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## **The Critical Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Workforce Development**

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Civil rights leader and distinguished American educator Benjamin Elijah Mays stated, “For he who starts behind in the great race of life must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front” (Colston 2002, p. 96).<sup>1</sup> Despite the passage of more than 150 years since the end of formal slavery, African Americans are still behind based on nearly all economic measures, including wealth and economic mobility.

It should come as no surprise then that African Americans fare no better in the labor market, where wages lag behind their white counterparts. While the roots and causes of these gaps are myriad, it is clear, as Dr. Mays suggests, that extraordinary measures and targeted approaches are needed to arrive at greater economic equality. There has been some progress, including higher rates of high school degree completion, but much work remains.<sup>2</sup> Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) play a major role in preparing this population for the workforce. In addition to both academic- and technical-oriented degree offerings, confidence-building support offered through HBCU environments also can offer graduates a fundamental cornerstone for workforce success.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of today’s more than 100 HBCUs vary. Some started as state-sponsored land grant institutions, others were sponsored by religious organizations, and still others were the benefactors of wealthy philanthropists. Their missions, however, have been essentially uniform: to provide higher education opportunities primarily to students of color who at that time were largely excluded from other colleges or universities or in some cases did not feel comfortable in these institu-

tions.<sup>4</sup> With legal and cultural changes, especially over the past five decades, some observers have questioned the necessity for institutions designed to serve a particular racial population, thus viewing HBCUs as anachronisms. Other challenges have placed additional strains on many HBCUs, including relatively small endowments, decreased enrollment (U.S. Department of Education 2016), and in some cases complete closure. Yet, while some HBCUs have faltered under this modern framework, others have met the challenge with strong results. As of 2016, for example, both Spelman and Morehouse College, as well as Howard, Claflin, Hampton, and Tuskegee Universities, had higher six-year graduation rates for African American students than the national average across all four-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education 2016).<sup>5</sup>

The modern-day relevance of maintaining and supporting HBCUs is perhaps best evidenced by the stark differences in labor market outcomes for African Americans relative to whites. A 2017 Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco *Economic Letter* identifies that among the factors contributing to the black-white wage gap are those more difficult to measure, “such as discrimination, differences in school quality, or differences in career opportunities” (Daly, Hobijn, and Pedtke 2017, p. 4). HBCUs are uniquely positioned to prepare their graduates to overcome each of these factors, especially since a significantly higher percentage of their students are from low-income families. For instance, 59 percent of HBCU students at four-year institutions come from families that earn \$30,000 or less a year, compared to 33 percent of students nationally (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

Indeed, attending and graduating from HBCUs has been an important pathway for African Americans out of postslavery squalor and into the middle class. While HBCUs claim many famous Americans as graduates, including Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, and Marion Wright Edelman, they are also responsible for graduating hundreds of thousands of African Americans who work in many Fortune 1000 companies and who have occupations within diverse industry sectors across the United States and around the world.

The authors in this section, current or former HBCU presidents and a vice president, are well situated to discuss the past and the future of HBCUs. Each makes a compelling contemporary case on why HBCUs are vital components of our country’s workforce development effort, worthy of both recognition and support.

Clark Atlanta University President Ronald A. Johnson's chapter details the origins and contributions of HBCUs to the workplace, and also makes a strong case for the importance of diversity on the overall economy. He points out how HBCUs produce graduates who can respond to the modern economy's need for well-educated workers skilled in critical thinking. Perhaps most compelling is Johnson's assertion that HBCU students are more prepared for the workplace thanks to experiences less likely to occur in a non-HBCU environment. These types of experiences support self-actualization and self-esteem building—two important attributes that may help African Americans overcome labor challenges such as discrimination. Johnson also suggests that because HBCUs have a high proportion of first-generation college students, new models must be developed to ensure student debt is not a barrier and that these students are able to attend and complete college.

Former Morehouse College President John Silvanus Wilson, Jr. builds on the notion of rethinking federal government policies and funding models for HBCUs through a new investing lens incorporating the public and private sectors. Wilson also turns the lens inward and suggests ways that HBCUs themselves can improve viability with approaches such as developing more robust endowments and implementing governance infrastructures that position these institutions for greater success. He concludes with a call for increased investment in those HBCUs with a leadership structure that can effectively and efficiently deploy additional capital.

Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM) President and Dean Valerie Montgomery Rice and Vice President David Hefner provide yet another valuable perspective. They explore the numerous impediments to workplace success for minorities through a systems approach. They draw the connection between reading scores, poverty, community health, labor market outcomes, and the benefits of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) education. The authors assert that workforce performance measures like chronic absenteeism are correlated to health disparities and make a strong case for how workforce development investments should be linked to efforts designed to address these health disparities. They adeptly point out precollege interventions as the most successful pathway for promoting college graduation, including the development of more integrated programmatic initiatives with K–12 and community partners. Montgomery Rice and

Hefner describe MSM's efforts to strengthen academic performance at a nearby elementary school through evidence-based interventions in partnership with the local school district and a nonprofit.

These three chapters are not only individually compelling, but when considered collectively, they present a cohesive narrative on the various factors and solutions needed to prepare a stronger workforce, particularly for African Americans who face additional challenges. Indeed, the success of various workforce development efforts is often measured using labor outcomes such as wages and career advancement. While these are important factors, they do not account for the individual's starting position in terms of family income, wealth, housing, and schools. The population and communities served by HBCUs are less likely to start at the same point in the "great race of life," as suggested in the quote by Benjamin Mays.

Yet, as another seminal American educator, Booker T. Washington, once wrote, "success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome" (Washington 1901, p. 39). While HBCUs certainly have achieved various degrees of success in terms of student outcomes, the authors in this section make the exigent case that HBCU students and graduates contribute significantly to the success of our economy. As a nation, we should continue to invest in HBCUs, perhaps with different and more resource-intensive approaches than for non-HBCU institutions. Additional investments will help ensure that HBCUs continue to serve their important and necessary role in workforce development, workplace diversity, and equitable labor market outcomes.

## Notes

The authors thank Mels de Zeeuw for his contributions to the data analysis pertaining to HBCUs.

1. In addition to playing a foundational role in the civil rights movement, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was the president of Morehouse College for nearly 30 years.
2. The gap between the proportion of non-Hispanic blacks and whites over the age of 25 with at least a high school degree has narrowed to 6 percentage points in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017), compared to more than 20 percentage points in the mid-twentieth century (U.S. Census Bureau 1999). The gap between the proportion of non-Hispanic blacks and whites over the age of 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher was about 14 percentage points in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

3. Data show that minority HBCU graduates are more likely to cite experiential learning opportunities offered through their campuses as an important factor contributing to their workplace engagement (Gallup Inc. 2015).
4. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines an HBCU as “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.” See U.S. Department of Education, n.d.
5. The national average six-year African American graduation rate across all institutions in 2016 was 49.7 percent, lower than comparative rates at Spelman College (77.5 percent), Howard University (60.9 percent), Claflin University (58.6 percent), Hampton University (55.4 percent), Tuskegee University (50.4 percent), and Morehouse College (50.3 percent) (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

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