. The works range from theoretical to practical. Each providing systematic ways that these ideas can be scaled to other institutions. Ultimately, the important take away from these chapters is that there are success stories to improving student engagement and retention and that story needs to be told and replicated to make a larger impact on the students.

The first couple of Chapters, 1-4, focuses on retention strategies within HBCUs. Many of the chapters are case studies at HBCUs, others look at strategies more widely used in colleges and universities and discuss the opportunities they possess for HBCUs to employ. The key element to the success of persistence and retention programs as both Drs. Woods-Warrior and Hinton state is university commitment to the entire student. Students need to be identified early, supported socially, academically, financially from acceptance through graduation. Many federal, state, local and private dollars are available to support such initiatives. Institutions need to ensure that many of the opportunities that can be available to students, are provided in ways that are connected to persistence and retention efforts. Since many HBCUs educate a large number of African-Americans, then the opportunity to become showcase institutions in the area needs to be capitalized upon.

The author, Dr. Ford recognized that HBCUs and other minority serving institutions have the opportunity to make a significant difference with writing centers. They were not on the agendas of major or regional conferences for writing centers, and their narratives were not included in the scholarly or trade literature making their presence seem nonexistent when in reality, hundreds of these centers existed. This chapter provides insight into how these professionals joined to together to support each other, but also how writing centers must claim a space and a strong identity within the university, not just as a service unit for struggling students, but a place of academic excellence.

Similarly, the team of scholars from the Psychology Department at Bowie State have attempted to apply the concepts important to retention through addressing the whole student using the multi-tiered system, where interventions addressing the academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs of their incoming first year students. Unlike the other two chapters, they present concepts to use in the classroom like supplemental instruction and techniques to address the mental health challenges many students face such as anxiety and depression. They called this a multi-tiered System of Support model (SoS model). This SoS model resulted in academic success when implemented on a small scale at Bowie State in 2010 and 2014.

Academic excellence combines not only retention but their performance while matriculating. This set of chapters, 5-10, addresses strategies that aid in developing strong students in terms of grades, curricular participation in such activities as laboratories, presenting papers, publishing academic and
professional works. Most of the academic literature about Black students focuses on undergraduate students. However, at least 21 HBCUs educate students in doctoral programs, and about 40 offer master’s degrees. The chapter posits that deliberate mentoring of students leads to increased retention, enhanced professional commitment, satisfaction with academic programs, and greater productivity and creativity.

A team of GenX and Millennial HBCU scholars and professionals joined to offer a case study of how learning communities can be implemented in a truly Afro-centric manner in keeping with the rich traditions of HBCUs. They draw from the literature and bring to bear insights from implementing the strategy successfully on campus of Norfolk State University, a public HBCU in Virginia.

HBCUs, because of their large number of Black faculty members provide role models and mentors who look like their student body, have been connected to retention, satisfaction and graduation rates according to Japera Johnson, Tiffany Jones, Clyde Wilcox, and Judith K. Gwathmey (Wilcox). Furthermore, the authors posit that HBCUs missions and philosophies tend to focus on helping others and caring for the whole student, respectively, and, therefore, help students to see a greater purpose to their success in these disciplines. The authors recommend that HBCUs invest in STEMM remediation and experiential learning experiences. Also they suggest that articulation agreements with four-year and two-year colleges will help students transition into STEMM graduate and bachelor’s degree programs. Those implementing these ideas can serve as institutional agents and mentors for students.

Using examples from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University (NC A&T), North Carolina Central University (NCCU) and Winston-Salem State University, authors Sayo O Fakayode, Vincent Snipes, Margaret Kanipes, Abdul K. Mohammed, and Zakiya S Wilson offer four strategies in which HBCUs can increase enrollment in and retention and graduation from STEM programs. The authors recommend HBCUs design and implement new curriculum that emphasizes active learning and student engaging pedagogies. They also urge HBCUs to involve students early in experiential learning research opportunities. Finally, the authors urge the establishment of strong collaborations between HBCUs and local K12 school districts as well as community colleges to promote a grass root science education and quality pipe-lines for STEM HBCU students.

While many HBCUs see online and distant education as a real opportunity to increase enrollment, the next chapter explores HBCU student perceptions of online learning. About 33 HBCUs offer degrees from associate to doctoral degrees online according to Yolanda Lyght Dunston. Based on a survey of North Carolina Central University education majors, the author concludes that HBCUs must work to ensure that communication between faculty and students must be strong and access to the faculty and resources to ensure academic success must be present. Faculty preparation and planning as well as technical support are essential to a successful online or distance education program.

“Taking Advantage of a Changing Market” focuses broadly how technology and professional development of the faculty will help meet the needs of the changing demographics of HBCU students. Chapter Authors Bryan Kent Wallace and Adenike Marie Davidson offer specific recommendations on how to improve online library holdings, integrate technologies from mobile devices to online course offerings. They outline seven steps to help HBCUs achieve a modern integrated approach to teaching and learning, based on educational and management practices and theories.

The next set of chapters, 11, 12, and 13, are unique to the book because they specifically target groups based upon two important characteristics: race and gender. These aren’t the only characteristics that are important; however, based upon the chapters that were submitted, this was a common theme. Institutions need to deal with racial and gender issues on campus using various resources. The need to not only ensure that the population of students that are recruited and accepted are diverse, but that they
have the necessary supports to feel included and not excluded. “The African American Course Mystique” examines at how a particular HBCU has engaged White students through its African American studies or African Diaspora course requirement for graduation. The general education curriculum is an important aspect of the college experience as students are typically required to complete courses outside of their major. Many of these courses are centered around social justice, African American studies, African studies, or liberal arts course designated to specifically engaged the students around particular topics in one of these areas through a different discipline. However, while the African American student is the main audience, it is clear that other students may not have been considered, and this chapter will speak to some of their experiences.

“Motivational Factors for Academic Success Prospectives of African American Males at HBCUs” is pure research grounded in gaining a better understanding of the black male experience at an HBCU. Black male enrollment has been declining for years, while black female enrollment has been on a steady increase. The need to retain African American males is very important. Institutions need to find out what is important to them so that they can make stronger connections between a college education and their ultimately life goals. Understanding their experiences and expectations can improve the ways services to these students are tailored to meet their needs. “The Role of HBCUs in Preparing African American Males in Careers in Information” provides specific tools that will encourage more African American males to pursue careers in Information Technology. This field lacks a significant number of African American males. Therefore, a way to encourage students to join STEM, STEAM or other areas where there is a significant lack of presence is an opportunity for HBCUs to expand their academic offerings and provide better educational experiences to students who pursue this particular career.

Finally, the book concludes with Chapters 14 and 15, which examine very specific aspects of the HBCU academic sector. Case studies serve a very important part of the book. Through all the information that is presented, there are still intrinsic issues that must be addressed and are unique to specific disciplines, fields, knowledge and outcomes. “Techniques for Retaining Computer Science Students at HBCUs” stresses the importance for HBCUs to encourage more computer science students, but to also retain the ones who are majoring in the field. These specific techniques are applicable to those institutions that offer this degree or partner with institutions to offer these courses. “The Emergence of the Professional Doctorate” ends the discussion of the book examining the doctoral level experience of students in doctorates of education programs. Much research is centered towards undergraduate students and education. Many HBCUs offer graduate level programs. Therefore, more research needs to be done in this area so that better understandings and approaches can be done. Using career experiences in and outside of the classroom are important ways to retain students to complete their degree.

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REFERENCES