

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Beyond a Niche: The Value of Historically Black Women's Colleges in the 21st Century

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaliyah J. Deggs is a first generation professional from Kansas City, MO. She earned her Masters of Arts in Higher Education with a graduate certificate in American Indian Higher Education from the University of Arizona, in Tucson,

AZ and graduated with her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Anthropology from Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. She is a Student Affairs scholar-practitioner at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, FL. Some of her professional and research interests focus on college access and success for low-income and first generation college students, food equity, holistic wellness, and professional development. In hopes of reclaiming power and expanding one's awareness, Aaliyah's goal is to highlight counternarratives and diverse and nontraditional experiences within minoritized groups.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's Colleges have served women students since the 19th century. These institutions fought to support this population during a time when institutions of higher education only served white men. To sustain many women's colleges, they are tasked with reimagining their purpose and creating a new niche. For example, despite the decreasing numbers of women's colleges throughout the United States, Historically Black Women Colleges (HBWCs), Bennett College and Spelman College, have carved out a sustainable niche: a space where Black women can focus on being just a student. As the number of Black women graduates increases, it is important to recognize intentional spaces for this population.

The purpose of this brief is to highlight the importance of and need for HBWCs. Using a content analysis approach and literature review, I created a framework called the "HBWC Niche," which includes three key components of the HBWC experience: Intentionality, Community, and Intersectionality (ICI). In recent years, there has been an increase in literature about Black women's experiences in college. However, there is limited research on HBWCs and their need to be sustained to fulfill the gap in Black women student success, belonging, and safety. This brief highlights the elements of the "HBWC Niche" framework, the contributions of HBWCs in higher education and the economy, and how to sustain these institutions.

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## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Colleges were established in the 1830s to create educational opportunities exclusively for women. Geographically, most women's colleges are located in the Northeast and Southern parts of the United States. Like many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), most women's colleges are religiously affiliated private liberal arts institutions. The early women's colleges were significant because they offered women a higher education degree equivalent to that of the leading men's colleges (Perkins, 1997). According to Langdon (2001), women's colleges had clear and compelling missions because they provided access to postsecondary education to those who were once denied. This allowed women's colleges to create a niche for themselves. By the 1960s, there were a total of 230 women's colleges.

However, by the 1980s, many single-gendered institutions shifted toward coeducation and only 116 women's colleges survived, which forced surviving women's colleges to focus on creating positive environments where women matter (Langdon, 2001). Moreover, in 2021, the number of women's colleges decreased to fewer than 40 colleges. This reality caused Whitford (2021), who authored "Women's Colleges Work to Compete in a Crowded Market," to propose the question, "Why attend a college for women when the same programs are available at coed institutions?" Now, women's colleges are challenged with finding a different niche.

The decrease in women's colleges had an impact on HBCUs as well. During the 19th and 20th centuries, there were four Historically Black Women Colleges (HBWCs): Barber-Scotia College, Bennett College, Huston-Tillotson University, and Spelman College. Bennett College and Spelman College are the two remaining HBWCs. These two HBWCs created a sustainable niche: *a space where Black women can focus on being just a student*. This niche is important because it reduces deficit thinking about two salient identities: race and gender.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Most research about women's colleges focuses on the Seven Sister Colleges (all women's colleges), which include: Barnard College, Bryn Mawr College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, Radcliffe College, Vassar College, and Wellesley College. Historically, despite sex homogeneity, Black women attending traditionally white women's colleges still experienced racial discrimination and exclusion (Perkins, 1995). Based on Perkins' (1997) article, "The African American Female Elite: The Early History of African American Women in the Seven Sister College 1880-1960," Black women attending the Seven Sister Colleges all experienced discrimination, especially with on-campus housing. They were either denied access to live on-campus or remained segregated in a single room without a roommate (Perkins, 1997). Furthermore, during that time, there was a perceived unwritten policy that the Seven Sisters Colleges had a quota of no more than two Blacks people per class (Perkins, 1997).

In contrast to the Seven Sister college experiences, another traditionally women's colleges, Hunter College (later became a coeducational institution), is considered one of the most significant institutions in the history of the higher education of Black women (Perkins, 1995).

**Note:** This brief focuses on cisgender experiences of college students and graduates of Bennett College and Spelman College. Both institutions were founded in the 19th century and further developed in the 20th century. During those times, gender operated from a binary perspective. The outward understanding of gender identity and gender expression were limited. Although, gender identity and biological sex are different, the terms "woman," "women," and "female" are used interchangeably in this brief, as well as "gender" and "sex."

Hunter College's acceptance of racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity created a space where Black women students felt that their admission was a 'golden opportunity' and influenced them to get involved in campus life (Perkins, 1995). Despite the limited opportunities for Black women to attend institutions of higher education during the 19th century (Perkins, 1995), women at that time took advantage of the opportunity and managed to navigate the academic setting.

Throughout the literature about women's colleges, the experiences and contributions of HBWCs are often left out. This results from double discrimination (race and gender) within academia. In many race and gender studies, men are considered the universal racial subject and white women are the universal female subject (Gasman, 2007; Glenn, 1998). Furthermore, most research on Black colleges does not include the intersections of race and gender. However, race and gender are an integral part of HBCUs (Gasman, 2007), especially at HBWCs. According to Guy-Sheftall (1982), no history of women's education in America would be complete without the Spelman and Bennett stories.

Although there is limited literature on HBWCs, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of literature about either one or both institutions. Previous literature on HBWCs ranges from the 1980s, early/mid 2000s, and now in late 2010s and beyond. Much of the available research and dissertations focus on the foundation and origins, curriculum, social activism and engagement, and the socialization of Black women at Bennett College and Spelman College. For example, Collins & Lewis (2008) discuss the socialization process through ceremonies, rituals, and symbols at HBWCs.

Some other articles that focus on the unique and intentional approach of developing Black women academically, personally, and professionally (Collins & Lewis, 2008) at HBWCs include: *Education in Action: The Work of Bennett College for Women, 1930-1960*

(Flowers, 2017), *Black women and higher education: Spelman and Bennett College revisited* (Guy-Sheftall, 1982), *Protest, Faith, and Race and Gender: Student Experiences at Bennett College for Black Women* (Height, 2018), and *A Culture of Success: Black Alumnae Discussions of the Assets-Based Approach at Spelman College* (Winkle-Wagner et. al., 2020). More specifically, this brief focuses on the longevity and sustainability of the remaining two HBWCs: Bennett College and Spelman College. The premise of this brief is that the "HBWC Niche" creates a safe space for Black women to simply focus on being a student and succeed.





## SPOTLIGHT: BENNETT COLLEGE



*Bennett College (1873)  
Greensboro, North Carolina*

### MISSION STATEMENT

Bennett College prepares women of color through a transformative liberal arts education to lead with purpose, integrity, and a strong sense of self-worth. Bennett provides educational access to students while promoting inquiry, civic engagement, social justice, lifelong learning, and equity for all.

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- According to the 2021-2022 *U.S. News and World Report*, Bennett has been named the #1 in "Top Performers on Social Mobility;" and is ranked 38th overall among HBCUs.
- According to Bennett College's 2018 Annual report, alumnae raised over \$2 million in gifts and pledges, which ranked #3 in HBCU alumnae giving.

## SPOTLIGHT: SPELMAN COLLEGE



*Spelman College (1881)  
Atlanta, Georgia*

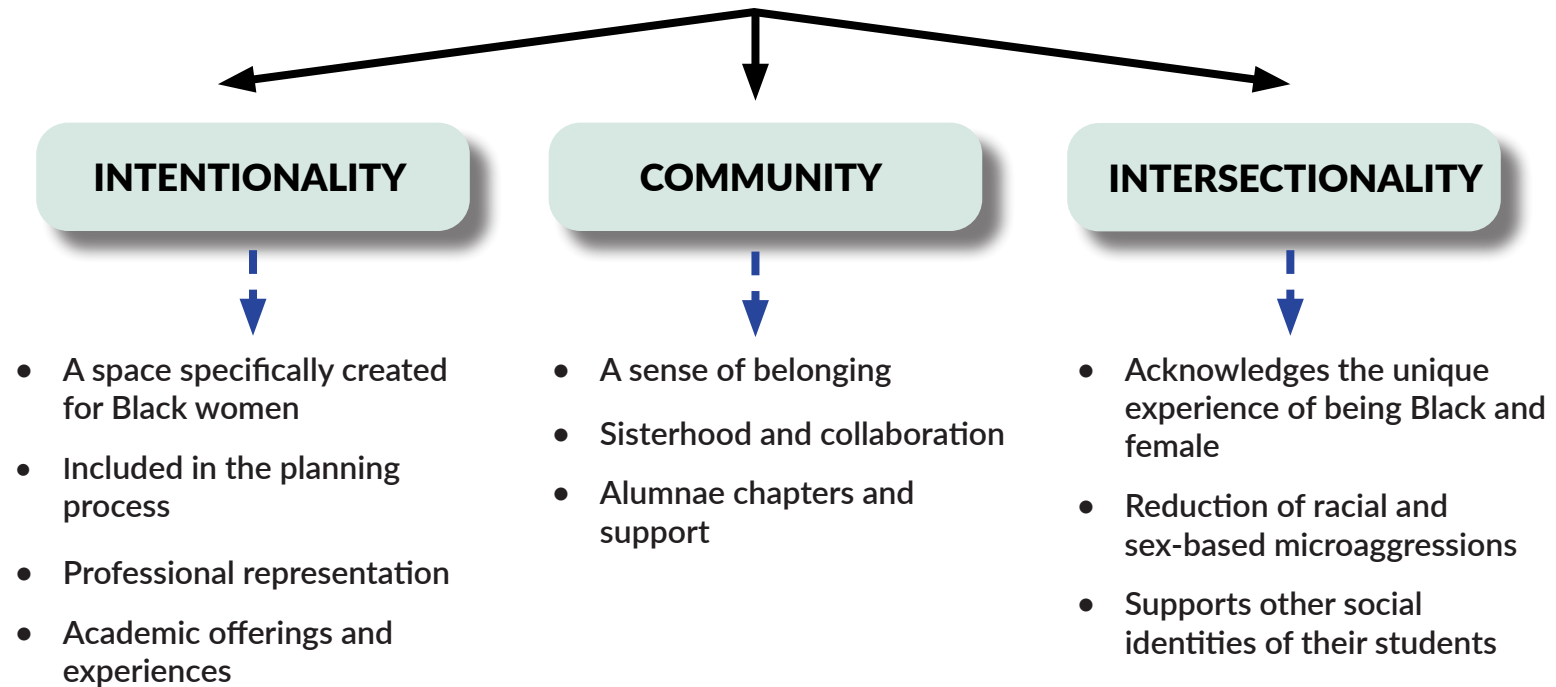
### MISSION STATEMENT

Spelman College is a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students. Through diverse learning modalities, Spelman empowers the whole person to engage the many cultures of the world and inspires a commitment to positive social change.

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- According to the 2021-2022 *U.S. News and World Report*, Spelman has been named the #1 HBCU for 15 consecutive years; ranked #10 as a "Best Women's Colleges."
- Spelman is one of only four HBCUs with a chapter of the most prestigious academic honor society, Phi Beta Kappa.

## THE HBWC NICHE



### THE HBWC NICHE: INTENTIONALITY, COMMUNITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY (ICI)

According to Collins (2001), Bennett College and Spelman College symbolize the development of Black women's intellectual thought in an environment that encourages excellence (p. 3). The "HBWC Niche" framework highlights three key components of the HBWC experience: Intentionality, Community, and Intersectionality (ICI). Each component highlights the purpose and approach to crafting a supportive culture and nurturing experience.

### INTENTIONALITY

Bennett College is a four-year private liberal arts institution located in Greensboro, North Carolina. In 1873, Bennett College was originally founded as a coeducational institution by emancipated enslaved people. After 53 years, the Methodist Episcopal Church saw the need to serve Black women and transformed the institution into a women colleges in 1926. This is significant because this approach is the opposite of what many other women's colleges are doing today.

Spelman College is a four-year private liberal arts institution located in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1881, Spelman College was founded by two white women, Harriet Giles and Sophie Packard. Although originally named Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, the institution was renamed in 1924. Throughout the institution's 141-year existence, it served as a well-known institution for Black women.

Most institutions are microcosms of society, including views on identity. At many Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), there are conversations about how to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion into the systemic structure of the institution. Many institutions and departments have created diversity statements and task forces to address these barriers. Consequently, these barriers remind faculty, staff, and students with minoritized identities that they are an afterthought. Higher education was not intended to be accessible to all. However, at HBWCs, the needs of Black Women are the focal point. At HBCUs, most of the population consists of Black people, which naturally leads to Black professionals in leadership and administration roles (Nahal, et. al., 2015).

In many cases, students have faculty members who share one or more of the same identities. According to Collins (2001), both Bennett College and Spelman College have a critical mass of Black women who are faculty and administrators, and are seen as role models for the young women to emulate. This reduces the likelihood of Black women students being being racially tokenized or the only Black women in the classroom.

Moreover, Bennett College and Spelman College intentionally create an environment of success, belonging, and community through academic offerings and traditions. According to Winkle-Wagner et al. (2020), these institutions promoted success even if the surrounding society outside the campus gates were racially hostile to Black women. As liberal arts institutions, both Bennett and Spelman require every student to take diverse academic subjects.

Additionally, both institutions have academic offerings that center Black women's experiences. For example, Bennett College offers a Women's Studies minor, an Africana Women's Studies track, and courses such as "Black Women in the World," "Psychology of Women," "Afrocentric Psychology," and "Feminist Research Methods and Service Learning" (Bennett Academic Catalog, 2021). Also, other academic courses include gender-based perspectives in the course descriptions, such as "Business Ethics and Computer and Society." Spelman College offers Comparative Women's Studies major and minor. Some course offerings include "The Black Female Body in American Culture, Race, Class and Gender," and the "Sociology of Women."

To expand academic offerings and experiences, both Bennett and Spelman are members of other higher education consortiums, which allow HBWC students to cross-register at those partnered institutions. Bennett College is a member of the Greater Greensboro Consortium, which includes seven other colleges such as University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a few local community colleges, and fellow HBCU, North Carolina A&T State University. Spelman College is a member of Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUC), which includes Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Morehouse School of Medicine (Lockwood, 2004). Also, Spelman is a member of the Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education, which includes Emory University, Georgia State University, fellow Women's College, Agnes Scott College, and 15 other institutions.

Additionally, both institutions provide global engagement and leadership opportunities for their students. These opportunities are aligned with each institution's commitment to using the HBWC experience to evoke change and make a difference in the world. Bennett College students are prepared to become 'change agents' in their homes, community, and society (Lockwood, 2004). In fact, Spelman College's tagline is a "A Choice to Change the World." As a result of their commitment to social change, Bennett



College received the “HBCU Institutional Leader” designation by the Fulbright Program in 2019. Also, Bennett College received a \$83,600 grant from the Department of Education to support a study abroad program in Morocco. According to the 2021-2022 *U.S. News and World Report’s* Best Colleges rankings, Spelman ranked #33 in Study Abroad programs that offer course credits and cultural immersion and in 2021, ranked as the #1 producer of Gilman Scholars. These academic experiences and opportunities, along with institutional traditions, help to create an intentional and well-rounded college experience for HBWC students.



*New Bennett College students walk through the Bearden Gates as part of the Convocatum Est tradition (2018).*

To create an environment of belonging and community, both institutions have traditions and rituals designed to welcome newcomers into their campuses (Collins & Lewis, 2008), beginning at student arrival and continuing through to graduation. For example, both Bennett College and Spelman College, offer a New Student Orientation (NSO), which is a weeklong program that supports the college transition of incoming first-year students. During this week, students learn about the history of the colleges, receive academic advising, and participate in social activities that

aid in fostering rapport and social capital within the incoming class. Furthermore, Bennett hosts their first ceremony of matriculation *Convocatum Est*, which formally introduces and welcomes first year students, transfer students, and exchange students into the institution (Collins & Lewis, 2008). During this ceremony, students wear white attire and witness their signature in the college register.

## COMMUNITY

HBCUs should undoubtedly be seen as viable options to serve as spaces of sacred sanctuary (Mobley, 2017). In recent years, there has been a resurgence in HBCUs as Black students seek safe spaces, faculty and curriculum representation, and an empowering campus experience (Williams & Palmer, 2019). This is even more evident at HBWCs. Within the last few years, both Bennett College and Spelman College experienced enrollment increases. In Fall 2021, Bennett College enrollment increased from 409 (2017-2018) to 637 (2021-2022). Within this pool, there was a diversity of first-year applicants from different states. During the 2021-2022 admissions cycle, Spelman College broke admissions records with more than 11,000 applications. This number represents the highest applicant pool in the College’s 140+ year history and a 20% increase over last year (Spelman News, 2021).

Having a sense of belonging and familiarity promotes mutual collaboration and pride in one’s collegiate experience. According to Winkle-Wagner et. al. (2020), Spelman alumnae described multiple ways that Spelman College worked to create community and to cultivate the sense that success was within reach for the women who attended the institution. Both Bennett College and Spelman College create a culture of sisterhood and call each other “sisters.” Although students are not biologically related, there is familiarity because they share a common experience and goal (Collins & Lewis, 2008). The concept of sisterhood is practiced through peer-mentoring programs such as Big Sister/Little Sister programs at

both Bennett College and Spelman College and SpelBound sisters at Spelman College. To further embrace each other, Bennett students call each other “Bennett Belles” or “Belles.” According to Height (2018), a Bennett Belle is a student or alumna of the college who is well-versed in social graces because of her matriculation at Bennett College.” Similarly, Spelman students call each other “Spelmanites” or say, “My Spelman Sister” (Collins & Lewis, 2008).

The concept of sisterhood continues beyond graduation. Both institutions have national alumnae associations with local chapters. Bennett College’s National Alumnae Association (NAA) was founded in 1948 and has over 30 alumnae chapters throughout the United States. These alumnae chapters and other student and alumnae engagement are important to the survival and advancement of Bennett College (Height, 2018). Furthermore, beyond joining the alumnae associations, Bennett alumnae support current students through networking and career readiness opportunities such as mock interviews, career panels and resume assistance, as well as future student recruitment efforts.

According to Winkle-Wagner et al. (2020), many Spelman alumnae described their experiences at Spelman as physically, emotionally, socially, and academically safe for the women to learn, develop, and aspire toward their educational and occupational goals. According to one alumna quoted in Winkle-Wagner et al, “you were surrounded by a bunch of faculty that really cared” (p. 663) highlights the sense of community that encourages alumnae support.

The National Alumnae Association of Spelman College (NAASC) is one of the first women’s organizations in the country – established in 1892. Currently, there are nearly 70 alumnae chapters throughout the United States and Bermuda. Like Bennett College, Spelman alumnae support students through mentoring programs, career readiness opportunities, and become institution recruiters. Spelman alumnae support is especially critical during spring graduation

season. Graduating seniors participate in an institutional tradition called “Class Day.” Seniors can walk through the Alumnae Arch, and on the other side, there are generations of Spelman alumnae celebrating the graduates’ accomplishments (Collins & Lewis, 2008).



*Spelman College alumnae from the class of 1979 prepare to march through the Alumnae Arch for the “Class Day” tradition.*

In addition, these associations are important because they continue to provide a haven for HBWC graduates. The unfortunate reality is many graduates will enter professional environments where their identities are not seen and/or valued. These associations and collaborations with sisters can serve as a form of self-care, self-preservation, and a support group.

By participating in alumnae associations, alumnae weekend events, and alumnae volunteer opportunities, alumnae can strengthen their social capital and support their respective institutions. This support comes in forms of student recruitment efforts, community service, sharing alumnae achievements, and financial gifts. Along with corporate and foundation donations, alumnae donations play



a crucial role in sustaining HBWC and their academic quality and offerings. According to Peebles (2010), philanthropic support by way of sponsors and alumni provides financial resources, which are critical to the operationalization of curriculum.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

Oftentimes, the experiences of Black women are ignored and sometimes silenced. By contrast, at HBWCs, the unique experiences of being Black and a woman is acknowledged, and many institutional decisions are made using the lens of race and gender. These decisions better the student experience, which enhances the quality of the institutions. This perspective allows HBWC students to focus on just being students – meaning they can navigate college without thinking about the lack of belonging, safety, and academic achievement, due to two of their salient identities: race and gender. Instead, as claimed by Winkle-Wagner et. al. (2020), many alumnae perceived their identities as Black women to be viewed as assets at Spelman. As a result of the Black women representation at HBWCs, there is a reduction of race and sex biases, inequities, and microaggressions that may occur at other HBCUs and PWIs.

Like many HBCUs, HBWCs also highlights the diversity within the Black community and debunk monolithic perceptions (Nahal et. al, 2015). In this unique setting, HBWCs redefine the idea of “diversity.” Students can explore other social identities that are salient to them and build connections around other identities that are not race and sex based. Other interests and social identities such as gender identity and expression, geographical locations (hometown and/or region), national origins, religion, residence halls, socio-economic status, student organization involvement become the focus.

In addition to serving Black women, both Bennett College and Spelman College serve diverse and intersectional populations: first generation college students and low-income students. Bennett has worked tirelessly to serve underrepresented student

populations and close the education access gap. According to the 2021-2022 *U.S. News and World Report* “Best Colleges” rankings, Bennett College ranked #1 in Social Mobility – meaning Bennett College has successfully enrolled and graduated students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (family income is under \$50,000). In 2022, Bennett College partnered with the Rollin Jubilee Fund and the Debt Collective to eliminate \$1.7 million of debt for 462 former students (UNCF, 2022).

Like Bennett College, Spelman ranked in the top 5 (#4) as a top performer on Social Mobility (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2022). During the 2020-2021 academic year, Spelman College reduced tuition and fees by 14%, removed student balances and holds, and provided other financial support. Beyond supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Spelman continues to support first-generation college students. At Spelman, about 16% of the student body is composed of first-generation students (Burton, 2021). Spelman has a First-Generation (1st Gens) Scholars Program, which is a student organization devoted to providing academic and personal support for students who identify as first-generation college students. Also, in 2018, Spelman launched the Ford First Gen program (Burton, 2021). In 2021, Spelman was recognized as a First-Gen Forward institution by NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education’s Center for First-generation Student Success (Burton, 2021).

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)

Bennett College and Spelman College are excelling at creating a space for Black women while preparing them with tools to navigate life outside of a HBWC. Despite many HBCUs’ gender and class dynamics, Bennett and Spelman have been instrumental in graduating a high percentage of some of the most successful and brightest Black women professionals (Collins, 2001; Wolf-Wendel, 1995, 1998; Tidball et al., 1999). According to Guy-Sheftall, training Black women for leadership roles are high priorities at both

institutions (1982). Bennett and Spelman graduates have gone on to become the “First Black,” “First Woman,” and the “First Black Woman” to serve in politics, entertainment, education, business, and entrepreneurship to name a few. Spelman has fostered the idea that one could be highly successful in and beyond college from the first day they set foot on campus (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). For Bennett, the institution developed a curriculum that lives out their liberal arts model, which prepares students to demonstrate critical thinking, problem solving skills, and other skills that Bennett students will use in their careers to solve real-world problems (Flowers, 2017). Below is a list of some HBWC alumnae professional accomplishments from the 20th and 21st centuries.

## Notable Alumnae Accomplishments of the 20th Century

### Bennett College

**Sara Lou Harris Cater '43** – The first Black model in the New York buyers fashion show.

**Carolyn Robertson Payton '45** – The first woman and the first Black American to be Peace Corps Director.

**Yvonne Johnson '64** – The first Black American elected to City Council in Greensboro and later became the first Black American mayor of the city.

**Lisa Lunsford '85** – The CEO and co-founder of Global Strategic Solutions LLC (GS3 Global), a comprehensive supply chain management company she co-founded in 2010. Lisa was a finalist for the Michigan Supplier Development Council's 2014 Minority Supplier of the Year Award in Detroit, Michigan.

**Sonja Cambridge Wise '89** – The first Black American woman Robbery Detective in Tampa. Serves as the President of the Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers-Tampa Chapter. She currently serves as a Homicide Detective in Tampa, Florida.

**Tammi McCall '94** – An actor, comedian, and radio personality famously known as “Tammi Mac.” Mac is the host of “The Tammi Mac Show” on 102.3 KJLH in Los Angeles, rated #1 among African Americans in the market.

### Spelman College

**Marian Wright Edelman '60** – The founder and President emerita of the Children's Defense Fund, was honored by the Civil Rights and Social Justice section of the American Bar Association with a 2020 Thurgood Marshall Award.

**Beverly Guy Sheftall '66** – An educator, activist, author, and scholar who is the founding Director of the Women's Research and Resource Center (1981) and Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College. She has contributed to African American and Women's Studies literature. She is the past President of the National Women's Studies Association and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2017).

**Rosalind Gates Brewer '84** – In March 2021, Rosalind (Roz) Brewer joined Walgreens Boots Alliance as Chief Executive Officer, making her the only Black woman at the helm of an S&P 500 company. In 2019, she became the only Black woman to sit on Amazon's board. Her career portfolio includes Chief Operating Officer and Group President at Starbucks from (2017-2021), and President, Chief Executive Officer of Sam's Club from (2012-2017) and held several executive leadership positions with Walmart beginning in 2006. Brewer was named #6 on Fortune's 2021 “Most Powerful Women” list.

**Latanya Richardson Jackson '71** – An NAACP and Tony award nominated actor and producer. An active alumna, who served on the Spelman College Board of Trustees, 1998-2006. Currently, she serves on the Spelman College Women's Center National Advisory Board, and the renovated theater, lobby, dressing rooms, and supporting areas of the Fine Arts building will be renamed in her honor.

**Bernice King '85** – In addition to being daughter of late Civil Rights Activists, Rev. Dr. Martin L. King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, King is an attorney, author, minister, and renowned speaker. In 2020, King was featured in British Vogue cover story "The 20 Remarkable Activists on Vogue's September Cover Are Ready to Change the World."

**Stacey Abrams '95** – Abrams is the recipient of many firsts. She is the first-Black American woman major party gubernatorial Georgia nominee in the United States, the first woman to lead the Georgia General Assembly and the Georgia House of Representatives and received the first-ever Gabrielle Giffords Rising Star Award at the 2014 We Are EMILY awards dinner. In 2020, Forbes added Abrams to "The World's Most Powerful Women" list.

## Notable Alumnae Accomplishments of the 21st Century

### Bennett College

In the Spring 2021 edition of the Belle Ringer, Bennett highlights the accomplishments of alumnae, which they call "21st Century Belles" or the "New Millennium Belles."

**Neda Brown '01** – Brown has held diplomatic roles in Columbia, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Rwanda and other parts of Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean. Most recently she served as the consul general at the U.S.

consulate in Matamoros, Mexico. She has also been a media relations officer at the Foreign Press Center, the White House Situation Room and the State Department's Operations Center.

**Cherie Simons Dill '02** – As Vice President, Actuary at Everest Reinsurance Bermuda, Simons Dill is one of the first Bermudian actuaries and one of the first Bermudian women in the field. She is among the 1% of Black actuaries globally.

**Nyitre Rodgers '02** – After getting her psychology degree, Rogers worked as a statistician for the Department of Commerce and is currently an Executive Sous Chef.

**Sharrelle Barber '07** – Chaired the planning group to launch a major center at Drexel University to further research on racial inequity and disparities in health, which recently announced the plans to launch the Center on Racism and Health after receiving a \$9 million gift to support the project.

**Myeisha Essex '11** – Currently, Essex serves as a Senior Editor at EOnline.com, the digital arm of Entertainment Tonight. Previously, she was the Managing Editor of "The Shade Room," where she helped the team win two BET awards. For three seasons, she was Senior Digital Producer at "The Real" daytime talk show.

**Chelsea Moore '17** – In her role at Weber Shandwick, a leading global communications agency, Moore helps develop corporate communications for leading companies. She loves the behind-the-scenes aspect of her job working with executives—including C-suite leaders at Fortune 500 companies.



### Spelman College

**Keisha Knight Pulliam '01** - Pulliam is an actor, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. She is the Co-Founder and Chief Development Officer of Fearless Fund, a capital firm with the mission of investing in minority women entrepreneurs. Also, she is the Founder of a non-profit organization for young girls, Kamp Kizzy.

**Whitney Gayle Benta '01** - The Head of Talent Relations with Spotify, formerly the Senior Vice President of music and talent at REVOLT TV, the new multiplatform television channel founded by Sean Combs. Prior to joining REVOLT, Benta was vice president at MTV News.

**Lynnette Espy-Williams '03** - The Vice Chair and Office Managing Partner, and Chief Diversity Officer, Global Insurance Group of Cozen O'Connor, a full-service firm with nationally recognized practices in litigation, business law, and government relations. She was recognized in Georgia Trend Magazines' Legal Elite, named as a Georgia Rising Star (2012 and 2013), selected as Atlanta Business Chronicle's "People in the News" Chief Diversity Officer, and the IMPACT, and the National Bar Association's Nation's Best Advocates: 40 Lawyers Under 40 (2013).

**Lieutenant La'Shanda R. Holmes '07** - The first Black American woman helicopter pilot in the United States Coast Guard, making history in April 2010. Some of her honors include the 2014 Blacks in Government award, selection as one of Griot's Top 100 History Makers, and a nomination for an NAACP award for her work on The Smithsonian's "Black Wings" documentary.

**Azline Shelby Nelson '13** - The first Black woman to win the Jacob Global Venture Award, a pitch competition sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

**Isis Benjamin '20** - The Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of "House of Isis," an organic vegan hair and skin care line. House of Isis was selected to be a part of the first cohort of Target's Forward Founders Accelerator Program. The products are now in selected beauty supplies stores, featured in VoyageATL Magazine (2021), and was featured on Bermuda Broadcast Company (2021).

Source: All alumnae accomplishments listed were derived from institutional alumnae webpages, news releases, and documents, HBCU news outlets (e.g. *Watch the Yard*), and other mainstream outlets and companies (e.g., *Forbes*, Walgreens).

## INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING AND SUPPORT

Due to the historical marginalization of HBCUs, these institutions have never had the resources as their PWI peers (Winkle-Wagner, et al., 2020). Furthermore, historically women's colleges also did not receive the same financial resources and support as their counterparts (Barnes, 2014). According to Gasman (2013), fundraising is the most important factor for the long-term sustainability of HBCUs (p. 12). Despite these realities, both Bennett College and Spelman College have sustained through government funding, donations, endowments, and more. HBWC alumnae associations play a significant role in donation campaigns and other recruitment efforts. Additionally, women's colleges survived financial hardship by staying true to the original mission of preparing women to be leaders and intellectuals (Barnes, 2014; DeBare, 2004).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately, the impact that HBWCs have had on higher education and the advancement of Black women should be acknowledged and celebrated more frequently. Furthermore, HBWCs should be included in the literature and larger conversations about women's colleges and serve as viable post-secondary institutions and options. Both institutions have contributed to the increasing number of Black women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and other professional careers.

Although there are limited spaces for Black women to simply exist and not experience dual discrimination, Spelman and Bennett are indeed very special places for Black women to pursue an education, which embodies their niche and success (Guy-Sheftall, 1982). By examining the success of these institutions through the lens of the HBWC niche framework (which consists of intentionality, community, and intersectionality), we can see precisely how these academic spaces allow Black women to focus on being a student,

while thriving in supportive spaces that were designed for them. Given today's climate regarding racial injustices, ongoing gender-based discrimination, and Black women fighting to be seen and heard in the classroom and on social media, HBCUs, specifically HBWCs can serve as a model for institutions serious about promoting an inclusive campus environment (Williams & Palmer, 2019). Furthermore, HBWCs are examples of highlighting diversity within the Black community, as well as challenging others to explore diversity beyond race and gender.

It is imperative that Bennett College and Spelman College share their own stories in innovative and consistent ways, allowing them to control their narrative. Although both HBWCs have practiced resilience and sustained thus far, there is a continuous need for financial support from diverse and long-term sources. Government and institutional funding, alumnae giving and support, fundraising, community and corporate donations, more literature and marketing about their impact, accomplishments, and successes all play crucial roles in the sustainability of Bennett College and Spelman College. Supporting HBWCs grants one the opportunity to invest in and support the next Black women leaders of tomorrow.

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