Chapter 11

Perceptions of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belongingness at an HBCU: Implications and Applications for Faculty

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ABSTRACT

Most studies about inclusion of traditional minority groups and women on university campuses have been conducted at Predominantly White Institutions with student populations. This chapter focuses on the experiences, perceptions, and implications of diversity, belongingness, and inclusion of faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Data collected from students, staff, and faculty highlight the diversity and positive climate at HBCUs but indicate that there are important differences in how particular groups perceive inclusion. This chapter offers suggestions on how faculty and HBCUs can celebrate diversity and yet acknowledge, discuss, and act against the negative experiences that shape feelings of inclusion. The authors emphasize the role of HBCUs in standing for and leading discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) make up a small portion of the institutions of higher education in the United States. However, they play an important role in the lives of many individuals and give a unique perspective to the topics of diversity and inclusion. Studies on diversity and inclusion have often overlooked HBCUs, and, more specifically, faculty and minorities at these institutions.

In an attempt to move beyond a simple demographic perspective, this chapter examines themes of diversity and inclusion at HBCUs with a focus on the implications of functioning as a faculty member. After discussing the historical context and role of HBCUs, the authors review research on the experiences of various groups of faculty at these select institutions. They also describe the challenges of diversity and inclusion for faculty at HBCUs to overcome. New research presented in this chapter gives a snapshot of those challenges by investigating the perceptions of diversity and inclusion of faculty, staff, and students—and minorities within those populations—at an HBCU. The authors hope that by studying distinct populations faculty can gain a greater understanding of the general makeup of HBCUs and thus operate in the HBCU environment more effectively. This research adds to the small body of existing studies on this topic and opens the door to discussing ways in which diversity and inclusion can be positively and actively promoted.

BACKGROUND

Historical Context and Role of HBCUs

HBCUs were founded over 150 years ago for the purpose of educating free Blacks and later newly emancipated Blacks for whom entry into most existing universities—and, indeed, most formal education—was denied them. HBCUs have a long history of valuing diversity and often attempt to serve as a refuge from racial bias (Foster, 2001). Many HBCUs were established by White Christian missionaries who undertook the task of helping Blacks attain the educational qualification that would allow them opportunities for social mobility (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2011; Redd, 1998). Several of these institutions were forced to address the diverse needs of the Black population who, upon the declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation, could now legally learn to read. Most of these schools were established in the South where the majority of Blacks lived. The first groups of students enrolled at these institutions varied in age, ability, goals, and purpose, and the schools themselves were—and still are—just as varied. In an effort to address the needs of these early alumni, some of these institutions included elementary, high, and trade schools and seminaries. As time passed many of these schools adjusted their structure and the majors they offered to duplicate the curricula of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Initially, HBCUs were staffed overwhelmingly by White administrators and instructors while their student body was almost exclusively Black. Over time, as more Blacks obtained advanced degrees, they often returned to these schools as faculty and staff since employment at PWIs remained closed to all but a few Black scholars. In the 1930s and 1940s, many HBCUs also employed Jewish professors who had fled Nazi Europe but who were often denied employment by PWIs because of their religion. These schools employed large numbers of non-native born scholars of Color particularly those from the Caribbean, Africa, and various parts of Asia. Thus, unlike PWIs, HBCUs became sites for diversity especially regarding its faculty and staff.
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