The Case for Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Understanding Race Relations in the United States Through its HBCUs Priscille Biehlmann

Abstract

There are over 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States today. These schools are driven by their historic responsibility as some of the central institutions for post-secondary education for African Americans. This essay traces the history of HBCUs and looks at empirical data to argue that though African Americans now have a constitutional right to attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), HBCUs continue to have distinct advantages for both Black and non-Black students. It is ultimately argued that HBCUs should be strengthened in the years to come light of the continued institutionalized racism that African Americans face in the United States today.
The history of Black education in the United States has been characterized by exclusion. From the onset on the colonial period, European Americans did not allow Blacks into their schools. By the antebellum period, nearly every Southern state had laws in place specifically prohibiting the education of Black slaves. Well into the 20th century schools at all levels across the country were segregated, whether formally or informally, based on race. Despite their exclusion from mainstream education, African Americans continued to fight for the right to an education, from learning to read by candlelight away from the eyes of their masters during slavery, to pursuing an unrelenting legal campaign to break down barriers to opportunity in public schools during the Jim Crow era.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are an important example of the Black struggle for education in the United States. These institutions were created in the years following the Civil War to foster opportunities for newly freed slaves at a time when very few such opportunities existed. HBCUs remained the primary institutions for higher education and social mobility for African Americans for the next one hundred years until the desegregation of public colleges in the 1960s (Kim and Conrad, 2006; Brown II and Davis, 2001). Today, there are 105 HBCUs across 20 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S Virgin Islands. They are driven by their historic responsibility as some of the central institutions for postsecondary education for African Americans in a context of continued racial discrimination. Though they constitute only 3% of American institutions of higher education, they enroll over 14% of all African American students and graduate almost 29% of all African Americans who earn a degree (Bailey, 2003; Henderson, 2001). Of the top 10 colleges that graduate African Americans who go on to earn PhDs and MDs, 9 are HBCUs (Palmer, 2010).

Though these achievements are remarkable, HBCUs have faced significant obstacles to their success. Notably, these institutions have continually struggled with low student retention, inadequate funding, and declining enrollment (Brower and Ketterhagen, 2004; Walker, 2006; Walters, 2006). They have also been accused by some in the higher education community of compromising America’s commitment to desegregation since the Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision in 1954 (Guy-Sheftall, 2006; Hamilton, 2002). These challenges have had significant ramifications for these schools, at times threatening their very existence.

This essay seeks to sift through the wealth of information and empirical data on HBCUs to answer a few central questions: In what context did HBCUs emerge in and how did this history influence the form they took? How did landmark Supreme Court cases like Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board affect these institutions? Do HBCUs still have a place in higher education opportunities for Blacks today? What role do they play in higher education for Whites and other non-Black minorities? Shedding some light on these questions helps us to better comprehend the role these institutions have played (and continue to play) in redressing racial inequalities in educational opportunities within and outside of the United States. The question of HBCUs taps into wider tensions in American politics and society today: Will the country pursue a “color-blind” model for the nation, or a “race-conscious” one? The path the nation chooses will most probably determine the future of race relations in the United States in the years to come.

This essay will provide insights into these questions by looking at HBCUs through a chronological historical lens. First, I will trace their emergence during Reconstruction and subsequent growth throughout the Jim Crow era, arguing that while most HBCUs were created largely to ensure continued segregation in higher education, HBCUs played a crucial role in African American socioeconomic mobility throughout the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. Then examine the effects that the 1898 Plessy v. Ferguson and 1954 Brown v Board Supreme Court cases had upon HBCUs. I then move to an assessment of the role that HBCUs play in higher education today, using strong empirical evidence to argue that though African Americans now have a constitutional right to attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), HBCUs continue to provide distinct advantages for both Black and non-Black students. I conclude by analyzing how recent attacks on affirmative action policies, as well as White House initiatives to strengthen HBCUs, will affect HBCUs in the years to come. The findings in this historical and empirical analysis are clear; HBCUs have been a crucial component of America’s higher education system since their founding during Reconstruction, and continue to provide advantages to not only Black students, but to White and other non-Black minority students as well. These schools should be maintained and indeed strengthened in the years to come, in light of the continued institutionalized racism that Blacks face in the United States today.
for government intervention in order to ensure the creation of economic and social opportunities for Blacks, other were intent on maintaining the status quo of racial oppression. The question of Black education was a top societal concern during Reconstruction. In their historical analysis of HBCUs, Brown and Davis (2001) argue that these institutions were the result of a post-Civil War “social contract” between Whites and newly-freed Blacks, in which the US government took active measures to “reconcile the tattered relation between America and the descendants of Africa,” (pg. 34). As a result, more than 200 HBCUs were founded between 1860-1890, mostly by White abolitionists and missionaries, many of them with funds and land grants endowed by the federal government (Brown, 2002).

The primary goal of these institutions was to provide higher education for Black Americans during a time when no other establishment would serve this need. HBCUs were thus born out of necessity, arising “as a humanitarian response to the educational needs of black people,” (Blackwell, 1976). On a larger scale, the creation of HBCUs was driven by the goal of the collective economic and social advancement of Black Americans, a point which will be elaborated on in later sections.

However, these institutions were also exploited by Whites as a way to ensure the continued subordination of Blacks and in education and beyond. By segregating Black students into separate and markedly inferior schools, Whites could limit the quality of Black education, and consequently their ability to compete economically and politically mobilize. Evans, Evans, and Evans (2002) even goes as far as to argue that HBCUs were specifically designed not to succeed as institutions of higher learning, but rather “to appease Black people or to serve as a ‘holding institution’ so that Black students would not matriculate in historically White colleges and universities,” (pg. 3). Whether this was or was not their true intent, the fact remained that most of these schools were established and funded by White missionaries and an overwhelmingly White federal government. This had important implications for the curriculum, management, and mission of the Black colleges of the 19th century, which according to Allen (2002) boiled down to “White paternalism.”

HBCUs provided the only avenue to higher education for Black Americans in the years after the Civil War. They enrolled tens of thousands of students and produced leading Black figures like Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King Jr. Over the next century, control of these institutions gradually shifted from the grasps of White missionaries and into the hands of Black faculty. However, the federal government continued to have a strong influence over these schools. Two Supreme Court cases in particular were of central importance in shaping the HBCUs of the 20th century.

**Plessy v. Ferguson**

The landmark decision in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court case had important, albeit unexpected implications for HBCUs. In a 7-1 verdict, the court upheld state segregation laws in public facilities under the doctrine of ‘separate but equal.’ The decision simultaneously limited and strengthened opportunities for Blacks in higher education. While it sanctioned segregation policies that barred Blacks from White institutions, it also led to legislation such as the Second Morrill Act that specifically prohibited states from practicing discriminating college admissions, unless they could provide ‘separate but equal’ facilities for both races (Brown, 1999). As a result, Southern states reluctantly increased funding for HBCUs in order to ensure compliance (however loosely) with the ruling, allowing continued racial discrimination in White institutions. This increased funding allowed HBCUs to develop more robust academic programs, improve facilities, and enroll more students, ultimately strengthening the institutions (Samuels, 2005).

HBCUs continued to be grossly underfunded in comparison to their predominantly White counterparts. Many states were able to evade federal requirements for equal facilities altogether. Often, when states did grant funds to Black colleges, it was for only a fraction of what the HBCUs were legally entitled to (Samuels, 2005). The limited state funding resulted in the continued and marked inferiority of HBCUs into the 20th century. For this reason, African American civil rights groups began calling for the desegregation of colleges and universities across the country. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in particular championed desegregation in higher education in the 1940s and 1950s, often through tireless campaigns in state courts. However, these litigation strategies proved ineffective, as Southern state legislatures continued to fight off integration efforts by reactively upgrading Black colleges. As Samuels (2005) outlines,

“The pattern was usually predictable: a black student would apply for admission to an all-white graduate school or professional school. After the institution’s governing board summarily denied the application, there would be a sense of urgency to create a separate program at one of the state’s black colleges to preserve the all-white character of the institution whose admissions policy had been challenged,” (pg. 53).

Thus, the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine established in the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling had contradictory effects on HBCUs. While it resulted in greater state funding for these institutions, this funding materialized at the cost of continued racial discrimination in admissions to significantly better White colleges and universities.

**Brown v. Board of Education**

In wasn’t until 1954 that the
The Supreme Court rescinded its earlier decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and ruled unequivocally in the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, that segregation in public education “is a denial of the equal protection of the law” and that “‘separate but equal’ has no place” in state-funded institutions. While this decision was a clear victory in the fight for African American higher education, it raised important questions about the place of HBCUs in American society. Was the existence of state-funded Black colleges now antithetical to United States’ newfound commitment to desegregation? Or did HBCUs continue to be crucial actors in the fight for equal education opportunities for African Americans?

The decision prohibited state-sponsored segregation because it denied African Americans the power to determine their own destiny, Samuels (2005) argues that “it did not, and should not, apply to the voluntary choices made by black students regarding the educational institutions they decide to attend,” (pg. 7). If we adhere to Samuels’ interpretation of the *Brown* decision as essentially prohibiting constraints on educational opportunities for Blacks, HBCUs remain harmonious with the nation’s commitment to desegregation since *Brown*. This compatibility is clear when HBCUs are compared to similar institutions that were also founded on a particular group identity, including women’s colleges such as Sarah Lawrence, or religious colleges such as Duke (Catholic) and Brandeis (Jewish).

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These institutions had been created in reaction to their exclusion from mainstream higher education or their desire for institutions that represented their common identity or values. Like HBCUs, these schools are able to provide academic, social, and physiological advantages for their students that are a result of the environments they foster, free from discrimination based on race, gender, or religion in admissions. The fact that they were founded on a particular group identity, be it race, gender or religion, is not antithetical to desegregation, as long as these schools do not discriminate in their applications.

**HBCUs Today**

**Advantages for Black Students**

Despite the Supreme Court’s decision that African Americans have the unequivocal constitutional right to attend PWIs, HBCUs continue to have an important role to play in the Black higher education in the United States today. A wealth of empirical research supports the claim that HBCUs provide many advantages for African American students seeking higher education that PWIs do not. For instance, research has found that Black students who attend HBCUs earned higher wages than those who attended other institutions of higher education (Constantine, 1994). African American graduates from HBCUs are more likely to pursue a doctoral degree and other post-graduate degrees than black students at PWIs (Joseph, 2013; Drewry and Doerrman, 2001, Wenglinsky, 1996). As previously mentioned, of the top ten colleges that graduate Blacks who go on to earn PhDs and MD, nine are HBCUs (Pamler, 2010). A study by Henderson (2001) found that 80% of Black officers in the United States military, 80% of Black federal judges, 65% of Black physicians, 60% of Black attorneys, and 50% of Black teachers and engineers are HBCU graduates.

Research has consistently shown that Black students attending HBCUs have significantly higher psychosocial wellness, are more engaged in their campus community, and have greater confidence when compared to their counterparts at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002). Further still, Black students at HBCUs tend to have better relationships with faculty, higher academic success and intellectual development, and an overall greater satisfaction with their university experience than Black students attending PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Boer et al, 1995).

HBCUs also have a better track record than their predominantly White counterparts of encouraging the academic and professional success of economically disadvantaged and underprepared Black students. Many of these schools have specific programs in place to help these students adjust to the collegiate-level workload. In one example, Elizabeth City State University, an HBCU in North Carolina that accepts a large percentage of low-income and first-generation students, has seen a lot of success with its “Basic Education and Enrichment Program.” This program provides tutoring, study-skills workshops, and other services to students whose academic backgrounds reflect low levels of achievement (ECSU, 2006). Other HBCUs like Fort Valley State College in Georgia, Knoxville College in Tennessee, Federal City College in Washington, D.C, and Paul Quinn College in Texas, among many others, also have “catch-up” programs in place that are specifically designed to make up for deficiencies in secondary schooling that many of its students face (Willie, Reddick, and Brown, 2003; Davis, 1998). HBCUs’ longstanding history of serving poor and marginalized students has allowed them to develop effective remedial programs and services that help underprepared students succeed in university. It should be mentioned here that HBCUs are often criticized for their lower graduation rates, which hovers around an average of only 30% (NCES, 2011). However, this statistic is not telling the full story. For instance, it does not take into account the fact that HBCUs take
on the lion’s share of first-generation and low-income students (Mercer & Stedman, 2008). Despite the significant headway the programs mentioned above have made, these students remain for a variety of reasons, less likely to graduate regardless of the school they attend. This point is reaffirmed by the fact that PWIs with a similar percentage of low-income and first-generation students have similar graduation rates as HBCUs at large (Kim and Conrad, 2006). It is also worth noting that most HBCUs are located in Southern states, where graduation rates for all colleges and universities are lower than the national average (Gasman, 2012). It is important to keep these caveats in mind when criticizing Black colleges on their stats. In fact, I argue that the fact that these schools take on so many disadvantaged students confirms their importance to higher education, and indeed highlights their efforts in re-dressing socioeconomic inequalities at large.

A More Welcoming Institutional Environment

The reasons for this overall more positive experience for Black students attending HBCUs than those attending PWIs can be closely linked to the unique institutional climate that HBCUs provide for students of color. Research has consistently found that these institutions foster a more encouraging and understanding environment for Black students, given the higher percentage of Black faculty and administrators as role models and the “psychological advantages that accrue from being in the visible majority.” (Sibulkin and Butler, 2011, pg. 848; Palmer, Davis, and Gasman 2011; Palmer, 2010). The presence of Black faculty and peers creates a setting that is in tune with the “specific knowledge of the Black experience in America,” which can help Black students feel comfortable and involved in their classes and campus (Brown and Davis, 2001, pg. 42). This more nurturing environment also has the effect of creating stronger social networks for Black students that become important sources of “social capital” for these students in the future (Brown and Davis, 2001, pg. 42). This findings present a stark contrast to the experiences of Black students at PWIs, who often report feelings of alienation and disconnect from faculty, their White peers, and the campus community at large (Johnson, 2005; Person and Christensen, 1996). An in-depth study on the experiences of Black students at PWIs found that Black students cited concerns that their professors and course material barely touched on Black issues, if it all (Johnson, 2005). Transcripts from interviews conducted during the study demonstrate the dismay that many Black students feel about the lack of attention paid to Black issues in the classroom: “I feel like [the professors] deprive us because I guess it’s generally just based on Caucasians,”; “The professors were not sensitive to my being an African American, my being an African American in the classroom,”; “I feel like I’m left out. I’m left out,” (Johnson, 2005, 59). Some students even felt that their professors were afraid to discuss racial topics in class. Black students also reported feeling stereotyped by university staff. For example, one student felt that the administration staff was often reluctant or slow to grant permission to Black students seeking to hold social events on campus (Johnson, 2005).

Beyond the classroom, Black students attending PWIs also tend to feel alienated from their peers, who are predominantly White. They are often put in situations where they feel they have to act as the “defenders” and “explainers” of their race to White students (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996, 91). In a study conducted by Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) one Black student attending a PWI described feeling a constant need to prove to her White peers that she was as intellectually competent as they were:

“As far as my major, I am one of a few African American stu-

dents and it’s hard for me to see what people think or whatever. But when I first got here I had to prove myself, prove myself, and prove myself. It was not like I would go up to them and say, “now you see?” But it’s like they kept doubting me and doubting me,” (pg. 426).

These students often feel stereotyped by their White peers and face subtle micro-aggressions and even blatant racism at social events on and off campus. For instance, numerous Black males in Johnson’s (2005) study cited feeling that their classmates assumed they were at university because they were recruited to play sports rather than attending the university for its academics (pg. 67). Black students are also frequently stigmatized for being perceived as recipients of affirmative action policies, regardless of personal achievements (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996). More flagrant examples include instances of campus fraternities and sororities hosting “ghetto-themed” parties, during which White students poke fun at Black stereotypes by wearing blackface, drinking from watermelon cups, and posing for pictures holding while forming gang signs with their hands.

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ing blackface, drinking from watermelon cups, and posing for pictures holding while forming gang signs with their hands.

Negga, Applewhite, and Livingston (2007) found that Black students attending a PWI reported having lower levels of social support from faculty and peers when compared both to White students and to Black students at an HBCU. This social alienation can have serious consequences for the mental health of Black students at PWIs, with an abundance of research evidencing that this can result in increased psychosocial stress and hinder academic performance (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Love, 1993; Phelon-Rucker, 2000). Aside from the significant consequences that these feelings of alienation and exclusion from faculty and peers can have on Black students’ mental health and academic success, alienation at PWIs further limits Black students access to the formal and informal social networks that are critical for professional and personal growth in university (Brown and Davis, 2001, pg. 44).

**HBCUs and Black Cultural Identity**

Beyond the academic, professional, and psychological advantages HBCUs provide for Black students, these institutions also have an important role to play in maintaining and strengthening a sense of African American identity in their students. HBCUs work to preserve Black historical and cultural tradition, creating leaders and role models for the Black community, and stimulating economic growth within the Black community (Allen, 1992). This is done in part by providing a curriculum and campus life focused on Black issues, Black perspectives, and Black history (Mays, 1978). A feeling of Black racial unity is also fostered as a result of a student body that is made up of “poor and affluent people, the dispossessed and the well connected. Such diversity tends to prevent the development of social class stereotypes among Black people,” (Willies, Reddick and Brown, 2005, pg. 6).

In this sense, HBCUs are unique in their role as vehicles for the collective advancement of African Americans. In focusing on their Black identity, these schools are driven not only by goals of providing educational opportunities to individual students and gaining status as nationally ranked institutions; they are also motivated by an “ethical goal of serving the needs of Black Americans,” (Willie, Reddick, and Brown, 2005, pg. 59). This ideal of a shared Black mission for HBCUs is clearly expressed in the 1945 speech given by the president of Morehouse College, a prominent HBCU in Atlanta:

“It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College...to produce clever graduates, men fluent in speech and able to argue their way through; but rather, honest men, men who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills.” (quoted in Willie, Reddick, and Brown, 2005, pg 56).

For African Americans, higher education is the pathway to both individual success and the collective advancement of all Blacks. HBCUs take this task head on by creating an institutional environment that reminds its students of the nation’s Black past, present, and future. This creates students who are conscious of Black issues and are more willing and able to pursue these issues in their personal, professional, and political lives after graduation.

**The Experiences of Non-Black Students at HBCUs**

Though HBCUs are defined in large part by their Black identity and mission, they are committed to diversity in their student body and within their faculty. Many HBCUs actively recruit other racial minorities and White students, and consequently have sizable non-Black populations. As of 2011, over a quarter of HBCUs across the United States have at least a 20% non-Black student body (NCES, 2011). This diversity applies to faculty where non-Blacks made up anywhere from 28% to 40% of professors and administrators at HBCUs (quoted in Willie, Reddick, and Brown, 2005, pg. xvii). There exits some fear that increasing non-Black population threatens to undermine the original mission and identity of these institutions (Issa, 2014; Gasman, 2012). However, I argue that this diversity actually strengthens the schools and their mission as it fosters an appreciation and respect for Black culture among the broader population and helps break down stereotypes non-Black students may have about African Americans. Indeed, the presence of non-Black students does not threaten the integrity of HBCUs in the same way that the presence of racial minorities does not threaten the integrity of PWIs.

Normative claims about the implications of an increased non-Black student body aside, empirical evidence suggests that like their Black peers, non-Black students also significantly benefit from the attending HBCUs. Not only do these schools provide non-Black students with a top-tier education – HBCUs like Howard University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College are consistently ranked among the top schools in the country – but they also provide them with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. For instance, in a study by Willie (1981) over 75% of White students attending HBCUs reported that “education on Black campuses heighten their appreciation of different ways of life and caused them to be more concerned about equal opportunity for all,” (pg. 89-90). Moreover, White students attending HBCUs said that their multicultural experience would help them be more effective in their future careers, and felt they had benefited from the ex-
perience of being “temporary minorities,” (Willie, 1981, pg. 80). Non-Black minorities like Latinos also report positive experienced on HBCUs campuses, in part because they often come from disadvantaged backgrounds similar to many of their Black peers and benefit from the remedial programs mentioned above that these schools offer (Gasman, 2012). The academic, profession, psychological, and social benefits of HBCUs for both Black and non-Black students highlighted in this section demonstrate that despite the desegregation of higher education, these institutions are still important actors in higher education.

The Future of HBCUs

The positive effects HBCUs have on both Black and non-students’ mental health, self-confidence, and academic, professional, and personal growth signals the importance that these institutions play in higher education today. These empirics provide convincing evidence to justify not only the continued existence of, but also the grounds for the strengthening of HBCUs across the country. In essence, this implies a need for increased funding for these schools. Hikes in student tuition cannot be the source of this expanded funding, as the annual income of Blacks continues to be markedly lower than that of national average at all income levels (CNN Money, 2014), and thus would disproportionately burden this group and prevent many Black students from attending HBCUs altogether. The support must instead come from either private donors or federal and state governments.

HBCUs under President Obama

The Obama administration has taken steps to support Black colleges in its second term, focusing its efforts on increasing funding for the schools and strengthening the relationship between the schools and executive branch. In February 2010, President Obama signed an Executive Order establishing the “White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities” and the “President’s Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.” This first body, housed within the Department of Education, is tasked with fostering private-sector initiatives and public-private partnerships to promote the development of HBCUs and improving the quality of information about HBCUs available to the public. The second is made up largely of HBCU presidents from around the United States and is tasked with “advising the Obama Administration on matters pertaining to strengthening the educational capacity of these institutions,” (OPS, 2010). The executive order provides for the greater involvement of the Department of Education and the executive branch in the fate of HBCUs, requiring these bodies to prepare annual plans for improving education in these schools and submitting annual progress reports on these plans to the President and the education secretary.

In addition to the 2010 Executive Order establishing these two bodies, the Obama administration has worked to strengthen educational opportunities at HBCUs through its recent fiscal budgets. In 2011, it allocated $98 million in new funds for HBCUs within the Department of Education budget and increased its funding for the Strengthening Historically Black Graduate Institution program by 5%. It also allotted $20.5 million for the HBCU Capital Financing program, which provides money to finance renovations of infrastructure on HBCU campuses like classrooms, libraries, and dorms (OPS, 2010). The money can also be used to buy new research instruments and instructional equipment and build new educational facilities. While it is difficult to assess the direct impact these initiatives and funding packages have had on Black colleges because of how recently they were implemented, they demonstrate a new level of commitment from the federal government to the mission of Black higher education. This support from the executive branch is incredibly important in light of recent Supreme Court decisions that have resulted in the steady dismantling of affirmative action across the country.

The Demise of Affirmative Action and its Implications for HBCUs

The 1978 University of California Regents v. Bakke case was the first successful challenge to affirmative action policies. Allan Bakke, a White student, sued the University of California, Davis medical school on the grounds that the school’s affirmative action policy had unfairly discriminated against his application because of his race. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, where the Court ruled 5-4 that though race was an acceptable factor to consider in admissions as long as the program served a “compelling government interest,” the use of racial quotas was prohibited under the constitution. This instigated the gradual weakening of affirmative action programs for racial minorities in colleges and universities across the country, as schools cut their quota programs and restructured their admissions policies.

The next challenge came from the Hopwood v. Texas case of 1996. Here, four White students who were denied admission to Texas Law School sued the university for its affirmative action programs, claiming they had applied with higher LSAT scores and GPAs than 36 of the 43 Latinos admitted, and 16 of the 18 black students admitted. The U.S District Court ruled that these policies remained necessary until the nation could overcome its problems of institutionalized racism. However, the decision was overruled by the U.S Court of Appeals, 5th Circuit, which declared race-sensitive admissions policies were unconstitutional. Affirmative action policies were thus prohibited in the three states that 5th circuit has jurisdiction over until the 2003 Grutter v. Bollinger decision, which reaffirmed the limited use of race in admissions decisions. Since then, California, Washington, and Florida have all passed laws prohibiting the
use of race-conscious policies in public institutions. Though each of these states has implemented other programs to increase minority enrollment, these have not been nearly as effective in promoting higher education opportunities for minorities (Horn and Flores, 2003).

This string of attacks on affirmative action programs could result in the revival of HBCUs as the primary institutions for African American higher education, as PWIs become less accessible to Black students. As Palmer (2010) points out, state governments have largely abandoned race-conscious policies in recent years in favor of building a so called race-blind society, which will “inevitably result in fewer opportunities from African American students... making Black colleges and the role that they play even more important,” (pg. 771). If state legislatures and the courts continue to limit the use of affirmative action programs in higher education, HBCUs may once again become the primary providers for Black higher education. The schools will then need all the support they can get from private donors and other branches of the federal government. President Obama’s initiatives may not be sufficient on their own to enable HBCUs to surmount the task they face, however they signal a step in the right direction.

Conclusion
A long history of achievement and a wealth of empirical data evidences that HBCUs represent an important component of the higher education system in the United States. They are essential to America’s higher education system because of the supportive and welcoming institutional environment they create for Black and non-Black students alike. The academic, professional, psychological, and personal benefits that accrue from the studying within an HBCU environment in conjunction with their innovative strategies for teaching low-income and first generation students, cements their critical role as the nurturers of a collective Black identity. This success justifies the continued existence and reinforcement of Black colleges across the country. Further still, it suggests that PWIs can benefit from forming closer ties with HBCUs, who can teach them how to effectively handle the education of low-income and first generation students and create a more welcoming environments for their minority students.
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