

The Future of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, edited by Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe, is a compilation of interviews with 10 presidents, past and current, at HBCUs in the United States. Although the author asks specific questions in her interviews with the presidents, they are fairly relaxed interviews in which each administrator discusses their personal journey through higher education and why they chose the field, in addition to discussions about the major issues at the schools they lead and in black education in general.

The introduction, by far the longest chapter, written by the editor, presents a brief yet detailed history of higher education for black students in the US in the era before desegregation efforts and *Brown v. Board of Education*, through the Civil Rights Movement and where we are today as a society. This chapter lays the foundation for any reader to understand the context of higher education for black students, specifically in the South where most of the historically black schools are located and where all of the schools included in the book are located. This preface also introduces some of the major themes that the presidents discuss in the coming chapters and presents these issues in a historical and more impartial context than the presidents who certainly feel a need to defend their schools. Specifically, the author notes that in the era of desegregation, historically black schools were a double edged sword in the movement, on the one hand they seemed to resist integration and say that they preferred to be separate, while on the other hand these schools were instrumental in educating black students, moving the race forward into the main stream and educating some of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movements who made integration a reality.

In the interviews with the presidents this issue of selective segregation comes out and continues to play a role in a world where affirmative action and diversity levels are buzz words in the world of higher education. Again, the editor takes some of these notions and ideas that

floated around during different eras and looks to the scholars and presidents of the time to help better assess the rationale for the continuation of these types of schools. Quoting a Howard professor in the 1930's, Mbajekwe discusses how niche schools cater to students of Catholic or other religions, same sex schools, and other places where certain groups feel empowered to be in the majority at a school that caters to their needs. Likewise, black universities still have the monopoly on creating a community where black students do not feel like the minority or the token person of color.

The editor also spends a good amount of time in the introduction section talking about a lack of funding at these schools. She notes that the majority of funding for colleges and universities comes from alumni giving. While giving levels are low universally, this is especially an issue at HBCUs. Additionally, she notes, these schools have not been able to build partnerships with the corporate community. In the interviews with the presidents, almost all of them discuss not having enough funding, whether it is a lack of alumni support or federal funds. However, when thinking about alumni giving, none of the presidents or the author offers any information on why this is the case. To venture a guess, this is possibly due to lower starting salaries for students who graduate from these schools, possibly from latent racism in the job market, possibly because some of these schools are liberal arts and do not offer degrees that result in traditionally high earnings, or maybe it is just a result of the economy of the south and income levels in that region. This lack of alumni support, however, is crucial and certainly warrants further research, which the colleges may be doing but not bringing up within this collection of narratives. One of the presidents does, however, discuss the lack of support from corporate donors and says that the goal should be to get possible donors to see the school not as a charity, but as a place that produces some asset. As a charity, he says, people will donate small

money, but when seen as an asset for a whole community or field of employment, the gifts will be significant. Currently, as the author suggests, people tend to associate black schools with how they associate black people in general, “inferior and incompetent.” Again this begs the question of why this negative and stereotypical view has prevailed, though that kind of sociological research is certainly outside the scope of this book.

Along this same vein, the editor notes that in addition to failing support from alumni and corporate foundations, HBCUs are being somewhat overlooked by federal funding. Specifically, she quotes that only 10% of funding earmarked for high education is allocated to historically black schools. The book goes on to discuss, by a number of the presidents, that HBCUs only make up 3% of higher education institutions. Very clearly, and easily, one could argue that these black colleges need more funding than majority schools and precedent has been set in this regard on K-12 cases in states throughout the country that have shown the disparity in funding and resources in districts that are mostly black versus districts that are mostly white. Additionally, it is also important to note that 3% of institutions does not provide as clear of a ratio as the number of students served at black and non-black schools. However, as a standalone argument, it is not obvious to a layman reader why black schools that are only serving a small percentage of the population should get a disproportionate amount of funding. This argument could very easily be presented in a more clear fashion that quickly articulates the need for funding allocations to schools of mostly minority students, such as the fact that they educate the majority of black students in the country. Additionally, the presidents briefly mention that they can’t charge the same tuition rates as many of the non-minority schools, but they do not talk about what the cost is to educate a black student. Generally speaking, do these students come from high schools with lower per pupil spending? If so, does it cost more in tutoring students, etc, to educate a black

student? The introduction does such a good job at leveling the playing field for the reader by giving a solid background of minority higher education that it seems worthwhile to flesh out this argument more to those who are unfamiliar with education funding.

This collection of interviews poses a number of interesting points and questions about historically black schools that are pervasive at all of those institutions. The title of the book suggests that there will be some discussion on how these issues will be addressed in coming years, although none of the presidents speak in too much detail about an action plan to address them. Some of the writers talk about their accomplishments of getting lobbyists in Washington to make their presence known to the decision makers or the strides they have made in their presidencies, but none really present a solid plan for how to attack the changing racial landscape and increasing affirmative action at mainstream universities which is making enrollment difficult. One area that is repeatedly discussed by all presidents is the idea of diversity and how that term fits into a school where students are overwhelmingly of one racial group. All of the presidents talk about diversity in the context of race, as well as gender, age, socioeconomic background, ethnicity and country of origin for international students. This, as the presidents argue, creates a truly diverse class that requires students to interact with other people of vastly different backgrounds. The one area where the presidents do appear to have a plan is how the administrators overwhelmingly discuss recruiting Hispanic students as the demographics shift to a country that is projected to have over 50% of the population be Hispanic in coming years. This is an interesting idea since much thought has been given to how the racial landscape of higher education will change with this demographic shift. The focus on recruiting of this group will mean keeping the mission and history of these institutions alive by continuing to serve populations that have traditionally been left out of the world of higher education.

While this book, especially the introduction, paints a picture of the world of higher education for black students, it fails to take a step back and look at the wider context of higher education in American and how these schools fit in. For example, in discussing the need for more funding to get the best and brightest faculty and retain black faculty, how does that plan effect diversity efforts at majority schools? While HBCUs are hopefully increasing the number of black faculty that are turned out, are there really enough graduates to service both HBCUs and traditionally white institutions? The presidents all reiterate that their role, while segregated, is to be diverse. While there is certainly diversity in the student body as far as age and ethnicity, how does the lack of racial diversity affect, negatively or positively, students' interactions in the work place post-graduation? One of the presidents admits that the atmosphere in which they teach is not indicative of the corporate world, how does this affect new graduates in getting and retaining jobs? Lastly, the book fails to address one conception of HBCUs which is that they accept a lower caliber of student. In looking at the latest US News and World Report's section on black colleges, the range of SAT scores appears to be significant lower at the majority of these schools versus their white counterparts in the liberal arts or national university sections. Arguably, and rationally, this makes sense since minority students with high test scores and solid transcripts can likely take their pick of some of the higher ranked majority institutions that are looking to keep their quality up while also increasing diversity. HBCUs have historically served a population that could not otherwise get into college, and they continue to do that in an arena that requires high test scores that many students do not have. However, the real task of these schools is to bring them up to parity with other non-minority schools so they are seen as an asset and attract donors, rather as being seen as lower tier schools. An interesting addition to the book would have been a look at how to strike the right balance between serving black students whose

background would not make them an obvious choice for traditional schools with recalibrating their competitiveness and image as high quality schools. This appears to be one of the true hurdles that will present itself to HBCUs in the future.

Overall the book is appealing, but does not provide an action plan for how to address the majority of the problems plaguing these schools. Regardless, it is an interesting look at the first hand perspective of leaders, many of whom were touched by HBCUs through their own education or that of their family members. Additionally, while there are two sections to this book, one for private universities and one for public or state schools, there is not a delineation between how the issues are different between these distinctions and how funding or a lack of funding is more or less of an issue due to that status. As with all schools, there is never enough funding to institute all the programs a school would like to have. Regardless, it seems that schools that rely more heavily on state appropriations should have a notably different take on funding and if not, should state why there is still such a big hole in their financial status, despite state funding. This, among some other big questions, are left unanswered; regardless the book is an excellent and engaging primer on HBCUs, their past and their concerns, though not actions, in the future.

Bibliography

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