Chapter 2

Understanding, Celebrating and Maintaining the "HBCU Experience"

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ABSTRACT

As the debate continues on the relevance of HBCUs in higher education, the voices of alumni are central to understanding the role these institutions play in the academic field. HBCU Experience – The Book was a groundbreaking book published in 2014 designed to capture the stories of HBCU graduates. This chapter's purpose was to 1) identify the dominate themes present in the book, 2) provide an understanding of the cultural habits, practices and activities of HBCUs students individuals, and 3) offer recommendations of what alumni and others can do to assist HBCUs. A thematic analysis revealed multiple themes, including campuses being supportive; family-like environments; diverse student bodies and experiences deepening student development; and individual connections before attending college and during college assisted students with deciding to attend HBCUs remaining within those institutions. It was concluded HBCU staff, faculty and advocates should capitalize on alumni insights to assist students in their matriculations, as they are critical building blocks in establishing thriving, enduring HBCU campuses.

IMPACT ON STUDENT RETENTION

As evidenced through the essays in *HBCU Experience – The Book*, among many other Black college-related source materials, the impact of impassioned, committed HBCU alumni cannot be overstated. Their role, when properly motivated and engaged, can have a positive effect on everything from the overall promotion of HBCUs in general to bottom-line issues related to institutions' endowments and financial stability.

However, a vital and often overlooked (or taken for granted) aspect is the importance of the relationships between HBCU alumni and current HBCU students. Be it career advice, life-lessons shared or even direct financial support, HBCU alumni can play a pivotal role in supporting students in nearly all aspects of their matriculations, including initial acceptance to and eventual graduation from their respective HBCUs. This dynamic, whether it plays out via one-to-one relationships or through alumni-organized student support groups, has proven to be an important component in HBCUs retaining their student populations. And, moreover, helping all concerned prepare students to be active alumni themselves upon graduation.

As underscored in this chapter, HBCU leadership – on all levels – must take aggressive steps in connecting motivated HBCU alumni with current students. The dual benefits of encouraging past graduates to become active participants in their HBCU communities, while also instilling in current students a sense of broader commitment and responsibility cannot be easily weighed. Unleashing the power of the individual HBCU alumni experience, could assist HBCUs in a variety of areas, especially with student development and retention.

Attending an HBCU is a political act as far as I'm concerned. It's an act of pride. It's an act of protest. It's the one place in the world where African Americans eradicate the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. - DeAngelo Starnes

What makes attending a Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) different from attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI)? What are the enduring qualities of HBCUs? What is the "HBCU Experience?" There's only one group of people who can fully answer this question, and they are HBCU alum who make the important decision to not just apply to HBCUs, but complete their matriculation through them.

The last few decades have marked a notable increase in the number of Blacks who obtain higher education degrees, but many are enrolling in community colleges and "for-profit" institutions (Iloh & Toldson, 2013). While this trend is worth cel-

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