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Casual Conversations in Communicating the Value and Worth of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Lilu Barbosa

In my experience, knowledge and awareness of the worth of the United States (US) Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) seems to be transferred primarily through informal venues: conversations and interactions with friends and colleagues who have experienced them first-hand. In retrospect, it seems that prior to enrolling in higher education I was left in the dark about the academic institutions originally created to serve my particular demographic. Progressive thinkers, politicians and the academic elite espouse values such as diversity and equity. While the country has made large strides, students and professionals alike continue to fuel the misconception that education at HBCUs is sub-par. I have witnessed the manifestation of these internalized messages numerous times. The pervasive nature of this oppressive thinking can be startling. The remarks and attitudes are present in a variety of settings. In my mind, it translates to the notion that to be Black is inferior. This message has been emphasized in personal encounters, academic settings, and in the offices of high school guidance counselors. In response to this phenomenon, I ponder ways to be proactive improving this perception and do away with negative imagery that has been assigned to some of the US' most historic institutions – the HBCUs. This article is intended to be a reflection of those challenging moments as well as a starting point for exploring potential ways to initiate change with the current perceptions.

I am a first generation college student. No other relative has preceded me in my academic endeavors. As I speed along the highway of upward mobility propelled by education, I am frequently reminded of the feeling of having to learn as I go. I am the first of my mother's children to enroll in an institution of higher education. My parents never had the opportunity to get an education beyond high school in the Cape Verde Islands, but they always encouraged us to put forth our best effort

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in academics. Education was always valued in my home.

I acquired most of the knowledge needed to navigate the various stages of the college search process on my own. Although my family provided an abundance of insight to the best of their abilities, there were items that I took on by myself such as learning the specifics of course registration, campus involvement, and potential career tracks. I happily embraced these tasks. My undergraduate experience could be characterized as learning by doing. In hindsight, if I had more *social capital* (Baum & Zeirsch, 2003) with regards to the norms of the dominant White culture that existed outside of my community, my transition to college may have been smoother. Social capital can be viewed as a feature of social organizations. The networks that exist in a particular setting and the norms associated with that setting, as well as the social trust involved, allows people to navigate societal structures for various intended purposes (Baum & Zeirsch, 2003). For me, the lack of social capital only existed in a US context and in predominantly White settings. My identities as a Black urban man and Cape Verdean, entrenched in a Luso-African culture, formed the context in which I possessed a wealth of social capital. My lack of social capital with respect to higher education in the US is a primary reason why it never occurred to me to apply to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).

What was an HBCU to me back in 1997? Not only was I a first generation college student, but I was also the second of my siblings to be born in the US. Considering our Cape Verdean cultural background, the notion of an HBCU was an entirely foreign concept. It was only until after my enrollment in college that I learned more about HBCUs. I learned about the origins, the history, the achievements, and the successful network of alumni. I wonder why I did not know these things sooner? How did my surroundings prevent me from being informed?

After acquiring knowledge of HBCUs over a period of years, I felt the urge to re-examine my lack of exposure to this information growing up. What was it about my experience that kept me from learning about an entire collegiate experience? It became apparent that I was not informed about HBCUs through the venues where one might typically learn about higher education: the high school guidance counselor's office. My high school provided all students with an advisor. Only eight students would share an advisor during the academic year. In addition, every senior was assigned a college advisor. These were the settings where an individual was supposed to gain insight, advice, and new perspectives on colleges prior to the application process. Advisors would also support each student throughout their senior year as they applied for admission and took college entrance exams. Although this was the designated setting for access to information on colleges, there was very little offered on HBCUs. As I reflect on these experiences, I wonder why that was the case. It is difficult to pinpoint the reason, especially now,

so many years later.

As time went on, it seems that there has always existed another venue to learn about HBCUs. This is not about merely learning the names, locations and history. This was about learning the true nature of the empowering experience one can have at a predominantly Black university. I can only imagine what it would have been like to be a Black man in the presence of Black professors, administrators, and counselors. As a young man, I rarely, or never, saw a Black man in such a role. How can the young Black men of today break the stereotypes about themselves if they never interact with positive male figures of their own race? There was much to be gained in going to an HBCU. It was about learning the value and worth of Black institutions of higher education in the United States. The reality is that HBCUs have done much for the Black community. Today's HBCUs confer more than 25% of all bachelor's degrees awarded to Black people in the United States (Brown, 2004). The significance of the HBCU's role tends to go unnoticed, in an era that has promoted stigmas, misconceptions, and negative connotations about Black colleges, more than providing a balanced truth. I found that this balanced truth is communicated and passed down through casual conversations in informal settings. It is an oral history rich with stories and experiences.

The Right Setting for Oral History

How does one come to know the worth of Black institutions of higher education? For me it was in family settings. I attended a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), and wonder what it would have been like to study at Howard University or Morehouse College. My younger cousins who attended HBCUs would come back and share stories with my family. Their tales lit a fire within me burning with intrigue and curiosity. There were stories they told and retold that I simply could not relate to because of the demographics of the institution I attended. I wondered if I was missing out and, if I was, if I would ever be able to make up for lost time?

Black students I went to school with put their curiosity about attending HBCUs to rest by saying, "Well, at least we are getting a better education." Those moments showed me how messages of inferiority had been deeply internalized by young Black people of today. This internalized oppressive thinking is pervasive in the places I went to school. I heard it throughout my entire life- in high school, college, graduate school, and professional settings. On most occasions, those words were expressed by those who have never attended an HBCU, do not know, or are only echoing the sentiments of others. Why did I encounter such broad sweeping generalizations of historic and once prized institutions? Once great symbols of hope upon their inception, I cannot help but notice the overwhelming criticism and disregard of HBCUs I hear from time to time.

My friends and family who graduated from HBCUs gave me honest depictions of their schools. They provided a balanced perspective. They never placed any emphasis on the perceived bad qualities of the school which I heard often. There is a saying that bad news travels faster than good news – this is true in many respects. For example, there is a common critique that HBCUs are limited in the federal aid that they can provide, and that they are financially unstable (Powell, 2004). In response to some of these concerns, it is important to understand the financial challenges faced by HBCUs arise out of a unique context. This has been continuously overlooked. I feel there is a disparity among racial and ethnic groups with regard to those who possess a more complete knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of HBCUs. The acknowledgement of the positive attributes and actual status of the financial well-being of HBCUs only happen in small Black circles, where there existed some connection to an HBCU. At the same time, biased perspectives on HBCUs also exist in Black communities. Not all Black people have the same perspective on HBCUs. To say that all Black people support HBCUs would be inaccurate, and to say the contrary would also be inaccurate. I emphasize that this is my experience in my environment: just one city in the northeast US.

Over time, many stories lingered in my mind regarding what it must have been like to be a student on the campus of an HBCU. My cousins expressed an absence of racial tension that I experienced regularly at my PWI. It is difficult to imagine being in the US and not feeling those tensions. It is a difficult thought to comprehend. The only time in my life I can recall being free of the racial tensions I became accustomed to while growing up in Massachusetts was during my time in the Cape Verde Islands. The feeling is one that I have yet to put into words. It is almost a feeling of liberation knowing that I will not encounter certain stressors, when I wake up every day in the US with their weight on my shoulders. I can remember the flight back to the US and how a strong feeling of stress and anxiety overtook me as I sat in the middle row. I was upset that I was returning to the US, a challenging place while still a land of many opportunities. Does the experience of an HBCU alleviate some of this stress? I am not quite sure. Nothing can be so simple and no solution can be that apparent. As my mind wandered and considered all the possibilities of what could have been, I am left with the mystique of the HBCU embedded in my mind.

Overlooking the Value and Worth

My entire life I expected to go to college because, if I did not, my options in life would be severely limited. My parents came to the US looking to create a better life. Growing up, I began to romanticize certain aspects of what could be my life's story. I always played sports and expected that one day I would utilize my talents at the collegiate level. As we got older, my friends and I were in search of

a collegiate scholarship: athletic, academic, or financial. Coming from Dorchester, a low-income and gang-ridden neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, there was no guarantee that we would even get to college. The motivation to succeed came from mentors, family, and me. My parents gave me all the tools and encouragement to pursue college and graduating with a degree would be a major accomplishment for all of us. However, applying to college immediately after high school and enrolling in my first semester of classes was not a seamless transition.

My college plans were entrusted to an individual at my high school who was paid to guide young individuals into the world of higher education. At home no one had any advice for me as to which school may provide me the best opportunity to excel. This responsibility lay in the hands of a stranger. She did not know me; she did not know any of my frustrations, challenges, or desires. At the time, I was also unable to articulate my needs. As I revisit those times, I see how much power she truly had over the situation that many refer to as the most important decision in your life, which in retrospect is a short sighted view in life.

The high school I attended is a small New England preparatory school. Reminiscent of an old English higher education setting, my campus is on par with that of Dartmouth, Harvard, or Yale. The school grounds are outfitted with ivy-covered brick buildings that had been standing for more than a hundred years. We were often reminded by administrators that our high school was originally a feeder school for Harvard University upon its creation (Logan, 2006). During my time there, the students tended to be the offspring of corporate executives and government officials, but there were always a few others, like me, who hailed from immigrant families and urban settings. The college advisor lived on campus and was expected to provide continuous support for students throughout their senior year. After our initial introductory meeting, we scheduled another to assess my progress on my personal statement and supplemental essays. As we approached application deadlines, the frequency of our meetings increased. Soon, they were held regularly, at times even weekly or twice a week. Our conversations started off with two things: The Fiske College Guide (Fiske Guide, 2011) and a question, “So where do you want to go to school?” I was lost. We began by thumbing through sections of the college guide, flipping through countless pages in search of what *seemed* like a good fit for me. As we discussed the different schools, I remember phrases like “You would like this,” “You can’t get in,” or “Maybe you should think about this school.” At the time, I felt like she was deciding my future. In the end, I remember applying to several schools which I had no true desire to attend. By the end, I felt apathy toward the whole process. I wondered if that is what the college process is supposed to feel like? Should identifying the right school feel like a game of *roulette*? Is finding the right school the luck of the draw? These were my lingering questions through my senior year of high school.

In the conversations between my college advisor and I, we never discussed the possibility of an HBCU. There was never mention of resources related to the Black college experience, such as the Black College Tour, Black scholarship searches, United Negro College Fund, or any other programs aimed at helping Black youth (United Negro College Fund, 2010; Caring For Young Minds, 2010). The process felt sterile: we were going through the motions like workers on an assembly line moving from one step to the next. I wonder why we failed to touch upon the resources and options that were created for young Black students. Did my advisor feel like she would be marginalizing me by presenting the option of an HBCU? Perhaps she did not possess significant knowledge of the HBCUs. I do not know these answers, and so I am left to wonder. I feel I can conclude with certainty that my advisor did not see the degree to which a Black college experience can be empowering for a young Black man from an urban environment. I say this because she does not know what it is to be a Black man from the inner city.

My advisor and I never talked about what mattered to me in my life. Our conversations never progressed beyond being superficial. If what was meaningful to me was never discussed, how could I find the right fit? The right fit was a place that would have given me the best opportunities to develop and excel. While she did not know the extent to which an HBCU experience could be valuable to the confidence of so many Black men, neither did I. A few of my friends who attended Morehouse, Hampton, and Howard speak to the fact that their overall experience boosted their confidence. In addition to being individuals who naturally aspired to something better, their surroundings helped them conceive of the fact that the possibilities were limitless. Seeing large numbers of Black people with master's degrees, doctorates, and in faculty positions was inspiring for them and eradicated all of the messages that have been clogging our eyes and ears, implying that the Black community is inferior, less than, criminal and can do no good. It was a refreshing – a glimpse into what education could do to empower and uplift a historically oppressed group of people.

We glossed over the premier Black institutions in our search. It seemed that the perennial critiques were uttered in between breaths. “Little financial aid,” she would say, or “Not that strong academically.” Before I even knew the term HBCU, they were introduced to me in the context of negativity. I imagine that for others, this negativity is their only context for HBCUs. In my four years of high school, only two men pursued a college degree at an HBCU. They were seniors when I was a first-year student who graduated together and enrolled at Howard University. The following year, they returned to school to visit. We sat in the dining hall in a group of about twelve students at the Black table. Our designated table was located in a corner of the dining hall, a vantage point from where you could see everyone else. It was known to all students, staff, and faculty that this is where students of color, mostly Black, would congregate. I remember listening to their

stories of college life. At the time I did not know that they had gone to a *Black* college. I recall the smile on their faces as they recounted past events. They talked about good times, laughing, getting involved on campus, and meeting new people. When they were in high school, people would say that these young men had a chip on their shoulder. They had been labeled angry and intimidating by others outside of the Black community. The truth was that their frustrations stemmed from race matters on campus. Less than a year later, they looked as though a weight had been lifted from those same shoulders. They went from one extreme racial environment to another, and it seemed they were better for doing it.

Perceptions of the HBCU

A first impression is very important, but so is a second, third, fourth and fifth. How does repeated exposure to negative commentary surrounding HBCUs impact people's perceptions of the institutions? In my life, these dynamics were presented through an internalized oppressive view of HBCUs among people of color and by stereotypes of Black people imposed on the institutions. Through interactions with classmates, colleagues, and professors I got the impression that others do not perceive HBCUs to be on the same tier of higher education institutions as PWIs.

Today's Black colleges have been lambasted with a number of stereotypes and generalizations which conversations over a twelve-year span made clear. The media is also a major contributor of perpetuating stereotypes about Black colleges. There are several examples of the context in which HBCUs are often discussed negatively. Television helped build the myth that Black colleges are party zones. Programming such as *Spring Bling*, broadcasted by MTV-owned Black Entertainment Television (BET) (Black Entertainment Television, 2010), recorded Black students on Spring Break and perpetuated stereotypes of Black people: that we are only concerned with partying and *bling*. I never saw HBCUs depicted in the media as honorable institutions of higher education that focused on academics.

An interesting development in the last decade is the broadcasting of television advertisements by higher education institutions aimed at recruiting new students (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008). PWIs appear quite frequently on television. Interestingly, it is not uncommon to find a PWI advertisement for one institution televised at another PWI. Black colleges get very little or no exposure in this regard. I have yet to see any form of promotion for a Black college on a PWI campus. Programming revolving around marching bands at HBCUs is one of the few times that the schools are actually depicted on television, which usually is on BET. Again, as was the case with *Spring Bling*, the focus is on entertainment, not on educational opportunities.

So far, I have shared some of the imagery from my youth, but as a graduate stu-

dent and young professional, I encounter other generalizations. One of the most alarming issues in the midst of all the stereotypes and generalizations is that some of the same stereotypes used in the past to discriminate against Black people have now been imposed on Black colleges. For example, I often hear “HBCUs are homophobic.” Black institutions are often described in such a fashion (Harper & Gasman, 2008). The most recent example is the media coverage of Morehouse College and their dress code policy which prohibits men on campus from wearing women’s clothing (Mungin, 2009; Simon, 2009). Morehouse College is not representative of all HBCUs, and, as such, it is inappropriate to generalize all HBCUs as hindering progressive efforts aiming towards social justice and inclusivity.

It is easier to talk about the institution and be void of any responsibility about their primary stakeholders: Black people. In any statement that is a broad generalization, which discredits all the individuals that are working to positively impact HBCUs today (Wormely, 2010).

My Work Moving Forward

I served as a college advisor during my time at a community and youth resource center located in my hometown. My neighborhood is characterized by the media as being gang infested and crime ridden. I remember an article published in *The Boston Globe* and its prominently displayed title in bold letters: *Many youths fearful in their city: Death weighs heavily in Dorchester* (Badkhen, 2007). A sense of urgency guided our efforts at the community center because the reality was that every year members of our community would be lost to crime, prison, or gang violence. As Malcolm X stated, “education is our passport to the future” (Malcolm X, 1964), and so when I began my work with high school students, I set out to be the guidance counselor that I never had. My work was primarily with Cape Verdean youth who had just arrived in the United States. These students typically arrived in Boston and entered the ninth grade at local public high schools. One of my objectives was to present them with opportunities for success and give them all the information they would need to be successful. In doing so, I did not want to impose on them any beliefs that were not their own. My own biases and opinions were subject to this rule as well. I was not trying to convince students to apply to HBCUs. My goal was to try and find the best situation for them. It was critical that they used their growing pool of knowledge to formulate their own ideas, opinions and passions. This meant that I had the responsibility of creating access to information that would help guide their futures.

As I worked with students through the college search process, I did not want to gloss over any potential options in regards to colleges they could attend, thus repeating the past experiences I had with my advisor. The list of colleges and universities in the US is extensive and growing. With the development of junior

and online colleges, educational opportunities for higher education are at an all-time high. With abundant options, conversations to clarify students' needs and aspirations are extremely important in gauging how I can be useful to a particular student. Not having a conversation at all would leave too much uncertainty in deciding on the best approach to serving a student's needs. I felt as though this is what happened to me. Recalling my high school experience, I feel that I was not given complete access to information in the college search process. At the time, I was not even aware that such shortcomings were taking place. My advisors felt that financial aid was a major area of concern for me, which it was. Ironically, as I was told, one reason for bypassing the HBCU option was because of my need for federal aid. A conversation would have been a great vehicle for clarifying my needs at the time. But again, as I look back on my youth, I did not have the language to articulate what my needs might have been. For those who struggle as I did, the role of the advisor is crucial.

As I gained knowledge and experience in the field of higher education, I became effective at advising, guiding and supporting students by understanding their needs. I made an earnest attempt to help them gain admission to an institution that would give them the best opportunity to succeed. The term "best opportunity to succeed" is often used, but I want to place special emphasis on this concept. The best environment for a particular individual's success involves support systems and customized attention to detail. What works for one individual will not work for all the rest; therefore, there is no universal formula for working with any particular demographic of students. Student needs vary in all communities and their subgroups.

Since most of my students were new to the US, and did not have any context for higher education, I did not contribute to the culture of perpetuating misconceptions of HBCUs. I was prepared to give my students a balanced view of what HBCUs could offer in addition to other institutions. A balanced perspective meant that I could discuss the benefits and disadvantages of each institution. In examining the disadvantages, it was clear that some were real while others were perceived. The decision was left for the students and their families. I did not make the decision for them. Even to this day, I approach conversations with students in the same manner. I do not tell others what to do; I only help provide clarity as they engage in a decision making process. The word *guide* has been defined as having *to accompany; to show points of interest; to explain meaning or significance* (Dictionary.com, 2010). The last segment of this definition, *to explain meaning or significance*, resonates most with the work I aspire to do. As a society, we make meaning in our lives in different ways. One experience will impact and empower various individuals to different degrees. I hope that the work I did with these students assisted them in such a process. Talking to students, allowing them to share their stories, and sharing my stories illuminates what is important to them and most salient, down

to their inner core. Such conversations will lead me, and hopefully other student affairs practitioners, to take the right steps.

Final Thoughts

In closing, as we student affairs practitioners think about our interactions with students, it is important to examine the power we hold in the moments when advising or mentoring students. At times our words or actions will impact a student beyond our expectations. I think about the mentors in my life and how in many instances they were unaware of the degree to which they positively impacted my life. The same is true for those who profoundly caused me pain. As a student, I sought out certain individuals for guidance and support. In my role as a mentor, advisor, and educator, part of my job is to listen. In some instances my responsibility is to provide clarity for others with respect to dilemmas they are facing. Equally as important is the need for a student to feel valued. I believe that for young Black men in the inner city, this is especially important. Every day as we student affairs professionals go about our work it is beneficial to keep in mind that we have the ability to empower our students and to help them realize their worth. One aspect of empowerment means letting students do, learn and experience for themselves.

Our nation's HBCUs need support. The reality is that some Black colleges have been faced with a variety of challenges, many of which – though not for all – stem from financial difficulties. It is important to keep in mind that there are people— students, staff, and professionals— working to revitalize, and in some cases even save, these historic institutions from losing accreditation and/or closing their doors. Negative commentary only contributes to the misconceptions and negative imagery often propagated in society. We are tarnishing what many died to create. At times, we become prisoners of the moment and forget to reflect on our past and even our recent past. Many individuals have endured a lifelong fight to create equity in a society where certain individuals were bound to encounter social obstacles. Access to education has been one form of equity. In some cases, such individuals were catalysts for what resulted in today's HBCUs.

Perhaps the most important message one can take away is that we, as student affairs professionals, must be wary of the collective message we send when colluding in over-criticism and generalizations of HBCUs. As higher education professionals, every time we speak negatively of Black colleges and emphasize their shortcomings, we send a message to all communities. The message I heard as a young teenager was that Black institutions are not good enough— not even for a Black man. Past conversations with people have led me to feel as though many have given up on Black colleges. In conversation, their very existence is questioned. A painful reality is that those entrusted in working with students, providing support and guidance are at times contributing to the widely held negative perceptions

about HBCUs. The message to our students should be to learn the truth. There are multiple truths in life, and one valuable truth is to not agree blindly with the ignorance of others.

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