

Leadership, Governance, and Sustainability of Black Colleges and Universities

BY JACK L. EZZELL, JR., AND ALVIN J. SCHEXNIDER

TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Under-funding of historically black colleges and universities by state governments, along with tepid support from private donors, has contributed to the inability of some black colleges to maintain their leadership in the recruitment of African-American students.
- 2 The absence of strong, committed, and stable leadership places some historically black institutions at a distinct disadvantage in developing the resources needed to achieve long-term goals of educational excellence.
- 3 More attention must be paid to the careful selection of citizens to serve on the governing boards of historically black colleges and universities.

A TOPIC OF CONTINUING INTEREST IN American higher education and society is the future of historically black colleges and universities, commonly referred to as HBCUs. The nation's public and private black institutions of higher education have proved their mettle, and yet they face persistent challenges to survive. Recent proposals by a Georgia legislator and the governor of Mississippi to merge black colleges highlight the challenges facing these institutions, especially in a weak economy. The majority of

black colleges are located in the South, and although the federal courts have affirmed their right to exist and to receive funding to address historic inequities, governors and legislators are faced with difficult choices in trying to cope with the vestiges of a dual system of higher education in their states.

We are products of black institutions, North Carolina A&T State University and Grambling State University, respectively, and we know well the history, organizational culture, threats, and opportunities at HBCUs. It was our good fortune to work together from 2002 to 2007 in key roles at Norfolk State University (Ezzell as Rector of the Board of Visitors, Schexnider as executive vice president and interim president).

Those experiences and contacts with many other HBCUs have strengthened our appreciation of the signal importance of high-quality leadership and governance if these institutions are to realize their enormous potential to help fulfill the dreams and hopes of the African-American community.

According to the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, there are 105 HBCUs. Fewer than half are private, and a handful offer two-year associate, rather than baccalaureate, degrees. Black institutions render an invaluable service to this country; for decades their influence has been felt far beyond their numbers. Although black colleges constitute only 3 percent of all

institutions of higher education in the U.S., they produce 23 percent of African-American college graduates, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Were it not for black colleges, there would be no African-American middle class and far fewer black professionals, including teachers, Ph.D.s, pharmacists, engineers, and military officers.

Yet a huge part of the challenge black colleges currently face is that, whereas they basically enjoyed a monopoly on African-American students for most of their existence, today only about 14 percent of blacks enrolled in college attend HBCUs. Federal court decisions, civil-rights legislation, and affirmative-action policies led to the demise of segregation in higher education and a subsequent erosion of African-American students' enrollment at HBCUs. Under-funding of HBCUs by state governments and tepid support from private donors has also contributed to the inability of some black colleges to maintain their leadership in the recruitment of African-American students. These factors have rendered leadership and governance among the most critical issues facing many black colleges.

Leadership and Governance

For a variety of reasons, the ability of black colleges to recruit and retain strong leaders has been problematic. Black colleges are characterized by a unique culture and heritage shaped by origins in an era of segregation and hostility. Many young African-American Ph.D.s with presidential qualifications may not desire to lead institutions still grappling with the vestiges of segregation, including under-funding, a legacy of conservative leadership, and limited resources. The conservative nature of black colleges has been a strength that enabled many to survive; yet this admirable asset has at times been an impediment to the change and innovation required to be competitive.

Some HBCUs have been slow to adapt to change, including technology-driven change, and this has affected business processes, thereby curtailing recruitment and opportunities to benefit from financial aid and federal research grants. Some institutions are still grappling with the reluctance of leaders to engage faculty and staff in providing leadership for the institution. Also, some HBCUs have been challenged by issues related to shared governance, ranging from boards that sometimes intrude on faculty rights and prerogatives to board interference with management. Inclusiveness and shared governance are basic elements of an effective higher-education leadership model. The best and brightest faculty, staff, and students are unlikely to accept a leadership style that limits their ability to contribute to the vitality of the institution when they have options to attend or work at a wide range of colleges and universities.

Effective leadership in the presidency and strong board governance, along with a commitment to work together to fulfill the mission of the institution, are essential to the success of a college or university. A president who dominates his or her board, or a board that usurps its president will invariably

lead to failure. There have been enough instances of this in past years that it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain outstanding higher-education leaders for some HBCU campuses. Similarly, getting the best talent to serve on boards of trustees is also becoming more difficult, mainly due to the frustrations related to under-funding, politics, or a combination of both.

Nonetheless, we are convinced that these hurdles can—and must—be surmounted in order for HBCUs to achieve success. The president and the board must understand their respective roles, that is, leadership of the institution by the president and governance and policy-setting by the board. Both the president and the board must commit to working collaboratively on behalf of the institution. As the Association of Governing Boards noted in its seminal 2006 report, *The Leadership Imperative*, integral leadership “links the president, the faculty, and the board together in a well-functioning partnership purposefully devoted to a well-defined, broadly affirmed institutional vision.”

This is easier said than done. It is not easy to find people with the rare combination of abilities required to lead black colleges effectively and willing to undertake the demands. The president's role requires not only knowledge of higher education, but an understanding of the complexities associated with leading an organization with a unique culture, often inadequate resources, a limited and possibly declining base of financial support, and, more often than not, alumni who wish to exert strong influence.

For governing boards of black colleges, the challenges are equally daunting. At many of the private institutions, governing boards are self-perpetuating. They may be larger than necessary, and members may serve without regard to term limits, making it hard to recruit people with fresh perspectives and different backgrounds and expertise. An even bigger challenge may be finding trustees who understand the role of the board (and the differing role of the president) and are willing to commit the time and resources—both intellectual and financial—to be effective.

At public black colleges, governing boards are appointed by elected officials and thus are highly susceptible to political machinations and individual agendas. This has led to high turnover in the presidencies of several black colleges, and the resultant instability has rendered many of these institutions vulnerable to internal and external interests. For example, in some states, public black colleges have become outplacement centers or sources of political largesse for powerful elected officials. The greater their ability to affect an institution's budget, the greater these officials' influence. Such factors can make it even more difficult to recruit outstanding leaders who are willing to serve as president or on the governing board.

Resources

The issue of resources is especially acute at HBCUs since they were established with modest funding. Amazingly,

they have contributed substantially more to the economy and society than could reasonably be expected given their limited resources. Many HBCUs are aggressively seeking additional funds through private donations, but they remain at a distinct disadvantage compared to universities with well-off alumni. To put this in perspective, the combined endowments of all 105 HBCUs total less than \$2 billion, compared to the approximately \$26 billion that Harvard University still had at its disposal even after the recent economic downturn led to a substantial drop in the value of its endowment, as reported in a recent survey by the National Association of College and University Business Officers and the Commonfund Institute. The availability of scholarship dollars supported by healthy endowments enables majority institutions, private and public, to enjoy a competitive edge in the recruitment of African-American students and faculty members. While African-American students are attracted by scholarships, African-American faculty tend to be lured by lighter teaching loads and more support for research, including grants, technology, and facilities.

According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, between 1990 and 2030 the African-American population is projected to expand 68 percent. Black colleges and universities must find ways to increase financial support from middle-class and upper-income African-Americans, including alumni. Black institutions are being buffeted by both public and private non-HBCU universities, as well as by two-year community and technical colleges that in some respects pose an even greater threat to the existence of HBCUs. That is because two-year colleges are often supported by state and local governments, and their mission is tied to workforce development. Economic incentives provided by governors and legislators, as well as by local governments, explain why Mercedes-Benz is in Alabama, Toyota is in Kentucky, Nissan is in Tennessee, and BMW is in South Carolina. Tax incentives caused these firms to locate in regions where they could stimulate economic development. Taxpayers understand this and may be more inclined to support community colleges because of it.

Perceptions about the role and value of black colleges won't change without intentional effort and dedication. The absence of strong, committed, and stable leadership places some HBCUs at a distinct disadvantage in developing the resources needed to achieve long-term goals of educational excellence. America's colleges and universities are in fierce competition for resources with several major institutions running billion-dollar campaigns. This means that larger, better-staffed, and richly endowed universities are likely to absorb the available monies from rich donors, leaving little to be secured on behalf of the financially challenged institutions.

It will be difficult for many HBCUs to extricate themselves from these difficult situations. Greater attention must be focused on recruiting outstanding presidents and finding first-rate leaders to serve on governing boards. Both are

critical to the success of the institutions, and both are essential to raising funds, whether public or private. Also, more attention must be paid to the careful selection of citizens to serve on governing boards. For example, a decision by former Virginia Governor (now U.S. Senator) Mark Warner to screen appointments to public college and university boards through use of a blue-ribbon panel has proved enormously successful. Virginia's two public HBCUs have benefited from this process mainly because it has attracted more qualified individuals for appointment to boards. Also, the appointment of the review panel signaled the state's commitment to excellence on governing boards for all of its public institutions. The result is that more-experienced and dedicated individuals are accepting board appointments.

We believe there are continuing, important roles for HBCUs—in producing graduates who can compete and foster diversity in every field of endeavor; in stemming the tide of African-American males who seem “tracked” from the lower grades to drop out of school and wind up in prison; in sparking a spirit of entrepreneurship among African-American students who seek self-empowerment; and in transmitting African-American history, culture, and expectations for the future. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

For governors and legislators: Establish a standing blue-ribbon panel comprising respected citizens to vet potential candidates to serve on public governing boards, including those of HBCUs. Creation of the panel by statute will ensure continuity, despite electoral changes in either the executive or legislative branches of government. Further, apply the same standards of excellence to all colleges and universities, including minority-serving institutions, and support leaders who seek to implement change in order to meet established goals.

For state higher-education boards: Black colleges and universities were isolated from higher-education oversight for much of their existence. The attention they received, if any, was likely to be negative rather than positive. Higher-education boards and systems must focus adequate attention on the unique leadership and management requirements of HBCUs and commit themselves to providing the resources required to ensure these institutions' effectiveness. State boards and systems can also be helpful in encouraging more mutually beneficial partnerships and strategic alliances between majority and minority institutions, which are sometimes located within commuting distance of one another.

For selection committees for leadership positions: Leaders who aspire to become presidents of black colleges or universities require skill sets that will enable them to succeed. The challenges confronting HBCUs, often related to inadequate resources, require leaders who are at once politically adept and entrepreneurial, so there must be a good fit between the leader and the institution. Leadership-development programs like the American Council on Education's Fellows Program and the Millennium Leadership

Institute of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) are a potential source of recruitment for HBCU presidents. Search efforts for leadership positions at HBCUs must start with knowledge of the talent pool available through these programs, as well as other potential sources of leaders outside of academia. Finding the right leader requires serious and deep consideration, even with the help of a reputable search firm and a dedicated search committee.

In sum, for HBCUs to continue to do their important work, their presidents and boards must commit to finding the best practices that distinguish excellent boards and then work diligently to implement them. These include thoughtful leadership by a president who provides a vision and a plan, along with a board committed to working with the president to achieve agreed-upon goals. When presidents and boards share goals and seek ways to partner with institutional stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, and alumni), the prospects for success are heightened immeasurably.

The nation's historically black colleges and universities, public and private, cannot achieve their potential and achieve sustainability as strong, competitive institutions of higher education without focusing greater attention on leadership and governance. Failure to recruit exceptional leadership for both the presidency and the governing board puts institutions at considerable risk. For HBCUs in particular, there is often little or no room for error when institutions are on the brink of financial disaster. Securing outstanding leadership in the presidency and on governing boards is vital to their continued existence and vitality. ■

AUTHORS: Jack L. Ezzell, Jr., is chief executive officer of Zel Technologies in Hampton, Virginia, and former rector of the Board of Visitors of Norfolk State University. Alvin J. Schexnider, a former chancellor of Winston-Salem State University and former interim president of Norfolk State University, is currently president of Thomas Nelson Community College and an AGB consultant.

EMAIL: jezzell@zeltech.com, ajs@tncc.edu