Chapter 8
Social Media and HBCU Admissions:
An Analysis of Two-Way Communication

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ABSTRACT

In a time of immense competition by all universities for top students and financial support, HBCUs have a special challenge to move beyond the laurels of tradition and innovatively participate in the modern market of college admissions. This study is a follow-up comparative deductive content analysis of the use of social media by admissions offices of top HBCUs according to U.S. News and World Report. The presence of these institutions' undergraduate admissions offices on popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and the usability of these sites have been measured against the principles of two-way communication. The results show diversity in social media use amongst institutions and certain changes and improvements made on each site since the time of the 2013 pilot study. Findings and recommendations provide insight into next steps for HBCUs to remain competitive in the digital age, according to best practices in public relations.

INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a rich history of educating African-Americans beginning in a time where majority institutions were segregated and HBCUs continue to serve a vital role in American higher education providing a unique collegiate experience full of tradition. HBCUs foster a culture of family-like mentoring for students and deeply rooted personal affiliations and affection. However, in a time of immense competition by all universities for top students and financial support, HBCUs have a special challenge to move beyond the laurels of tradition and innovatively participate in the modern market of college admissions. This study is a continuance and comparison of an identically structured pilot study conducted in 2013. It is a deductive content analysis of the use of social media by admissions offices of top HBCUs according to 2013 *U.S. News and World Report*. American colleges and universities, including HBCUs have adopted diverse web presences. Participation in social media websites takes this practice to a new level allowing for two-way digital communication. The presence of these institutions' undergraduate admissions offices on popular social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is measured. Findings evaluate the effectiveness of two-way communication. This study shines light on the current status of modern HBCU admissions and provides insight according to best practices in public relations into next steps for HBCUs to remain competitive in this age.

BACKGROUND

The youth of today, the "Millennial" generation, represents a tremendous communication challenge for everyone from parents and politicians to colleges and companies. Millennials thrive in an always 'on' world. …This world of interactivity and hyper-communication has fundamentally changed how teenagers and young adults receive, process and act on information (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 1).

Redd (1998) discusses the need for HBCUs to be mindful of new admissions barriers and practices in order to maintain longevity. Mainstream institutions or Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have begun to fully adapt to digital communications and admissions. Keller (2011) highlighted the benefits of digital admissions. "Analyzing…Web data to drive online decisions brings enormous rewards" (p. 2).

Greenwood (2012) succinctly discussed the need for participation in social media by college admissions offices. "Colleges linking SNS [social networking sites] pages

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