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CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

Working Together: Interorganizational Relationships between HBCUs, National Alumni Associations, and Foundations

by Jessica Elmore, Kansas State University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief examines the relationships that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), national alumni associations, and foundations have with each other. Three relationship processes are analyzed based on existing interorganizational theory: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. The study examines how these processes affect alumni-giving initiatives and programs at three HBCUs in order to discover best practices and areas for improvement. Three main themes are identified: working together, human capital and organizational structures, and resource capacity. Recommendations are presented to assist practitioners in evaluating and improving their current relationships and organizations.

BACKGROUND

Research shows that communities of color donate generously and consider education to be a top priority, which suggests that there is more to the story as to why HBCU alumni-giving rates are below average (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2012; Pettey, 2002). The purpose of this research brief is to explore the interorganizational relationships that exist between an HBCU's university president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer and how they cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate with one another to foster alumni giving. The concept of interorganizational relationships comes

from Negandhi's (1975) *Interorganization Theory*, which focuses on interactions and processes between organizations and examines the social interactions under conditions of unstructured authority.

Using Negandhi's (1975) theory allows us to highlight the rapidly growing need for organizations in higher education—especially HBCUs—to interact and collaborate with each other for competitive funding advantages. Interorganizational networking is more prevalent in today's business world because a competitive advantage is required for organizations to survive in increasingly growing global markets (Dyer & Chu, 2000). When looking at how organizations choose to work with each other, interorganizational theory focuses on understanding three main processes: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. In a study on university fundraising conducted by Arnold (2003), the processes of "cooperation, coordination, and collaboration" were identified as the factors that most contributed to the relationship between the alumni association and development entities in large public universities. According to Arnold (2003), these processes take place between "two or more organizations [that] interact

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within a shared domain,” and the organizations under analysis here are 1) the HBCU itself, 2) its separate but affiliated national alumni association, and 3) its separate but affiliated foundation.

For the purpose of this study, cooperation is defined as the interactions that take place between a university’s president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer, with a particular focus on the psychological characteristics of the relationship and how mutually beneficial it is for all parties (Elmore, 2015). Coordination is defined as the ability of the university president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer to bring resources together to accomplish a common goal (Elmore, 2015). Finally, collaboration is defined as the capability of the university president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer to structure authority among organizations in order to make decisions and/or interact to build capacity (Elmore, 2015).

Understanding interorganizational relationships... is important for helping HBCUs stay competitive in an increasingly difficult period of low alumni-giving and unprecedented budget cuts.

Colleges and universities across the United States are persistently searching for ways to increase their alumni giving and involvement. The effects of the 2008 recession have required public institutions of higher education to significantly increase their alumni-giving percentages to replace the accelerated reduction of state and public funding. In addition to increasing alumni giving, raising money from communities of color has also been a topic of interest.

HBCUs have been experiencing cuts to their already meager budgets and have been challenged with increasing their below-average alumni-giving percentages (Huffington Post Education, 2012). As an alumni

president at one HBCU puts it, “Public institutions are having to learn to fight the battle. And, if we don’t learn to fight it and participate in keeping the institution viable, then they will go the way of becoming an extension or offsite campus of some other institution.” To offer solutions to HBCU alumni-giving challenges, *A Guide to Fundraising at HBCUs: An All Campus Approach* was published by Routledge in 2011. Authors Marybeth Gasman and Nelson Bowman III suggested that to increase alumni giving, an entire campus has to be involved and top leadership must lead the way. Thus, understanding interorganizational relationships among university leadership, alumni organizations, and foundations is important for helping HBCUs stay competitive in an increasingly difficult period of low alumni-giving and unprecedented budget cuts.

THE STUDY

To identify potential research sites for this study, purposeful sampling was used. The sites selected had to meet the following criteria:

- Four-year programs
- Public institutions
- Small to medium-size schools (1,000 to 15,000 undergraduate students)
- Varsity athletic teams
- Independent or interdependent alumni association
- Independent or interdependent foundation

Out of the 105 HBCUs that exist across the U.S. (as of 2015), 40 met the above criteria and 3 were selected for examination in this study (U.S. Department of Education). All three sites that were selected were studied with the explicit agreement of each HBCU president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer or designee. The primary data sources collected were semi-structured audiotaped interviews with the leadership at each institution and a variety of documents,

which include: organizational charts, mission statements, lists of board members and their affiliates, and annual reports, where available. The websites of each HBCU, national alumni association, and foundation were also explored. To ensure that the information received was accurate and valid, multiple sources of data were used to assist with validating and cross-referencing the information collected. The names of institutions and interorganizational leadership have been omitted to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The research questions that guided this study can be found to the right, and information about the selected sites can be found in Fig. 1.

RESULTS

In what ways do the university presidents, chief alumni officers, and chief foundation officers or their designees cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate at public HBCUs?

Cooperation

Effective sharing and gaining buy-in to the university’s vision is a critical responsibility of the university’s executive team, and interorganizational leaders were more cooperative in the area of fundraising when organizations aligned their efforts on specific initiatives. At Site One, the chief alumni officer expressed how their institution came together on an athletic fundraising project:

The very first thing we did was send out a letter on the president’s letterhead, which was an appeal for fundraising to all of the alums, that was signed by the president of the university, the president of the foundation, and the president of the alumni association. We were very much in lock step with that.

Research Questions

- In what ways do the university president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer or designee cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate at public HBCUs?
- How does the process of cooperation contribute to interorganizational relations at public HBCUs?
- How does the process of coordination contribute to interorganizational relations at public HBCUs?
- How does the process of collaboration contribute to interorganizational relations at public HBCUs?

FIGURE 1: Organizational Characteristics of the Three HBCU Sites

	<i>Site One</i>	<i>Site Two</i>	<i>Site Three</i>
<i>Type of HBCU</i>	4-Year Public	4-Year Public	4-Year Public
<i>Type of Alumni Association</i>	Independent	Independent	Independent
<i>Type of Foundation</i>	Independent	Independent	Independent
<i>Number of Undergraduates Enrolled</i>	Over 8,000	Nearly 8,000	Nearly 3,000
<i>Percentage of Black Students</i>	Over 85%	Over 80%	Less than 50%

The necessity for cooperation comes from the mutual need for resources and a territorial culture that has and continues to exist among HBCUs and their interorganizational leaders. The chief alumni officer at Site Three expressed the importance of communicating and respecting the hierarchy of their national alumni association:

Under the old administration, I'd have to remind people [in the university] from time to time that if you want to communicate with the [alumni] chapters, it's a good idea to run that by me [first]... I think it's inappropriate for the Alumni Affairs Office at the university to start tasking chapter presidents to do something, or chapters to do something, [if] they have not discussed what they're doing with me. It is a little embarrassing and a little offensive to have a chapter president call his or her national president and ask what is this the university is asking me to do, why are they asking me to do that, how much are we vested in what's going on. And it's embarrassing and offensive [for me] to have to say, I don't know, this is the first I've ever heard of it.

The idea of not being valued or seen as a part of the team has an impact on the psychological relationships between the interorganizational leaders and the organization's ability to cooperate. The university president at Site One expressed the importance of showing value to his alumni volunteers:

I try to show in every forum on campus or when we go out and meet with alumni how much we value them and how we're all in it together. I try to tell folks that anybody who is volunteering their time and their resources is to be appreciated and is to be valued. That's a common message of mine... So I invite them to virtually every formal program we have or when we play certain football games and things like that and we have a box, a suite.

Through cooperative actions like working together and displaying a positive image of being a team, sites were able to effectively implement successful fundraising initiatives. Likewise, the university president at Site Three shared the importance of working together: "We have a very strong office of alumni affairs...and so the role of that office, of course, is to provide support for the national alumni association as well...the president's office, the alumni office, the foundation office those offices must be intertwined and they must be in synchronization with each other." The reciprocal respect and direction of interorganizational partners was seen as fundamental to their cooperation and mutual success.

Coordination

By organizing resources and communicating through the university alumni affairs department and office of development, both public and private events and activities (e.g. fundraising galas, homecoming activities, and various meetings) were coordinated to encourage maximum participation of potential donors. The chief foundation officer at Site Two explained that coordination with other organizations usually takes place through staff instead of leadership:

They [the foundation board members] don't solicit... It's not a board function. The fundraising is done pretty much by staff in terms of the major gifts program, the annual giving program, the planned giving program. Of course, they [foundation board members] help with some of the solicitations but the portfolios are managed by staff.

In the area of donor cultivation, coordinated efforts involved asking donors for gifts and were orchestrated through university departments rather than other alternatives in order to eliminate donor confusion and conflict. The chief foundation officer at Site Three acknowledged that there is potential for confusion among the various avenues of donor giving, so the interorganizational partners have to coordinate

resources and campaigns in order to prevent conflicts of interest:

We still make every effort to cooperate on every level of this because as we've found... with many HBCUs, people will say well I donated to this area and I don't need to donate to the other. So that's why it's a coordinated effort to make sure we maximize that kind of collaboration so we can get their biggest bang for our buck.

Interorganizational leaders from all three sites discussed the process of cultivating a donor and who was responsible for which task so there would not be confusion or conflict for donors. With multiple organizations at each site working on raising funds, coordinated efforts were noted as important to pool resources for optimal success.

Collaboration

Effective collaboration took place by the systemic designation of authority within the interorganizational structure. Sites did not want to portray the image of being disorganized and competing among their donor base by having multiple volunteers and professionals approach them. The chief foundation officer at Site Three commented on the necessity of assigning distinct responsibilities among the interorganizational partners:

So that we are not in conflict...recruiting donors...we're all sitting at the table together, and we're figuring out where do we need to go, what do we need to do, who do we need to contact...

As a result, the sharing of networks and platforms has been the main method of collaboration at the institutions observed in this study. Alumni associations and foundations are seen as groups to provide opportunities and open doors to potential donors for the university. The chief foundation officer at Site One viewed the responsibilities of their alumni association and foundation as, "the NAA [national alumni

association] being active for fundraising and recruiting new students to the University...[while] the foundation is here to attract and approach those corporate entities..."

Collaboration worked best when each organization was clear on its own role within the larger hierarchy of responsibilities between the university, alumni organization, and foundation.

How does the process of cooperation contribute to interorganizational relationships at public HBCUs?

Cooperation can be seen as an initial stage in interorganizational relationships. Getting the university, alumni association, and foundation to psychologically agree to come together can set the basis for a more in-depth relationship. The process of cooperation can be seen as the easiest form of commitment from the participants because it requires the smallest amount of effort. Under the process of cooperation, research revealed that the university president sets the fundraising goals and mission that the national alumni associations and foundations follow. The chief foundation officer at Site One stated, "...the goals are established by the university. We are a supporting foundation." Likewise, the chief alumni officer at Site Two explained how they set their goals: "[We looked] at what was then the draft strategic plan for our incoming president, where he wanted to take the university, and... where we as alumni fit in this picture. Then, we sort of framed our goals and objectives around the strategic plan..." Cooperation thus presented itself in this study primarily through how interorganizational partners supported an HBCU's goal as initially outlined by the university president and agreeing to come together under a unified strategic plan to work as a team.

How does the process of coordination contribute to interorganizational relationships at public HBCUs?

Coordination can be seen as a mid-level stage of commitment in interorganizational relationships. Having already psychologically decided to cooperate, the university and its alumni association and foundation set forth to coordinate organizational actions and resources. Each individual organization intentionally communicated and built flexibility into plans to ensure that scheduling of events and involvement with donors did not interfere with each other. This involved not just the pooling of resources but also the ability to create an interlocking schedule whereby interorganizational partners were aware of each other's programmatic events and initiatives, allowing for partnerships and the avoidance of conflicts. This study illustrates the all-encompassing use of university alumni affairs departments and offices of development for: daily administrative tasks, coordinating and planning special events, reaching out and communicating with alumni, and planning and managing fundraisers. By showing courtesy and respect for the timing of an individual organization's events and not interfering with the cultivation process of donors, the trust and experience that individual organizations have with one another can strengthen.

How does the process of collaboration contribute to interorganizational relationships at public HBCUs?

Collaboration can be seen as a high-level stage of commitment in interorganizational relationships. The research in this study shows that sites can improve on the implementation of collaboration. Leaders at the various organizations are a part of the decision-making process when serving on board of directors. The chief alumni officer at Site Three expressed his limited role despite being made a part of the decision-making process: "Last year or so, my position as the alumni president has been included as a voting member of the foundation. [However it

turned out that] my position had a seat on the foundation that could only express opinion, [but] could not vote or affect the outcome of anything." Now, however, the alumni president has been given voting power and plays a role in deciding outcomes. Organizations are also contributing whatever resources they have. Through collaboration, everyone involved is expected to have some "skin in the game." Entrusting university officials with personal business contacts and relying on independent organizations to follow through with achieving financial goals is the expectation of how collaboration is demonstrated. The chief foundation officer at Site One expressed his ability to bring a major donor to the university president and the failed attempt to collaborate: "I had the sole heir of a foundation give us three dates on his calendar that he could meet with me, the president, and my trustee...and the president [couldn't] find time to meet and travel with [me], to meet the sole heir...There are some priority issues."

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Utilizing data from interviews with interorganizational leadership and institutional documents, the processes of cooperation, coordination and collaboration were analyzed and grouped together by identifying similar ideas and concepts. The ideas and concepts that were repeated by multiple sites and leaders were placed into three generalizable themes that can explain the challenges faced by HBCUs as they attempt to reach their alumni-giving goals: 1) Working Together, 2) Human Capital and Organizational Structures, and 3) Resource Capacity.

Theme One: Working Together

The idea of coming together as a team was expressed as the way business is conducted at each individual site. Sites had not always operated in the spirit of "working together" in a formal sense, but the leadership now has embraced this philosophy and it is the current way of conducting business. This idea is expressed by the chief alumni

officer at Site Three:

At every opportunity, I work with the president of the foundation. We have a good working relationship...We specifically discussed trying to work together and to give the perception, to tell people we are working together, we're doing this together, we're keeping each other informed. And so that is probably the biggest single thing is to make people aware of the things that we work on together so they know. I suspect that there has been some cooperation and collaboration in the past that people didn't see so they just perceived it not to exist. But we make a point of saying, yes, we do work together.

Before the university, national alumni association, and foundation were promoting the practice of working together as a team, these organizations operated more like silos. This led to unsuccessful efforts at promoting donor giving when each organization operated on its own, as expressed by the chief foundation officer at Site Three: "There's no point in the Alumni Association approaching a donor, the foundation approaching a donor, the Special Assistant approaching a donor." Programming, approaching donors, and other priorities were executed on an individual organizational basis. This type of silo interaction caused competition among organizations and confusion among donors and supporters.

Participants moved to a more unified approach and have found success in coordinating their events to eliminate overlap. As a result, they have collectively seen a reduction in donor confusion. Even so, although these organizations have begun to coordinate their efforts better, there is still some duplication of efforts, as explained by the chief alumni officer at Site Two:

We have our annual alumni day, which is really a weekend that coincides with the commencement at the university...We also have during homecoming, of course, we have a special event, alumni

meeting and annual alumni meeting, which is also at the time of our alumni day. Our alumni association participates in the entire weekend of events at the university, including the Foundation gala, the annual parade, homecoming parade, the homecoming game event and numerous activities that follow during that day.

Theme Two: Human Capital and Organizational Structures

At each participating site, the university had an alumni affairs department and an office of development as parts of its organizational structure. It is important to note that the university alumni affairs department and national alumni association hold the same responsibilities; similarly, the university office of development and foundation also hold the same responsibilities. Those responsibilities include:

- Communicating with and engaging alumni
- Implementing annual and major giving programs
- Managing and safeguarding the alumni/donor database
- Donor cultivation
- Alumni recognition
- Preparing and assisting the university president for donor visits

In addition, all four entities (office of alumni affairs, office of development, national alumni association, and foundation) see fundraising for the university as their responsibility. As the chief foundation officer at Site Three puts it: "The university has a development office, which works in conjunction with us [foundation] in trying to raise money." This is similar to the views expressed by the chief alumni officer at the same institution: "We have to get out, we being the whole university complex with all of its arms and agencies, we have to get out in the field and raise the money..." Compared to the national alumni association and foundation, which are separate and external 501c(3) organizations managed by alumni volunteers, the office of alumni affairs and the office of development are housed under the university's internal organizational

structure and are employees of the university. Thus, most of the HBCU alumni associations and foundations have few to no employees and often operate solely as boards of directors, with appointed seats for the university president, chief alumni officer, and chief foundation officer. The human capital of alumni associations and foundations is therefore comparatively limited in relation to their university-housed counterparts.

Limited staffing and limitations on position terms were consistently mentioned in interviews as challenges that HBCUs, national alumni associations, and foundations need to overcome. The national alumni association at Site Three, for example, expressed they had no staff and their entire organization was volunteer based: “We’re all volunteers and everything that we get done we get done through volunteer efforts.” The foundation at the same site also communicated that their organization was strictly made up of volunteers as well: “We have to depend on our “volunteer” base of our graduates to do that. And so that is where basically the differences are, in that our structure is so very small and we’re limited by that.” To compound the problem of a lack of alumni volunteers, the business of alumni engagement and fundraising is no longer a small percentage of a professional’s job responsibility; instead it has evolved into a meticulous art form that requires certifications, extensive training, and daily interactions to be successful. The continual concern is that university advancement departments are still small, have limited capacity, and experience turnover.

With the duplication of roles among the university advancement departments, alumni associations, and foundations, the coordination of reaching out to alumni, planning alumni activities, and/or fundraising has to be done delicately for the goal of increasing the university’s capacity to be met. The appointed seats of the separate entities can provide opportunities for interorganizational conversations that allow for the coordination of activities and fundraising.

Theme Three: Resource Capacity

Ultimately, the need to increase resource capacity in the form of funding, personnel, technology, and equipment is the university’s end goal. The national alumni association and foundation share their networks with the university to provide opportunities to increase its resource capacity. Operating with a limited budget and the need for more student scholarships, there is an expectation that if the university, national alumni association and foundation are going to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate, then any money raised is meant for the university exclusively. The chief foundation officer at Site One shared the following message to their donors: “Donors can give us access to support a gift for them and they can go out and try to get other people to bring money in but they have to understand that the money is intended for the University only.” The need for the foundation president to clarify that any money raised is for the university only can be attributed to the fact that national alumni associations and foundations have also faced major challenges when it comes to building and growing their own operational budgets. The same chief foundation officer at Site One explained the following:

The alumni association has been very weak. At one point they were borrowing...money from a bank to pay their one employee...To create the foundation the first thing I realized we needed [was] money. So I taxed my trustees at \$50,000 each to provide an operating fund. Half of them paid, half did not.

The financial stability of the national alumni association or foundation is not a point of focus when all three entities agree to cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate, because it is seen that their HBCU’s financial needs is the top priority. Regardless of the resource challenges that the national alumni associations and foundations are facing, they are still committed to collaborating for the purpose of helping their alma mater increase its resource capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a consistent concern and dialogue about the survival of HBCUs and their need for resources (Adcox, 2015). National alumni associations and foundations continue to be seen as organizations that can provide solutions to HBCU challenges. Leaders and supporters continue to express how imperative it is for alumni to give back to their alma mater. Understanding that alumni giving is a part of the solution to the problem, this research brief has looked at how interorganizational cooperation, coordination, and collaboration can contribute to the process of encouraging alumni to give.

Acknowledging that alumni giving can be drastically improved, an exploration of the current landscape of interorganizational relationships can help practitioners identify both the strategies that are successful and the existing norms that may be ineffective. If HBCU leaders and supporters are serious about increasing resources and overcoming the challenge of low alumni-giving percentages, they need to look at the interorganizational relationships of which they are a part, identify the current strategies being applied, evaluate the productiveness of their strategies and relationships, and assess the level of knowledge and structures in place for successful institutional advancement. Leaders and supporters must also be willing to see alumni giving as an end game that is fundamentally predicated on the relationships and structures they have in place for cultivating and engaging alumni.

Final recommendations for practitioners can be found to the right.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *The board of directors at HBCU national alumni associations need to participate in the Council of Alumni Association Executives (CAAE) and examine their current organizational structures and budget challenges. Practitioners can use CAAE to assist and educate themselves on more successful operational budget strategies and resource development opportunities that can put them in a better position to support their respective universities.*
- *HBCUs should consider bringing in consultants to create and implement business plans to transform national alumni associations and foundations from being volunteer-based organizations with no employees to fully sustainable businesses that are still structured separately from the university.*
- *Practitioners should identify duplicated efforts from the university's alumni relations and office of development to address any mutual frustrations or challenges that impact interorganizational relationships and discover possible opportunities for combining forces.*
- *Practitioners should consider conducting a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis on the processes of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration at their institution with their affiliated organizations.*
- *HBCUs should take stock of the levels of knowledge and expertise that their national alumni association and foundation volunteers have in the area of alumni relations and fundraising.*

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