



Full Length Research Paper

Financial aid in historically black Colleges and Universities: challenges and the way forward

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ABSTRACT

Historically Black Colleges and Universities emerged after the Civil War and represented a unique chapter in the development of American higher education. These institutions were established to educate African American students who were prohibited from attending other institutions of higher learning. However, today these institutions are facing numerous challenges many of which are financial in nature and have been caused partly due to the prevailing leadership and decision-making approaches of their presidents. This study examines the decision-making styles of Historically Black Colleges and Universities presidents in the context of financial aid and general administration. A qualitative research design was used in the study in which 17 current and former presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America were interviewed. Although there are other challenges such as accreditation, ethics, the main challenges to Historically Black Colleges and Universities were identified as budgetary and financing constraints and leadership.

Keywords: Financial Aid, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Challenges, College presidents

INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have undoubtedly played a major role in the American higher education paradigm. However, in recent years these institutions have had to face many unprecedented challenges. Both current and future leaders of HBCUs must take advantage of all opportunities made available to them to ensure not only that these institutions survive, but also prosper. Accordingly, HBCU presidents must shape their leadership practices to engage the ever changing environments they are required to confront.

To illustrate, Wilson (2010) explains that at their very best, America's 105 HBCUs have been proven to be abundantly effective in the world's strongest and most diverse system of higher education; despite many challenges they have endured over the years. Wilson (2010) further reports that currently HBCUs represent approximately three percent of the higher education

institutions in the United States, but they enroll 12 percent of all African-American students. In addition, these institutions are responsible for 30 percent of all baccalaureate degrees; 40 percent of all science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degrees, and 60 percent of all engineering degrees awarded to African American students. In the graduate area for sciences, African-American graduates who earn a Ph.D. are more likely to have attended a HBCU. In fact, majority of PhDs awarded to African-Americans come from HBCUs. Moreover, HBCUs produce over half of all African-American teachers and 40 percent of all health professionals. Additionally, HBCUs produce a disproportionate number of African-American students who go on to complete professional degrees at other institutions. For example, Xavier University in Louisiana has long been acknowledged and regarded as the

nation's leading institution in the production of African-American undergraduates entering medical school. Moreover, a study conducted at the University of Georgia revealed that 27.4 percent of the African-American journalism and mass communication bachelor's degree recipients in academic year 2000-2001 graduated from HBCUs (Berry, 2003). But despite these impressive numbers, HBCUs continue to face a number of significant challenges.

Ricard and Brown (2008) elucidates that throughout the years practically HBCUs in all every state of the United States have several challenges, including: a) transient leadership, b) misappropriation of funds, c) accreditation, d) financial and mismanagement issues, e) sexual harassment, f) federal investigations into alleged financial aid violations, and g) competition between public and private black college sectors. Ultimately, Freeman (2006) suggests that the range of leadership issues, intertwined with the survival and vitality of these institutions, is a source of considerable concern at a time when leadership, as well as accountability, are being continually evaluated and heavily scrutinized by students and faculty, governing boards, and funders. Consequently, Ezzell and Schexnider (2010), and other researchers have theorized that these factors have rendered leadership among the most critical issues facing HBCUs today.

Important to note is HBCUs emerged after the Civil War and represented a unique chapter in the development of American higher education. These institutions were established to educate African American students who were prohibited from attending other institutions of higher learning (Cohen, 1998). Nichols (2004) explained that in the ultimate design, these schools were not meant to succeed, but rather that they were established to appease black people or to serve as "holding institutions" so that African-American students would not matriculate in historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs). However, converse to these expectations, most HBCUs have managed to exceed expectations.

In sum, Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ranson, and Bowan, (2010) unequivocally state that in light of the social, political, and cultural perspectives of the 21st century higher education, it is imperative to gain an in-depth understanding of the leadership and decision-making practices of HBCU presidents. Hence, in an attempt to understand how HBCU presidents are responding to some of the more pervasive challenges confronting their institutions, this study will investigate decision-making practices of HBCU presidents.

Ricard and Brown (2008) identified several areas where HBCU presidencies have been uniquely challenged and have had to implement maverick decision-making practices. These areas include leadership, budget, accreditation, ethics, financial aid, and institutional growth and development. However, the

decision-making practices and strategies used by HBCU presidents in responding to institutional challenges have not been assessed. Thus, this study was further designed to contribute to the body of literature on leadership by focusing on the leadership styles of HBCU presidents and their decision-making practices. This would be achieved by examining how HBCU presidents take decisions, policies and strategies when they are attempting to resolve some of the most perplexing and complex problems faced by these institutions' ethical issues. Additionally, this study explores existing problems, practices, and strategies that HBCU presidents, past and present, shared.

This paper begins with an introduction and follows with a review on literature on financial aid. After, there is a presentation of the study conceptual framework and research design whereby the various research methods used to collect, analyze and present data are discussed. After, we present the study findings on challenges, responses to challenges, emerging themes from interviews, financial concerns of HBCUs, ethical issues at HBCUs and then wind up with a discussion of findings, conclusion and suggested areas for future research.

Financial Aid

In 2004-08, a good number of full-time, full-year African-American undergraduate college students attending HBCUs received some kind of financial aid (Ramani et al., 2007), including both grants and loans. Particularly, African American students attending HBCUs obtained more financial aid than did students as a whole nationwide. Student loans, which are greater than the national average, are more often used to finance postsecondary educational pursuits of African-American students attending HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Comparatively, students enrolled at HBCUs are more likely to come from low-income households than are African-American students (Rust, 2009). Not surprisingly, HBCUs have incurred the highest rate of default on student loans. Murray (2010) found that HBCUs have the highest student loan default rate among all public colleges in 19 states. For this reason, future availability of student financing is in jeopardy and HBCUs leader have to engineer new and creative ways to insure access for the most needy of the population.

Conceptual Framework

In developing the conceptual framework for this study, the primary goal was to examine leadership and decision-making practices of HBCU presidents. This conceptual framework was developed and modified from Lipham's (1974) individual decision-making model, which

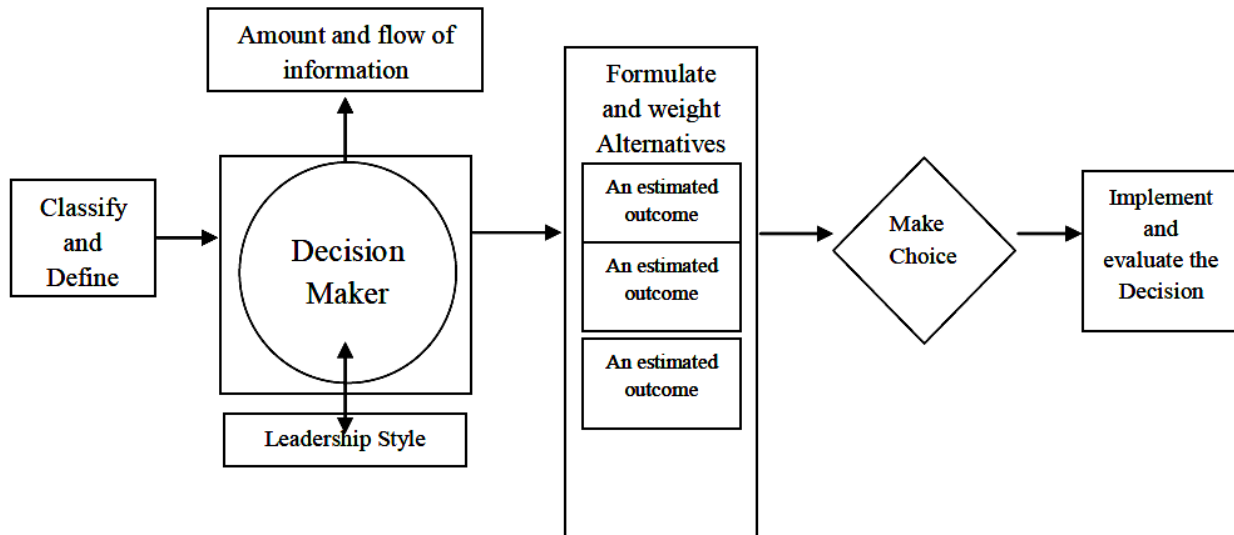


Figure 1. Individual Decision Making Model, Lipham, J. (1974).

emphasized that the college president needs to be aware of their perceptual screen as a decision maker. The perceptual screen is based on the governing board, the political climate in the legislation, on campus, and on the president's goals and objectives for the institutions.

In this model, the college president, as an individual decision-maker, identifies problems in the system, classifies and defines the problem in terms of the perceptual screen (internal or external), and then makes a decision relative to his/her leadership style. Throughout the process the decision-maker is provided with information on a formal and informal basis. Alternatives are formed based on their expected outcomes, and once the choice is implemented the decision is later evaluated. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework.

Research design

A qualitative research design was used in the study. Qualitative research is subjective and may be used to interpret or assign meaning to a phenomenon (Merriam, 1991). The term further implies "an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As Merriam (1998) later explains, qualitative research is designed to allow researchers to better understand, interpret or explain the social and personal characteristics associated with an event, process or phenomenon, by taking the researchers into the natural setting and using the thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of the people involved. The qualitative research approach is based on six assumptions: 1)

qualitative researchers focus on process over outcomes or products, 2) qualitative researchers are concerned with meaning, more particularly how people deal with and make sense of lived experiences, 3) the researchers is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, 4) qualitative research normally involves fieldwork, 5) qualitative research is descriptive, and 6) qualitative research is inductive.

Due to the paucity of research on this topic, this qualitative method provided an appropriate means for the researchers to examine the decision making practices of HBCU presidents from their individual perspectives.

Using qualitative research methods, the researchers interviewed each college president selected for this study; however, due to their distance from the researchers, the interviews were conducted by phone. A narrative structure was used to portray what college presidents have experienced as leaders of HBCUs. The data were analyzed and interpreted to form an understanding of the decision-making practices of the HBCU president. These lived experiences of HBCU presidents were compared to determine if the participants shared similar experiences, leadership styles, and decision-making practices. In order to provide a framework for the decision-making practices, the results of the data were grouped based on five theoretical frameworks of leadership: Trait Theory, Power and Influence theory, Behavioral Theory, Contingency Theory, and Symbolic and Cultural Theory. The qualitative research method of phenomenology was used to analyze and categorize HBCU presidential leadership styles and to determine how these leadership styles have influenced their decision-making practices.

Study population

The study covered four public and private HBCUs across the United States of Africa. A total of 17 current and former presidents of these HBCUs were selected to participate in the study by intending interviews.

The interview

The interviews were conducted via telephone and lasted an average of 30 minutes. The telephone call was recorded using a digital voice recorder. The researchers asked both structured and unstructured questions allowing interviewees space to express their opinions freely. In cases the interviews did not comprehend the questions asked, researchers took time to explain the questions prior to the interview.

Each interview was conducted as follows:

1. Consent – The consent form was emailed to the participants prior to the start of the interview. After the document was read and all questions addressed, the participant was asked to sign, date, and either fax or email the form to a designated location. The participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that the interview was being recorded for transcription and analysis. In addition, the participants were reminded that the interview would be confidential.
2. Introduction – The researcher introduced himself and provided an overview of the study.
3. Interview Questions – The questions were asked in the order that they appear on the interview guide.
4. Closing – The interview came to closure once all of the questions had been asked. The participants also had an opportunity to share additional information.
5. Real names of respondents were not used during presentation of findings. Each respondent was given a nick name for purposes of protecting their identity and ensuring utmost confidentiality.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken during the interview process. Field notes are texts recorded by the researcher during an observation in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2005). According to Shank (2006, p. 60), “field notes are just as much about your impressions and your observations as they are records of who said what.” Further, Shank (2006) noted that mechanical recording devices can capture words but not your thoughts and cannot replace field notes – they can only support them with a more accurate record.

FINDINGS

The number of faculty in the colleges studied ranged from 10 to 430. The lowest numbers were registered in private

colleges, while high numbers were observed in public colleges and universities. Institutions with high numbers of faculty were located in large cities. Colleges in rural communities had between 83 and 364 faculty members. The ratio of faculty to students was 1:16 at one small, rural college, while the highest ratio was 1:23 at a university located near a large city. The average ratio was approximately one faculty member for every 21 students.

Although African-American students still comprise the majority of student enrollment, all the institutions have small numbers of white, Latino, and Asian students, and some have attracted Native Americans and other ethnicities as well. As noted in the figure below, participants reported student financial aid rates of more than 90%. Student dependence on financial aid in some colleges was 99%. They discussed the challenges involved in working with students from low wealth families, including their lack of academic preparedness, and unfamiliarity with the financial aid process. Some of these presidents also stated that they had enhanced their institution's reputation and performance by significantly increasing admission requirements.

Since the researchers were unable to visit the sites in person, insights were gained from participants' direct and indirect comments, and from online information including institutional websites and other sources. These sources revealed that the infrastructure at many of these colleges and universities featured new structures and older buildings that were well maintained, and grounds that were attractively landscaped. Several presidents indicated that improvements and updates of this type had taken place during their administration.

Responses to Challenges

As stated above, the central focus of this study was HBCU presidents' leadership and decision-making processes and practices. Although elements of leadership were discussed in the preceding passage, this topic will now be evaluated in terms of its relationship to the challenges HBCU presidents must manage. Participants responded to questions asking how they defined their own leadership, specifically in reference to challenges identified in the literature. In addition to a specific mention of leadership, these areas included budget, accreditation, ethics, financial aid, and institutional growth and development. One question in the interview protocol asked participants to identify which of these challenges they felt was most important.

A total of 13 out of 17 participants identified budgeting, including financial management, as their primary area of concern. Several stated this without hesitation, while others either settled upon this decision later in the discussion, or appended other areas of challenge to it. Some respondents stated unequivocally that this was the most critical issue faced in their own institutions, as well

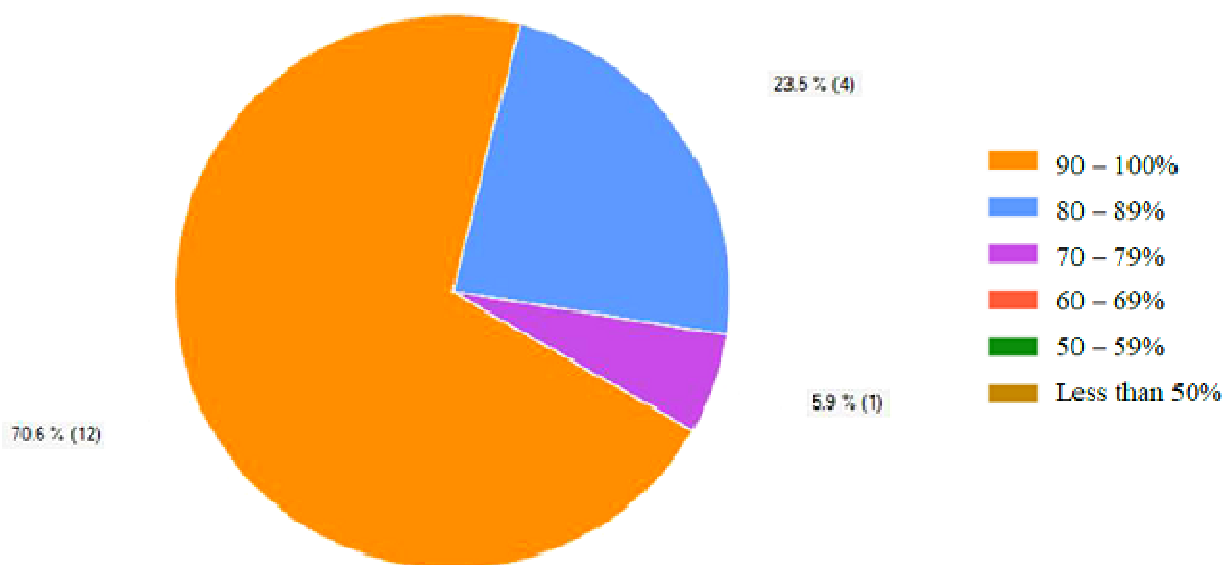


Figure 2. Percentages of Students Receiving Financial Aid

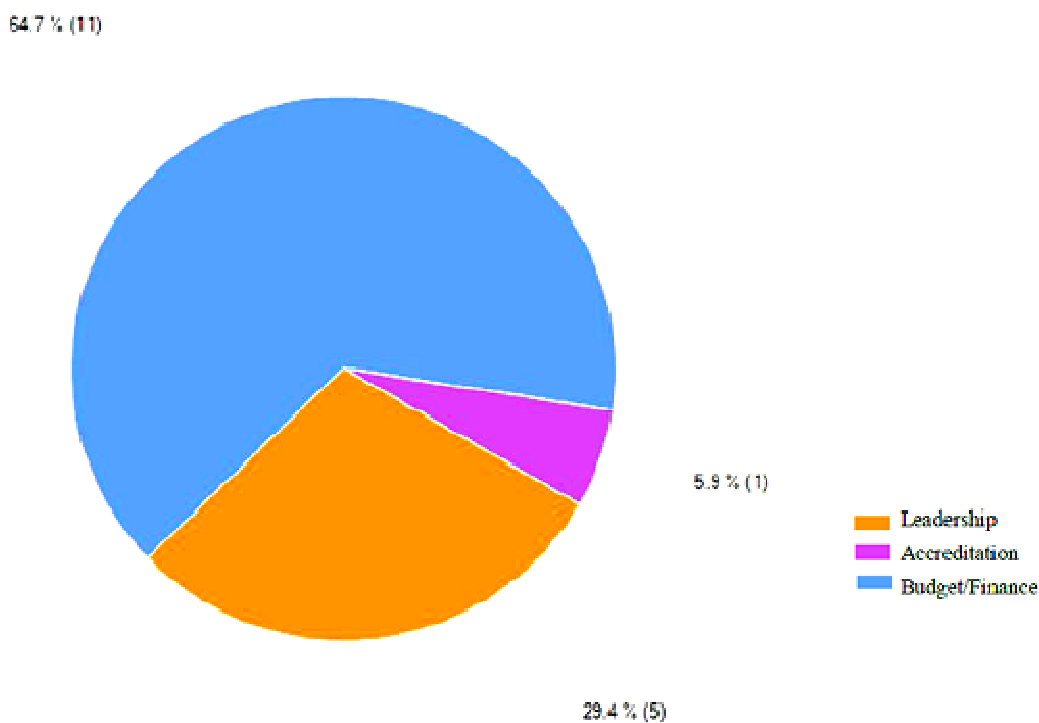


Figure 3. Most Important Challenge

as in many other HBCUs. Alicia also stated that budget concerns were of utmost importance, but she did not elaborate, choosing to move to another topic. Figure 3 presents the most important challenging to HBCUs.

Francine, for example, stated the paramount importance of budget and finance among the challenges presented for consideration. “Without a stable budget and

without people who can utilize the various technologies to make sure you’re tracking all of your revenue and your expenditures, it’s really hard to do anything else.” She described the situation at her university when she first assumed leadership. “(The university) had been going in and out of deficits and no one seemed to understand why this was happening. By about the end of the first year I

had it figured out. The students weren't paying their tuition." She added that the university had not only allowed these students to continue, but in some cases they had been allowed to graduate and even obtain transcripts.

Since her institution is part of a larger system, Francine asked for and got help in conducting audits. "I immediately got some things computerized here and we got a handle on how much tuition we weren't getting paid," she added. "You know, this is definitely not brain science, but we found out that the deficit each year was almost exactly related to the amount of money the students weren't paying." The result, she pointed out, was that the university realized a \$2 million surplus last year, and expected to break even during the current cycle. "If you have a little left over, that's nice," she said, "but you definitely have to break even."

Paul concurred with ranking budgetary concerns at the top of the list. He explained how insufficient financial resources had created problems with the organization's accrediting agency. "A good example," he offered "was when I assumed the interim presidency here. We were on probation for financial instability and because we needed a Ph.D. in the business area. Well, if we had the money we could have hired a Ph.D. overnight, but by the time we thought we had them they got a better offer." Harvey also claimed budgetary worries as his chief concern by saying:

The financial crisis that this country has been in has affected higher education institutions to no end. State appropriations, grants and donations have significantly reduced. Some grants have been terminated.

Blake initially declined to agree that the areas presented for discussion were those specifically plaguing HBCUs. "What does 'agreement' mean," he asked. After this point was clarified he agreed that they were indeed among the areas of concern, but that "You left out one that is really important to the institution. I would say financial management, right, in this day and age is probably the most important." This ties in neatly, however, with the predominant theme of budgetary importance. He added sound reasons for his choice:

State schools appropriations are being cut so significantly. With the new conservatives and republican agenda of slashing budgets, they are taking major cuts on financial aid to school and colleges. So Chief Executive Officers and their teams have to really be well versed on financial management in order for their institutions to continue a march towards quality and excellence. You really have to know how to manage your money well. And raise money. Not only manage it well, but raise money.

"I'm not saying that money solves all the problems," George said, "but with adequate finances you are able to attract students that you can provide scholarships to. You're in a position to attract the human talent that you need for both faculty and staff." This emphasis on human

talent was echoed by Nelson who felt that the ability to attract top-rated faculty, staff and students affected the overall success of operations. "If you have the necessary talent, the rest of it falls into place because the people are good enough to solve your other problems. And if you have the talent, you can find the fundraisers," he added.

Isaac added to this equation by introducing the concept of budgeting into financial aid. His college, he said, is "among the top five percent of schools in the country in terms of students' Pell grant eligibility. Having enough financial aid to support these students so that they don't leave with this tremendous debt burden is more the issue for us." He explained that the majority of his students come from low wealth families that "Don't have a tradition of saving up money, so they come to college expecting the college to have everything for them, but it's like it doesn't work that way,"

One participant took exception to the foundation of the interview questions. James pointed out that the issues stated as challenges are common to all universities nowadays, not just to HBCUs, although he later agreed that budget was the most critical. Although he also acknowledged the importance of finances, Langston contributed new insights when he set forth the need for establishing new performance measures, which he defined as "the variables used by legislators to determine the amount of money institutions receive." He explained that retention, graduation rates, job placement, and contributions made by alumni are some of the more than 120 variables that impact these funding decisions:

"These measures are looking across the board and assuming that all institutions are the same, regardless of their mission. So we are immediately compared with institutions that African -Americans could not attend only a few years ago. We all know that the experience for people of color through K-12 is not very good in terms of preparing them for the challenges and expectations of the institutions for higher education".

In addition, Langston mentioned an area not addressed by other participants: "You always have this fear out there of being merged with some other institution or closed because of program duplications, because of low completers and those kinds of things."

The category that drew the second largest number of responses was leadership; four participants identified this challenge as most important. Charles said that "leadership is the major one because the leadership determines what happens with all the others. Now what's happening in our institutions is that we have a dearth of leaders that are willing to take on these positions." Charles drew agreement from Ellen, Kenneth and Michael. "Leadership is number one," Ellen remarked. "Without appropriate leadership you're going to have budgeting problems, accreditation problems, ethical issues, financial aid issues and all the other things you mentioned." Kenneth agreed: "If you have a strong leader then strategies for resolving all of these other things can

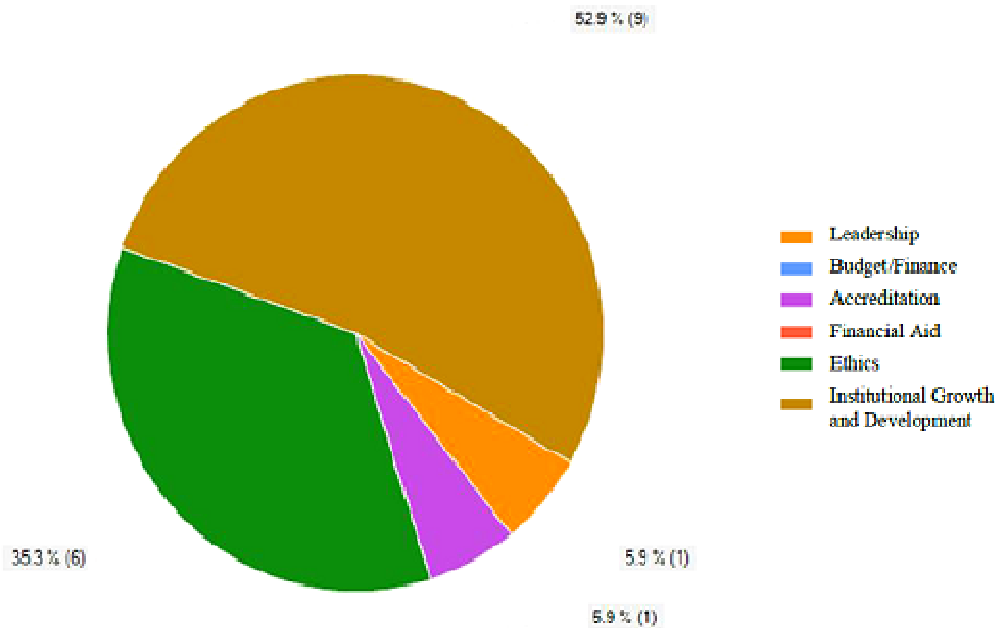


Figure 4. Least Important Challenge

easily be addressed.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Michael who said “You can overcome all of the challenges associated with each one of those if you’ve got good leadership in place.”

The issue of accreditation was raised by Francine, who tied it together with budget challenges, but this was identified by Richard as most important. “Well, I don’t know if you could say any one by itself is most important, but clearly an institution needs to be fully accredited; they need to have solid academic programs to be able to do that. The ability to attract talent was deemed crucial by two interviewees: Nelson and Olivia, whose comments were included in the discussion on budgetary matters. It may be remembered that Olivia pointed out that this concern was separate from finances, and depended more on institutional culture.

Quentin added a unique perspective with the addition of a challenge not noted by the other participants. “The one challenge that you left out is that all of these institutions are black and society does not value black universities providing education to black people,” he stated. He added that America is a racist country, and implied that many of the challenges faced by HBCUs are due to this fact. Figure 4 presents the least important challenges to HBCUs.

Emerging Themes

During the analysis of participants’ responses, several themes emerged from the data. The researchers were careful to look for data that contradicted the inference of these themes, but it seemed clear that they were strongly

rooted in both the content and context of their occurrence. Emergent themes may be categorized under three broad headings: financial concerns, student characteristics, and the proposed solutions to meet these challenges. These themes will be presented in sequence, although their interrelated nature must be noted as well.

Financial Concerns

The overarching importance of budget and other financial concerns was reiterated by every participant in this study. As discussed above, these concerns included cuts in federal and state appropriations, issues surrounding financial aid, and the elimination of overspending and other wasteful practices. These cuts also have resulted in the elimination of many remedial courses at the post-secondary level. Many of the presidents indicated that the correct handling of this area was essential to the survival of their institution. In addition to increasing fundraising activities, some solutions to address these shortfalls included an emphasis on grant writing and entrepreneurial ventures.

Charles said that state appropriations comprise only 40 percent of operating costs, and that “most of our money is coming through research and grants.” Olivia encourages departments and individuals to write grant applications, and in this way “get extra money to build labs, to train students, to give scholarships and do some of those things.” Since Nelson wanted to create an institution with the capacity to self-fund, he developed a plan to transform his college to function like an entrepreneurial entity: “We’re going to create ancillary

businesses that produce revenue streams that fund the institution and allow us a predictable growth pattern so we're not overly reliant on government, on federal aid," he said.

Ethics

An area of concern that did not produce much discussion was that of ethics. With the exception of some relatively minor sexual and financial violations, no ethical lapses had occurred during the current administration of any participant. A few described incidents that had occurred during the previous administration and Nelson described significant violations but asked that details not be reported. All were adamant that ethical violations would not be tolerated. Nelson added that:

"I can understand people making mistakes, but behavior that stands against our mission and institutional integrity will not be tolerated. You can never guarantee it will never occur again, but you can reduce the probability by having policies, procedures and protocols in place where somebody ought to catch it before it gets to the level that some of this stuff has gotten to. It's not about (my) behavior or (my) ethics, it's about the impact on the institution".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some nonprofit education organizations frame learning experiences in a context of relevance and rigor that addresses students' conditions while simultaneously holding them to high expectations; these may offer students additional opportunities to gain competency in math, science, language arts and other disciplines that would better prepare them for the college experience. The co-sponsorship of programs within the sphere of targeted nonprofits would offer HBCUs a more immediate link with students most likely to be their future applicants.

The insights about decision-making practices among HBCU presidents yield multiple possibilities for future research. This study raised questions about leaders' effectiveness and qualitative studies that examine the relationship between African-American leaders in higher education and their followers could provide useful data. Effectiveness also could be evaluated by comparing strategic plans to outcomes; a qualitative approach might prove useful in tracing the path to achievement of goals, while a quantitative study could compare stated goals and results in terms of increases in enrollment, increases in financial support, or some such rubric. Quantitative studies also could view effectiveness in terms of fundraising, for example, which could easily be measured in dollars; conversely, this could be undertaken as a qualitative study that teases out the reasons why the results of fundraising activities vary widely and attempts to isolate the determining factors.

Since a number of participants discussed past or current accreditation issues, improvements in this area are especially noteworthy. According to the AAUP (2007), excessive debt coupled with an unsound financial base was a common problem area. Several presidents stated that they have no current issues with accreditation, but that constant vigilance is necessary to meet the stringent demands of the accrediting agency. Many of these presidents had resolved issues inherited from their predecessor. Misuse of funds had often entered the realm of ethical violations, but participants stated that most of these issues had been fully resolved, or at least were being handled in an effective manner.

Most important challenges faced were identified as budget and financing, leadership and accreditation. On the other hand, the least important challenges were identified as institutional growth and development, and ethics.

Future research

Another area with extensive possibilities for future research is that of student demographics. Since there was general agreement among participants that the majority of students coming to HBCUs are underprepared for the demands of higher education, studies that examine presidents' attempts to solve this problem would be warranted. Since partnerships between universities and K-12 systems already exist, a multifaceted approach to evaluation of these partnerships could yield data that would inform practice and help boost student readiness and retention.

An additional area of research could consist of a careful evaluation of the scope and content of teacher training programs. Since student achievement in the public K-12 system is notoriously low, especially in those schools and districts that are tasked with serving the needs of low wealth minority students, qualitative studies that evaluate the effectiveness of these university programs in preparing teachers for actual classroom conditions would serve as a major contribution to the literature. Presidents' involvement in this type of programmatic evaluation would provide additional data about their leadership practices as well.

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