

A Response to Racism: How HBCU Enrollment Grew in the Face of Hatred

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Executive Summary

Over the past three years, about one-third of HBCUs have experienced record increases in applications and enrollment. Anecdotal information credits racial tensions, the political climate under the Trump administration, and what HBCU President Walter M. Kimbrough calls the “Missouri Effect”—the recent surge in race-based harassment of Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for the enrollment resurgence. This empirical study explores—if and how, these events may have contributed to the increase in HBCU enrollment. Specifically, using a qualitative approach, we interviewed 80 students across four HBCUs of various types (e.g., public, private, comprehensive, and research-intensive). The findings from our study provide empirical evidence pertaining to how the “Missouri Effect” influenced Black student enrollment at HBCUs. This study provides implications for HBCUs as they recruit and enroll more college-bound Black students, particularly in the current political climate. Similarly, this study also includes recommendations for higher education institutions, including PWIs as they seek to promote a more inclusive and supportive campus community for minoritized student populations.



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Background and Literature Review

To some extent, it can be argued that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are experiencing a renaissance in terms of their enrollment of Black students. Just a few short years ago—2013 to be exact, there was discussion in the scholarly literature as well as the popular press that fewer Black students were attending HBCUs (Gasman, 2013; Harris, 2018; Kimbrough, 2016; Smith, 2017). Specifically, a [report from the Center for Minority Serving Institutions](#) delineated that the student demography of HBCUs had changed over the years (2013). This report revealed that while the number of Black students attending HBCUs had declined over the years since the 1980s, the number of non-Black students (e.g., White, Asian American, and Latinx) had increased. According to Gasman (2013), Black undergraduate enrollment at HBCUs was largely flat and stood at 76% percent in 2013, whereas the enrollment of White, Latinx, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students comprised 13%, 3%, and 1%, respectively.

Given the lower number of Black students matriculating into HBCUs, some HBCUs were actively recruiting Latinx students to their campuses and implementing activities to facilitate their sense of belonging (Stewart, 2014). In addition, as mandates of court cases, such as *Adams v. Richardson* (1972) and *United States v. Fordice* (1992), compel public HBCUs to increase the racial diversification of their student bodies, Palmer and Maramba (2015a, 2015b) expressed that the number of non-Black students enrolling into Black colleges would continue to increase. While narratives of this sort dominated reports, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journals articles published about students at HBCUs from 2013 to mid 2015, and as candidate Donald Trump secured the nomination to run as president for the Republican Party and the rhetoric of his campaign rallies became more racialized, the narrative regarding Black student enrollment into HBCUs started to shift. Indeed, many sources explained that Trump's campaign for the presidency fueled a rise in hate crimes in society, in general, and hateful acts on college campuses (Harris, 2018; Pratt, 2016; Smith, 2017). Thus, mounting anecdotal evidence started to emerge that an increasing number of Black students were returning to HBCUs because they offered a safe haven from the racism and vitriol Trump's campaign brought out in many White Americans (Harris, 2018; Kimbrough, 2016; Smith, 2017).

This sentiment was reflected by Walter M. Kimbrough (2016), President of Dillard University, who opined that following a series of protests at the University of Missouri aimed at bringing attention to the social injustices of Black students on campus coupled with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which raised concern and action about the systemic issue of oppression and modern day lynching of Black bodies, HBCUs of various sizes, missions, and institutional types experienced an uptick in the number of applications and enrollment of Black students. Kimbrough coined this enrollment trend as the “Missouri Effect” and explained that Black students were not just seeking a safe space in returning to HBCUs, they were also seeking more interactions with Black faculty, a Black-centered curriculum, and an overall empowering campus experience. Moreover, the protest that turned deadly in Charlottesville in 2017, in which Donald Trump referred to White nationalists as ‘very fine people,’ amplified Black students’ desire for a more comfortable and inclusive campus environment (Jamison, 2017).

As many sources were crediting the racial climate as the impetus for driving more Black students to HBCUs, there was a dearth of empirical evidence to support this assertion. Thus, this claim appeared to be mere conjecture and not rooted in facts. Consequently, we sought to critically examine this phenomenon by investigating the college choice process for Black students at HBCUs. Exploring the college choice experience of Black HBCU students is not new. For example, while some researchers provided context about the college choice process of students in general (Hearn, Griswold, Marine, & McFarland, 1995; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989) other researchers (Freeman, 1999; McDonough et al., 1995) provided insight into reasons Black students choose to attend HBCUs. Though dated, according to Astin and Cross (1981), Black students’ attendance at HBCUs was driven by relationships with teachers and relatives. McDonough and colleagues (1995) added further context by noting Black students were motivated to attend HBCUs because of their religion, the reputation of the schools, and because of relatives. Adding greater insight into factors serving as the catalyst for Black students’ choice of attending HBCUs is the work of Kassie Freeman (1997, 1999, 2005). Specifically, in a qualitative study of Black college-bound high school students, Freeman and Thomas (2002) found that one of the primary motivators for Black students’ choice of an HBCU was cultural connectivity. They found this desire to be particularly

prevalent among students who attend predominantly White high schools. Conversely, they explained, Black students who attended majority Black high schools sought to attend PWIs because they sought to share their culture with other racial and ethnic communities and they reflected that HBCUs were not a microcosm of the real world. Jennifer Johnson (2017, 2019) and Janelle Williams (2017) have added to the conversation on college choice regarding HBCUs examining the motivations of millennials and HBCU alumni. Williams (2017) concluded that alumni influence was a top factor in the choice of students who attended Pennsylvania HBCUs from 2011-2016.

In summary, while research has provided context about Black students' choice to attend an HBCU, our study did not seek to replicate the findings of the previous studies that explored Black students' college choice. In light of speculation that Donald Trump has used language as a weapon to conjure racism in society and on college campuses, we sought to provide an empirical perspective on how racism may have influenced Black student's college choice.

Objective

In 2015, only 9% of Black students enrolled in degree-granting institutions elected to attend an HBCU (PEW, 2017). However, as discussed previously, in the fall of 2016, some HBCUs experienced a sudden increase in new student applications and new student enrollment from Black students — including a small number of schools with record enrollment upsurges both in attendance and applications received. Anecdotal information credits racial tensions, the political climate under the Trump administration, and what HBCU President Walter M. Kimbrough calls the “Missouri Effect,” for the enrollment resurgence among Black students at HBCUs. Empirical research exploring, if and how, these events have contributed to the increase is missing from current HBCU college choice literature. Knowledge derived from the actual experience of the students who enrolled, rather than from theory, is needed and may help HBCUs, specifically, and other institutions, generally, understand how the “Missouri Effect” and other racialized incidents may have had an impact on enrollment patterns from 2016-2018. Within this context, this study was guided by the following research question:



University of Missouri students organizing following racial incidents on campus.
Source: columbiainmissourian.com

How did the election of President Trump and the current racial climate influence the decision of Black undergraduate students to consider attending and enrolling at an HBCU?

Framework

This study was guided by a naturalistic approach. Given the exploratory nature of naturalistic or qualitative research, this current study sought to examine how the “Missouri Effect” (i.e., race-based incidents) may have influenced the enrollment increase among Black students in HBCUs (Creswell, 2016). We asked participants open-ended questions to understand what role, if any, recent and current events, including the election of President Trump, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the “Missouri Effect” played in their college choice process. Given our approach, our epistemological perspective was rooted in social constructivism paradigm.

Methods

Using a qualitative approach, we collected primary data through in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the participants that lasted 50-65 minutes. Our approach underscored the researchers listening to participants and understanding how the participants made meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2016). Before engaging in the interview with researchers, participants completed a demographic survey to explore and draw out the connections between the factors that influenced their decision to choose an HBCU and why these factors mattered to the participants. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company after each set of interviews. The text was verified by the researchers, and member-checks were conducted with the participants to ensure accuracy of their voices (Creswell, 2016). Once the transcriptions were approved, the researchers coded the data using open, axial, and selective coding procedures (Creswell, 2016), which resulted in the identification of the themes.

Data Sources

Interviews were conducted with 80 current Black undergraduate students from across four HBCUs of different sizes, missions, and designations. These four institutions saw increases in applications and enrollment between 2016-2018. For example, in 2016, one of the HBCUs, a private, mid-Atlantic research-intensive institution saw a 32% increase in new applicants, while another private research HBCU in the south, saw a 109% increase. Moreover, in 2017, a public research-intensive HBCU in the mid-Atlantic, saw a 47% increase and a mid-size, comprehensive HBCU in the south, saw a 70% increase. During the time of the interviews, all students were freshmen or sophomores. Limiting this study to freshmen and sophomores was critical because these students were engaging in the college choice process during the time candidate Trump, now President Trump, was campaigning for the presidency.

Preliminary Findings

Given the volume of data, a subsample of 20 students was chosen for preliminary analysis from the 80 participants. Preliminary analysis found that the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), President Trump (PT),

and the Missouri Effect (ME) influenced college-bound Black American students to consider applying and/or later attending an HBCU between 2016-2018.

At this juncture of the analysis, three themes were identified regarding how these events influenced participants' choice of an HBCU. First, most participants raised concerns about safety on campus and in the surrounding community at PWIs. Second, participants discussed the media coverage of inclusion/exclusion based on identity (race, gender, religious affiliation and sexual identity) on both PWI and HBCU campuses. Third, participants explained that the lack of safe spaces in high school and experiences of blatant racism and microaggressions from teachers and non-Black peers in high school motivated them to apply to HBCUs. Participants noted that President Trump's radicalized rhetoric during the campaign increased the frequency of these issues.



Source: talkupaps.com

Sample Quotes:

Ayana B., an 18-year-old freshman, studying communications and journalism shared:

During and after the election, I was getting in arguments with White students all the time. I mean, it started senior year/middle of junior year. It was surprising because I didn't know how people who I thought were my friends felt about certain topics. I started to feel like I was in danger, like I was way more in danger than I actually thought... I really got to see people behind what they try to present as, especially some people who claim themselves as democrats or liberals and things like that. I just felt like they don't have my back. It was kind of like the same view I had with Stanford and Dallas Baptist. They don't want me. They could definitely do without me; they probably don't want me there at all. That's exactly why I had to go to a HBCU.

Brandy C., a 19-year-old sophomore, majoring in organic chemistry, reflected:

I went to a very predominantly White high school, and so around the time of the election, there were a lot more people who were coming out, being more racist in my school, and so it was kind of like hmm, maybe I should just go to an HBCU. It wasn't a conversation that I had with anyone it just kind of, it was in the back of my mind... I would be around with my White friends, and they'd be like wow, you're not Black, you're so White. You're an Oreo. Stuff like that, or just like little comments. Like I used to have dreads. One of my friends told me I looked like a mop, or just backhanded comments or offhanded comments that they might not necessarily have meant in a racist way, but I was like hmm, I don't think so...

Discussion

In the 10 days following the election of President Trump, 140 hate incidents were reported at predominately White campuses across the country (Miller & Werner-Winslow, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education, campus hate crime rose 25% for a reported 1,250 crimes in 2016. The Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism also reported 346 incidents of White supremacist propaganda campaigns that targeted college campuses, following the election including a series of racialized incidents at the University of Missouri from 2015-2016. These incidences included swastikas in residence halls, racial epithets used publicly toward then SGA president and Black student groups and two White students dropping cotton balls in front of the Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center (2010).

While our analysis is still in the early stages, this study offers several significant contributions to the literature. First, our findings suggest that Black college-bound students are/ have been affected and influenced by the current social and political climate in the United States. This, in turn, has created a renewed interest and increase in applications to HBCUs across the country. Second, an important implication identified from the findings is that campus climate and campus culture rank high on the scales of what is important to prospective students and families. While incoming students are concerned with academics and finances, they are equally, if not more, concerned with their safety and well-being in the face of a 4 to 6-year commitment. Third, the findings from this study provide practical guidance to higher education administrators that want to support inclusive campus climates, increase Black student enrollment, and remain competitive in an open choice environment. Finally, another finding worth pointing out from this study is that many students in this current study who were influenced to attend an HBCU because of the current climate of racism in the U.S. and on college campuses, had attended predominantly White high schools. This is consistent with Freeman and Thomas's (2002) findings.

Recommendations

The study participants identified a number of areas that need further consideration. The following recommendations for research and practice are based on the preliminary findings.

It is clear HBCUs are critical educational venues and questions about their relevance should no longer be up for discussion. A critical and often celebrated aspect of HBCUs is their ability to provide a safe environment for all students. Moreover, given the climate in which we are currently living, HBCUs should serve as a model for institutions serious about promoting an inclusive campus environment. Without a doubt, one may say that given the majority Black student population of many HBCUs and their sizeable share of Black faculty, staff, and administrators, that it is easy for HBCUs to facilitate a harmonious campus climate. While this might be true to some extent, campuses of HBCUs are replete with racial and ethnic diverse students, faculty, and staff. This illustrates that there is truly something special about not only the interactions Black students have with faculty and other HBCU campus personnel but also to the cultural-centered and relevant curricula to which they are exposed. Other institutions should seek to study and attempt to replicate this type of empowering institutional climate.

In addition, per the findings of this current study, which indicate that campus climate matters when students are considering applying and matriculating into postsecondary institution of higher education, institutions need to make sure that regardless of what is occurring in the wide society, that they are fostering a climate of civility and inclusion. Finally, given the increasingly competitive landscape of higher education, HBCUs should consider vigorously and intensely advertising the safe haven they provide to students and how this is inextricably linked to student success and their overall development. Frequently HBCUs tout their academic outcomes among Black students (i.e., disproportionately graduating Black doctors, lawyers, and Blacks with degrees in STEM) but aside from peer-reviewed journals, the safe campus climate HBCUs facilitate is not well-publicized to the wide society. Proactive advertising this salient aspect would ensure HBCUs not merely survive, but thrive for years to come.

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