

2001

Are black colleges necessary?

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Abstract

Black colleges have a vital role in the lives of young people and the black community as a whole. They are not vanguards of segregation, but of black culture and black life. Though they are not the most up-to-date technologically, or offer the most magnificent campuses, or accumulate large endowments, they are the most successful in educating black students, doing it with minimal resources. I suggest other institutions study the techniques of HBCUs in order to educate all young people, particularly other minority groups such as Latinos and Native Americans. Our communities, states, and federal governments as well as corporations should partner with black colleges so that they can better equip institutions to do what they do best.

ARE BLACK COLLEGES NECESSARY?

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

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May 2001

This Research Paper by: Mark B. Longley

Entitled: ARE BLACK COLLEGES NECESSARY?

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

May 2, 2001
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Are Black Colleges Necessary?

Nearly thirty years have passed since the federal government outlawed racial discrimination of black students desiring to enter majority white colleges and universities. Today, black students can enter almost any school of their choosing; because of this, some have questioned the continued need for America's historically black colleges and universities. Several historically black public colleges are located in the same vicinity as predominately white public institutions, so additional questions have arisen as to the feasibility of duplicating majors and programs at two public schools in the same area. Historically black colleges typically possess more modest facilities and fewer students than the neighboring white institutions. They usually are not regarded as "research institutions" that command great respect or maintain huge endowments, like some majority institutions. Located primarily in the Southern United States these schools also are not known for their progressive philosophies in higher education. Finally, many view these institutions as stalwarts of the segregation of the past. These are questions and issues with which high school students, counselors, teachers, and parents grapple annually when it is time for students to decide where to attend college.

In this paper I will address these and other issues regarding America's historically black colleges and universities. Initially, I will define the historically black college and explain its history. Next, I will discuss the current state of many of today's black colleges. I will look at the unique mission of the historically black college. I will also examine the successes and challenges of historically black colleges. Finally, I will give

my conclusions and recommendations about whether or not historically black colleges should be recognized as viable institutions of higher learning.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities Defined

The National Advisory Committee on Universities defines Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as “institutions that were founded primarily for Black Americans although their charters were, in most instances, not exclusionary. These are institutions serving or identified with the service to Black America for at least two decades, with most being fifty to one hundred years old” (Sims, 1994, p. 5). Generally, black college, minority college, and HBCU are used interchangeably. The term “historically” is used because the demographics of several colleges over the years have changed. Presently, for example, half of the student populations of at least four HBCUs are Caucasian: Bluefield State and West Virginia State (both in West Virginia), Kentucky State, and Lincoln University in Missouri (Drummond, 2000). Other schools such as Chicago State and University of the District of Columbia (UDC) though not founded as HBCUs now have majority black student bodies. For funding purposes UDC has recently requested HBCU status. Currently there are 102 historically black colleges (excluding Chicago State and UDC). They are almost equally divided between private and public, two-year and four-year; some of them also include graduate, and professional schools.

Origin of HBCUs

Prior to the Civil War, there were over 4 million black slaves in America who were denied by law the right to an education, though there were many “free blacks” who were educated. However, unless they taught themselves, only the kindness of white southerners enabled slaves to learn even the basic skills of reading and writing. Southern

slave owners depended on the slave labor to preserve their way of life; educating this source of cheap labor ran counter to that. In simple rationale, the educating of slaves was associated with revolution or slave revolts.

Northern colleges as a custom did not admit blacks prior to emancipation. Oberlin College in Ohio and Berea College in Kentucky were notable exceptions to this rule during slavery. Some elementary and secondary schools had been established for free blacks in cities where there were large free black populations. The first colleges founded to provide higher education for blacks were Ashmun Institute (now Lincoln University) in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce in Ohio. Both institutions opened in the mid-1850s and were founded by church groups--Presbyterians and Methodists, mostly.

After slavery three groups established most of today's HBCUs and many other black colleges that no longer exist: American Missionary Association, Freedman's Bureau, and black church groups. In Black Colleges and Universities, Julian Roebuck and Komanduri Murty (1993) estimated that over two hundred black private colleges were established between 1865 and 1890 but by 1900 many ceased to exist. Initially many of the colleges were colleges in name only since most of its students were in need of elementary school training. However, the demand for black teachers was so great that after equipping its students with a basic education, many schools then functioned as normal schools.

In 1890 the 2nd Morrill Act created, among other things, black land-grant colleges. Each southern or border state not wanting the freed people to enter their white institution established a "separate but equal" institution for blacks. Though this 2nd Morrill Act added 17 additional colleges to educate blacks, it is obvious that these colleges were not equal to their white counterparts or ever intended to be (Roebuck & Murty, p. 28). In

Black Education, An Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Goodenow (1989) stated that southerners throughout this period had remained hostile toward any form of formal education for blacks. After 1877, state legislatures “legally” disfranchised, discriminated against, and segregated blacks in all walks of life. The Ku Klus Klan considered black schools a ready target (Goodenow, 1989).

At the end of the 19th century, the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) U.S. Supreme Court decision legalized “separate but equal” public accommodations based on race. At this time, public education for blacks created a demand for college educated black teachers. Before and immediately following the passage of the 2nd Morrill Act most black colleges were founded as normal schools. Teaching and preaching were the primary occupations for black college graduates. Some black students attended schools in the north but the majority were educated in the southern black colleges. This trend continued until the federal government forced integration of southern public universities in the 1960s.

Current State of Black Colleges

Much of the talk about black colleges tends to focus on their history and the rationale for their founding. In this section I will discuss the current statistics, general conditions, and recent trends of black colleges especially in light of significant court rulings.

Presently there are 102 HBCUs, slightly more of them public than private. HBCUs currently enroll fewer than 20 percent of black undergraduates (Roebuck and Murty, 1993, p. 4). All HBCUs are accredited by the regional accreditation associations. Some private HBCUs’ enrollments hover in the hundreds, and low enrollment, poor funding, and in some instances mismanagement of resources have resulted in some HBCUs facing

the possibility of closing their doors (Jackson, 1986, p. 15). Private institutions such as Knoxville College (Tennessee), Jarvis Christian College and Texas College (both in Texas), Selma University (Alabama), and Morris Brown (Georgia) have been or are in danger of losing their accreditation and possibly closing.

In one case, Texas Southern University, threatened with losing its accreditation, sued the state of Texas claiming that the state has discriminated against historically black colleges and universities (Texas Being Sued, 1999). The suit was brought on the fact that a recent court settlement awarded \$1 billion to some majority public universities in Texas but nothing to Texas's black public universities.

In some southern states, courts have been mired in litigation for years over the issue of desegregation. Jake Ayers, a Mississippi man, filed suit 25 years ago accusing the state of Mississippi of discrimination against Mississippi's three historically black public universities: Jackson State, Alcorn State, and Mississippi Valley. The case has gone through numerous appeals and is presently with the Mississippi Supreme Court. Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama courts have confirmed that inequalities in funding have existed between predominately white schools and historically black colleges. Each state has begun to make funding more equal.

Similarly, according to the state courts, not enough integration has taken place at some public institutions. In each of the three southern states mentioned, state judges have ruled that the predominately white schools are "too white" and that the historically black schools "too black." Each black public school in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama now has a minority recruiter on its admissions staff whose primary job is to recruit white students. This minority recruiter is often a white individual whose major selling point in

attracting white students is an abundance of scholarship money “ear marked” for white students. Additionally, other minorities such as Latinos are also recruited and considered candidates for “minority” scholarships. The Mississippi courts recently ruled that endowments must be established to support the three public historically black universities: Jackson State, Mississippi Valley, and Alcorn State. Judge Neal Biggers, Jr., ruled that 65% of the endowment money provided to the colleges by the Mississippi Legislature must go to white students (St. John, 2000) in the form of scholarships. Previously, these schools had little or no financing from which to draw. This is in comparison to several well-funded white institutions that have been able to operate comfortable each year off the interest accrued from their endowments.

Minority scholarships for non-white students on majority white campuses have been a source of resentment and frustration for deserving white students for years, not unlike Affirmative Action programs for minorities. A few years ago the Alabama courts went even further, ordering predominately white schools not only to enroll more black students, but also to employ more black instructors and staff persons. In the same ruling, historically black colleges were also ordered to enroll more white students and to hire more white faculty and staff persons.

Historically Black College Traits

The historically black college profile is different from that of the typical majority white institution. First of all, black colleges are small. The College Handbook 1998 lists Ohio State University, University of Texas at Austin, and Michigan State Universities as having enrollments of between 40,000 and 48,000 students. This is in huge contrast to Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Howard University in Washington,

D.C., the two largest black colleges, which enroll between 9,000 and 11,000 students each year, respectively. Though few schools would turn away large numbers of students if they wanted to enroll there, the average private black college has between one and two thousand students. These small enrollments usually translate into small class sizes, which naturally is an important selling point for black colleges. Hampton University (VA) and Clark Atlanta University (GA) are two of the largest private HBCUs, each enrolling approximately 5,000 students. In comparison, two majority private institutions, Georgetown University and Loyola University (Chicago) annually enroll 22,000 and 15,000 students, respectively.

Historically black public institutions have larger enrollments than private ones, averaging between 3,000 and 4,000 students annually. Besides those predominately white institutions previously mentioned, several states' premier public institution or "flagship" school commonly enroll 25,000 to 50,000 students each year. University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, and UCLA are examples of majority institutions that fit into this category.

Of the largest historically black public colleges, several enroll between 6,000 to 8,000 students. These include Norfolk State (VA), North Carolina A & T, Virginia State, Prairie View A & M (Texas), and Florida A & M. Howard University is unique among HBCUs. Founded by the Freedman's Bureau in 1867, it is the only HCBU that is mostly funded by the federal government, and classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a level-one research school. It also has the most professional schools of any black college, with 18. Its list of professional schools includes law, medicine, pharmacy, engineering, and several doctoral programs in the arts and sciences. A recent recruitment brochure boasts

that Howard has the largest group of black scholars in the world. Most people familiar with historically black colleges agree with Roebuck and Murty that "Howard is probably the most prestigious HBCU in the country" (1993, p. 73).

Historically black colleges are nurturing institutions (Ross, 1998, p. 11). Though faculty research and publish at HBCUs, they are not known for the "publish or perish" philosophy, focusing instead on an environment that gives students opportunities for "one on one" mentoring and role modeling with black professors. Heavy teaching loads with prescribed advising responsibilities are more the norm for faculty members at black colleges than pressure from the department heads to bring in grants (although successful grants are as appreciated as at majority institutions).

Black colleges, because of their size and culture, offer small classes. Ten-to-one student-to-teacher ratio or fifteen to twenty students per class are not just selling ploys, but are common experiences for students at most HBCUs.

Those not familiar with HBCUs might think they possess an all-black faculty and staff. In actuality, most are far from this. Upon visiting a black college one may find great diversity among the faculty. In Historically Black Colleges and Universities Murty and Roebuck (1993) found that "in 1987-88 academic year, more than one-third (38%) of the faculty at private historically black colleges (41) sponsored by the United Negro College Fund were non-black. This is an enviable figure when compared to the extreme under-representation of black faculty on predominately white campuses: Among the nation's more than 3,000 predominately white colleges and universities, fewer than 4 percent of the faculty members are black" (p. 15).

There is also growing diversity among the student population at HBCUs. More white students are attending black colleges because of pressure from southern state courts to desegregate public HBCUs, and because of the relatively low costs of attending HBCUs (Drummond, 2000, p. 1). Besides the four HBCUs mentioned earlier that now offer white students extensive financial aid to attend, other HBCUs now enroll double-digit percentages of white students. These include Alabama A&M, Tennessee State, Albany State in Georgia, Langston in Oklahoma, and Arkansas at Pine Bluff. In contrast, most four-year majority colleges have less than 10 percent black population. Generally speaking, diversity is being taken into account at most institutions—black or white. The difference is that at many of the black colleges diversity is taking place at a more rapid pace.

Pressure by southern state courts to desegregate HBCUs has spawned much of historically black colleges' increased diversification. Public black colleges have made recruiting white students a top priority. An abundance of scholarship money for white students has also contributed to growth at HBCUs.

Another factor is costs. Black colleges typically are less expensive to attend than white colleges. The most expensive black colleges (and regarded by many as the most prestigious) are Spelman and Morehouse Colleges (both in Georgia), Howard University, and Hampton University. And according to the College Handbook of 1998 (pp. 486, 478, 406, 1621), each were under \$10,000 in annual tuition. In comparison, prestigious majority private institutions that same year charged much more: Harvard University was priced at \$22,800; Davidson University, \$20,595; and Emory University, \$21,000. In

each southern state where there are both white and black schools, both public and private, black schools are less expensive in every instance (Drummond, 2000, p. 58).

Mission

Central to any college's existence is its mission. What are its basic purposes, goals, products, and culture? Historically black colleges, unlike other colleges and universities, are united in a mission to meet the educational and emotional needs of black students (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). In addition, HBCUs offer six other specific purposes:

(a) to maintain the black historical and cultural tradition (and cultural influences emanating from the black community) by preserving and acting as a repository of material records and by encouraging scholarly accomplishments of black professors in teaching about and researching the black condition; (b) to provide key leadership in the black community because college administrators, scholars, and students have an important social role to play in community affairs (the HBCU functions as model social organization and contributes to the resources needed for the expansion of black community activities); (c) to provide an economic function in the black community (HBCUs often have the largest institutional budget within the black community, which involves the acquisition of funds, the distribution of these funds to workers and their families and to small businesses, and the investment of these funds in economic institutions); (d) to provide black role models in the black community who can interpret the way in which social, political, or economic dynamics at the general society level impact on black people; (e) to produce graduates with special competence to deal with the problems between the minority and majority population groups; and (f) to produce black agents for specialized research, training, and information dissemination in dealing

with the life environment of black and other minority communities (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 10).

HBCUs also offer students the chance to develop a healthy black identity; opportunities for the ordinary student; a place for the weak, the timid, and the militant; and a setting for black affirmation (Murty & Roebuck, 1993).

Success Patterns

While some effects of black college environments and affirmations may be difficult to measure, graduation rates, professional school placement, and job placement are not. Historically black colleges have stellar records in these areas despite the fact that only 16% of all black college students are attending black colleges. Black colleges award bachelor's degrees to 30 percent of all black college graduates and half of all master's degrees. They are also responsible for educating 45% of all African Americans who hold corporate positions of vice president or higher (Clarke, 1998).

Black engineers graduate from only 10% of the nation's engineering institutions, many of these engineering schools are minority institutions like Prairie View Agriculture & Mechanical and North Carolina Agriculture & Technical State (Collison, 1999). They also graduate 75% of all black military officers, 80% of all black federal judges, and 85% of all black physicians. Additionally, black colleges produce half of all black teachers and Ph.Ds.

Finally, black students are more likely to graduate from college when they attend historically black campuses than when they attend predominately white ones. Numerous studies show HBCUs are more successful in enrolling, retaining, and graduating black students than majority white institutions, usually at half the costs. That is, relative to

black students on black campuses, black students on white campuses have lower persistence rates (more drop out between freshman and senior years), have lower academic achievement levels, enroll less often in advanced degree programs, display poorer overall psychological adjustment, and have lower post-graduation attainments and earnings (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). One researcher estimates black students' attrition rate on white campuses to be 5 to 8 times that of white students on the same campus (Deskens, 1991).

Researcher Jacqueline Fleming, in Blacks in College: A Comparative Study of Student's Success in Black and in White Institutions (1984), showed black students are much more successful on historically black campuses. She found the patterns of intellectual development to be far more advanced among black students at black colleges and universities than among black students at majority white institutions. She also found that students at HBCUs exhibited stronger personal attachments to faculty, enhanced involvement in the career process, greater satisfaction with their academic lives, improvement in measures of academic performance, more enterprising vocational interest patterns, and higher occupational attainments. Black students on white campuses, she found, showed quite the opposite. They reported increasing dissatisfaction with academic life, negative attitudes toward teachers whom they feel grade unfairly, limited return for time and effort invested in school work, and no net improvement in academic performance. Among students in white schools, there were few positive indications of attachments to a role model and high educational aspirations. By contrast, students in black colleges seem to have a virtual corner on intellectual satisfaction and outcomes during the college years. In the subjective psychosocial domain, African American

students in black schools experience better adjustment; black students in white schools often experienced a crisis in social adjustment (Fleming, 1984).

Allen, Epps, and Haniff (1991) investigated interpersonal relations and social networking in black and white college settings and how these factors affected student academic performance, satisfaction with academic life, and occupational aspirations. The results in each of the areas favored the students' experience in the black college. Students attending traditionally Black colleges view campus extracurricular activities as reflecting their interests, and participate in these activities, more than their peers on predominately white campuses. These findings suggest that satisfaction with campus life is greater for students on black campuses (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

Other studies have shown that it is crucial for black students on majority white campuses to maintain a strong relationship with at least one faculty member. In fact, faculty-student relations are a better predictor of black student success on the white campuses than on the black campus (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). One explanation for this is that students in need of social support and gratification look to their professors for this.

Students on black campuses, on the other hand, operate within an institutional setting that provides a broader range of choices for satisfying basic social needs. Hence, significant others are more likely to be other black students and staff persons as well as friends and peers from surrounding communities (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

Black students on black campuses are commonly assisted in feeling good about themselves and about finding their place in the university community through favorable interpersonal relationships with their fellow students. Campus support services are

designed and operated specifically for the needs of black students. There is no need for “minority support services” to ensure that there are activities (such as dances, homecoming festivities, or rallies) that allow black students to mix and interact socially, politically, or culturally. Unity and sharing among students on black campuses may not be ideal, but the institutional setting and the likelihood of common geographical and socioeconomic characteristics enhance their probability of the occurring (Allen, Epps, & Haniff 1991).

There is substantial evidence documenting the fact that students of black campuses benefit more from campus interpersonal relations and social networking than their peers on white campuses. It is clear that, on black campuses, black students are exposed to caring and supportive direction necessary for learning (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

Challenges

Black colleges have faced several challenges since their inception during slavery, and some of these same challenges still exist today. They include: discrimination, poverty, under-prepared students, inconsistent support, and an identity crisis (Taylor & Olswang, 1999).

Discrimination has been one of the more obvious and continuous obstacles for black colleges to overcome. In the beginning, the educational provisions for black students were vastly unequal to those of white students. The 2nd Morrill Act of 1890, which funded a separate land-grant college in each of the southern states for blacks, revealed this. Southern state governments agreed to it for three reasons: to get millions of dollars in federal funds for the development of white land-grant universities, to limit black education to vocational training, and to prevent blacks from attending white land-grant

colleges (Baker, 1989; Browning & Williams, 1978). The first facilities built for blacks were inferior; and the same thing can be said about HBCUs today. Recent rulings in Alabama and Mississippi confirmed inequities in financial support between white and black colleges. Legislatures now disguise these inequities by linking funding allocated to the college to enrollment. This is safe for white institutions since black colleges are the smaller ones; in some instances, they are much smaller. Partly because of fairness, political correctness, and black leaders demanding equity, some black colleges are finally (in some instances) receiving better and more equal funding.

The federal government, too, has discriminated against black colleges (Thompson, 1973). According to information on the financial support provided by government agencies, black colleges have received a relative pittance of funding compared to white colleges. The federal government tends to de-emphasize the role of black colleges in its concern to promote the general welfare of this nation. Despite the fact that practically all of their students suffer from major socio-economic disadvantages, black colleges are somehow expected to turn these students into creative citizens (Thompson, 1973). Even some of the religious organizations that founded and supported black colleges have contributed unequally to the white schools and HBCUs.

The biggest obstacle facing HBCUs today, as it was 100 years ago is poverty. Despite HBCUs like Howard, Spelman, Hampton, and Morehouse that have endowments of over \$100 million, most black colleges have little if any endowment. Some of the small church schools whose enrollments are several hundred students have been mired in poverty for decades. Their poverty is much more extensive and serious than simply a shortage of current educational and general funds. The poverty which characterizes these

schools is a chronic condition resulting from decades of accumulated deprivation. Just about every aspect of these colleges attests to the deleterious effects of having to “make do” with terribly inadequate financing. Author Daniel Thompson contends the reason these colleges have generally weak faculties, academically under-prepared student bodies, and inadequate, often sterile academic programs is the fact that they have not been able to pay the costs of improvement (Thompson, 1973, p. 28). Most have never had enough money to pay the level of salaries required to attract anywhere near a significant number of truly top flight teachers, to mount effective national student recruitment efforts, or to initiate and develop significant, innovative, badly needed academic programs. In many instances, they have had to compromise worthy goals because inadequate funds have made it necessary to scale down the quantity and quality of efforts needed to achieve them (Thompson, 1973).

Not only are most of the schools poor but also their students are often poor. At most HBCUs over 80 percent of the students are receiving financial aid. A study by Carole Hardeman also indicates that black young people have to work more than their white counterparts while in college (Jackson, 1986).

Black students on historically black campuses have come from different backgrounds and they have had different opportunities than their peers (black and white) on predominately white campuses. They lag behind in terms of family socioeconomic status; high school grades; facilities, available academic majors, and opportunities for advanced study (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

Conclusion

Studies show that black students on black campuses perform better academically than black students on white campuses (Roebuck & Murty, p. 12). This is despite the fact that the black students attending white colleges generally have higher grades and higher standardized test scores than the students attending HBCUs. As mentioned earlier, their parents are not as highly educated as the parents of those who attend white colleges.

Black colleges are schools mostly for the undergraduate. They are small, nurturing, personable, and designed with the underachieving high school student (who wants to mend his or her ways) in mind. Extensive remedial work for students deficient in certain areas has been, and continues to be, the hallmark of the majority black colleges. A high school diploma and a standardized test score are the requirements for entrance into most public black colleges, especially for those who are residents of that particular state. While the most prestigious colleges and universities will boast about their selectivity, black colleges boast about their availability and their willingness to give everyone a chance.

Socially, some students are not prepared to be a minority on a majority campus. Though equally American, many minority young people face major emotional, psychological, and cultural shocks when arriving on a white campus as a 17 or 18 year old. Their inner city neighborhood, community, and high school did not prepare them well for it.

Perhaps smaller majority white colleges that make deliberate efforts to address the social and emotional needs of the black undergraduate do a better job than the typical large public university. These are schools that are personable, that support diversity, and that are reasonable in their admission requirements.

I once met an admissions director of a prestigious state institution who touted his school's high graduation rate stating that it was nearly as high with black students. When I asked about the school's requirements for admission he stated "typically 3.5 or better G.P.A., with advanced placement courses, and twelve hundred (SATs) or at least one thousand on the SAT since black students don't test as well." My thought was that students with an academic record like that *should* graduate. But what about the more marginal black students with a 2.5 and an 800 SAT? Who will take, nurture, challenge, and encourage them to apply to graduate school, provide faculty, administrators, and peers similar in background, to support them, and whet their appetite for black history, black music, black art, black literature, black theater and black thought? This is the rich culture of the black community.

As an undergraduate at Xavier University, a historically black institution in New Orleans twenty years ago, I listened to famed black poets Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and James Baldwin. I also listened to the political philosophies of Stokely Carmichael and Dick Gregory, and I was recruited to register to vote by Jesse Jackson. I viewed the art of John Scott and listened to the commencement address of Alex Haley. My college experience was as rewarding culturally as it was for in preparing me academically for professional life.

In closing, black colleges indeed have a vital role in the lives of young people and the black community as a whole. They are not vanguards of segregation but of black culture, black life. Though their campuses are not the most up-to-date technologically, or offer the most magnificent campuses, or accumulate large endowments, they are the most successful in educating black students, doing it with minimal resources. I suggest other

institutions study the techniques of HBCUs in order to educate all young people, particularly other minority groups such as Latinos and Native Americans. Our communities, states, and federal governments as well as corporations should partner with black colleges so that they can better equip institutions to do what they do best.

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