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*Full Length Research Paper*

# Accreditation Challenges of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America

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Accreditation has long been a difficult process for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Membership in accreditation associations initially excluded most Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It was only after 1954 and the passage of laws dealing with desegregation in higher education that many of the HBCUs were allowed to be considered as promoters of scholarly academics by the larger community of postsecondary scholars. However, to-date, Historically Black Colleges and Universities still find problems obtaining accreditation. This study sought to examine the challenges Historically Black Colleges and Universities face in trying to secure accreditation; those affixed to leadership styles of college presidents other factors. A qualitative research design was adopted, whereby data were collected through interviews and analyzed using qualitative methods. Findings show there was consensus among interviewees regarding the factors affecting accreditation. Student challenges include lack of academic preparedness, unfamiliarity with the financial aid application process, and a lack of other resources to sustain themselves during their course of study, while university challenges included limited infrastructure, professional ethics and inadequate funding among others.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, Challenges, College presidents, Leadership styles, Historically Black Colleges and Universities

## INTRODUCTION

Accreditation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is one of the major issues that today university top leadership is preoccupied with. There

are challenges of curriculum development and continuous improvements, staff development, and quality management to ensure university graduates are accepted by industry (Gasman et al., 2007). Further, financial deficits, the quality of degrees of faculty, infrastructure, student numbers and library resources are

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all instrumental in determining accreditation of HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2007). Despite this, HBCUs have been faced with budget cuts for years due to inadequate government funding.

These challenges call for strong leadership from college presidents if colleges are to successfully obtain accreditation. Research shows that most information pertaining to the concept of leadership from a HBCU presidential standpoint has primarily focused on the social movements during the Civil Rights era and the late 20th century (Thompson, 1973; Willie and MacLeish, 1978; Willie and Edmonds, 1978). More recent studies have focused on mission and leadership (Mbajekwe, 2006; Ricard and Brown, 2008) who provided insight into the presidential views of the students, strategic planning, preparation for the position, and the uniqueness of HBCUs. However, Gasman et al. (2010) review of these studies found the research to be non-comprehensive and lacking in analysis with regard to control and leadership among HBCU presidents.

Leadership at HBCUs has been scrutinized in the media and higher education circles for more than 75 years. As leadership for HBCUs began to shift during the early 20th century from white to African-American, critics have complained about “recycled” presidents, authoritarian leadership, lack of shared governance, and trampled academic freedom (Gasman et al., 2010). This negative perspective was often validated by the constant struggles related to underprepared students, inadequate management, dwindling financial resources including low endowments, and competition for students and faculty members (Nichols, 2004).

Accreditation of colleges and universities is faced with both internal and external factors. The external factors are those pertaining to demands from a legislature and other funders requiring colleges to attain a certain minimum academic and other standards expected of them and their products, whereas internal factors are those that are derived from the views and demands of those closest to the decision makers within an organization such as faculty, staff, students, and governing boards. This study therefore sought to examine the factors that influence accreditation of HBCUs affixed to leadership styles of college presidents. In other words, we sought to examine how HBCU presidents address the accreditation issue in their universities or colleges.

### **Accreditation of HBCUs**

Accreditation has long been a difficult process for HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2007). Membership in accreditation

associations initially excluded most HBCUs. It was only after 1954 and the passage of laws dealing with desegregation in higher education that many of the HBCUs were allowed to be considered as promoters of scholarly academics by the larger community of postsecondary scholars. The Southern Association of Colleges (SACS), through its commission on colleges, brought historically black colleges into the accreditation process in 1929 and developed the Black College Association as the watch dog for standards (Roscoe, 1989). Throughout the years, accreditation has continued to be a long and difficult task for some HBCUs (AAUP, 2007). More pointedly, several two and four-year HBCUs have faced major accreditation issues between 1996 and 2005 which included:

- A four-year Presbyterian institution located in the southeast region of the United States had its Accreditation revoked was in 2004 because of academic and financial problems. Chief among the academic problems was the granting of degrees to twenty-eight (28) students who had not met graduation requirements.
- A four-year Methodist women's college located in the southeast region of the United States was placed on probation in 2002 for financial issues and later removed from the status in 2004.
- A four-year institution affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church located in the southeast region of the United States had its accreditation originally rescinded in 2004 because the administration plagiarized large portions of a quality-enhancement plan from another institution and submitted it to SACS for reaccreditation. In 2005, SACS reinstated accreditation as a result of the settlement of a lawsuit brought by the college against SACS. The institution subsequently obtained SACS reaffirmation.
- A four-year public institution located in the southeast region of the United States was originally placed on probation by SACS in 2001 because the institution's financial records were disorganized to the extent that the state auditor had been unable to audit the university since 1997. The state approved the institutions records in 2002; however, SACS required a longer probation before reinstating accreditation, as it wanted the institution to demonstrate a longer track record of success.
- A four-year, church-related institution located in the southeast region of the United States lost accreditation from SACS in 1996 because its debt reached \$3.2 million and enrollment dropped by two-thirds, from 1,200 to 400 students. As a result of losing its accreditation, the college reorganized itself as the first black college to join a group that included six other predominately white institutions. In addition, the college

laid off half of its 125 faculty members to bring the budget into line.

- A four-year Church of Christ institution located in the southeast region of the United States was placed on twelve months of probation in December 2005 after SACS determined that it needed to reduce its \$6 million debt and further improve the qualifications of the business school's faculty. Enrollment dropped from 1,200 to 800 in subsequent years.

- A four-year institution affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the southeast region of the United States lost its accreditation in 2002 after accumulating \$23 million in debt and being accused of using federal allocations for student financial aid to pay overdue bills.

- A four-year institution affiliated with the State Missionary Baptist Convention located in the southeast region of the United States lost accreditation from SACS in 1996 for having a \$10 million debt, the institution switched its accreditation to a religious accrediting body.

- A four-year Church of Christ institution located in the southeast region of the United States was placed on twelve months of probation in December 2005 for the second time in previous years and was to be subsequently reviewed in coming months. At the end of their last probationary period, enrollment fell to 303 students, health insurance for the staff was suspended, and the campus had millions of dollars in deferred maintenance (AAUP, 2007)

As earlier mentioned, most reprimands and revocations of HBCU accreditations were due to financial deficits; however, faculty quality (degrees), campus infrastructure, student enrollments, and even library holdings played an added role in the certification process (Gasman et al., 2007). HBCUs have been disproportionately hit hard by state budget and general financial shortfalls and will continue to be adversely impacted in the absence of better responses generated from viable decision-making practices.

## Enrollment

Researchers have pinpointed several reasons why HBCU enrollment rates are declining; these include: (a) the pool of traditional college students aged 18-24 is shrinking; (b) enrollment of black students is higher in all other institutions of higher education, including community colleges; (c) federal student loans for tuition have increased in comparison to grants which helped to catapult the mass education of blacks beginning in the early 1970s; and (d) the quality of academic programs has declined compared to other institutions (Branson, 1987;

Fleming, 1981; Thompson, 1973).

It should be further observed that for many years, white students have attended black colleges in small numbers. However, HBCUs have recently seen an increase in the number of white students enrolling on their campuses. Moreover, in some cases, HBCUs are recruiting white or other non-black students as a legal requirement to diversify the student body or to make ends meet with additional tuition dollars (Gasman et al., 2007). From a leadership perspective, Gasman (2007) further points out that some HBCU administrators have considered increased white enrollment as a testament to the fact that their institutions have transcended race and are now viewed as suitable for any students regardless of color, while others worry that this influx is costing African-American students precious scholarships and slots at better-known black colleges. Hence, HBCU presidents are faced with preserving the mission of their institutions throughout this process.

## METHODOLOGY

This section presents a description, outline, and discussion of the methods that were used in the study. Elements of the research methodology are as follows: (a) description, and discussion of methodology used in the data collection process, (b) description, and discussion of data and information sources, and (c) discussion of the data analysis and presentation.

### Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, whereby data were collected through interviews and analyzed mainly using qualitative methods.

### Interview Protocol

The interview protocol contained instructions for the interview process and the questions to be asked during the interview process, and provided space for note taking (Creswell, 2005). This interview protocol was used to address the research questions for this study. The interview guide consisted of introductory questions pertaining to general demographics such as years in position, age, gender, academic and professional background, and regional location of the institutions. This section was followed by key and probing questions regarding the self-described leadership style and their decision-making practices regarding critical issues.

**Table 1** Employment status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Current President	15	88.2	88.2	88.2
	Former President	2	11.8	11.8	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Participants in this study were given access to the interview guide prior to the interview process so they would have an opportunity to prepare their thoughts in advance.

The major questions asked during each of the interviews and an interpretative examination of participants' responses follow. It is important to note that participants' responses to specific questions often included responses to other questions as well. For this reason, quotations drawn from the data have been organized and reported in a manner designed to complement the literature.

### Data analysis and presentation of results

Qualitative research seeks out the 'why', not the 'how' of its topic through the analysis of unstructured information – things like interview transcripts, open ended survey responses, emails, notes, feedback forms, photos and videos. It does not just rely on statistics or numbers, which are the domain of quantitative researchers. In this study, we undertook multiple, careful readings of interview transcripts to manage, shape and make sense of information obtained during conversations with participants. In this manner, the researcher will identify themes, glean insights and develop meaningful conclusions about the phenomena.

The respondents' real names were concealed for privacy reasons. This was done in such a way that each respondent was given a nickname that appears in presentation of findings.

## FINDINGS

### Respondents' professional background

Questions were asked to elicit each president's professional background and experience. Participants were asked a series of questions related to the central focus of presidential decision making that may affect accreditation. The questions differentiated between presidents in terms of the category of employment status have been compressed into a comparative analysis of

what participants contributed to the body of data on each of the six specified areas of concern. Table 1 shows respondents employment status:

Table 1 above shows that most respondents were actively employed as college presidents (15/17). Only 2 were formerly employed as college presidents.

### Accreditation factors and challenges for HBCUs

Participants were asked to indicate the most hideous challenges they faced in terms of accreditation. They would classify each challenge as least important up to most important. This question generated less satisfactory data since five participants could not or would not select an item, and others chose their answer for reasons other than the item's lack of intrinsic worth. "I don't know how to classify 'least important' of what you've mentioned," Ellen said. Four other participants also declined to name a least-important topic. "These things that we're talking about are all related to each other," Olivia said. "You cannot single them out and address them individually." Quentin, George, and Francine used the same phrase in explaining why they couldn't single out one since "they're all important." George concluded "I'm not sure what I would put at the bottom of the list."

For a variety of reasons, five presidents chose institutional growth and advancement as least important. Kenneth felt that "it's hard to say what's not important," but he settled on the growth and development piece. "You know, to me it's a catch-all kind of phrase without knowing exactly what it means." Interestingly, Paul also chose growth and development despite the fact that his university has an office specifically for this purpose. For Alicia, the reason for her choice was that "I think that is something that comes once the foundation has been placed." Harvey noted "If other areas have been taken care of, we can grow the institution." Michael seemed to agree with this statement when he said that "the others have more immediate and direct impacts if they're not managed properly."

Two participants ranked ethics at the bottom of the list of importance. One selected ethics because it was not a problem at his university at the present time, and the other because he said there was no evidence to suggest

that this is a special concerns of HBCUs in general. Overall, the question of ethics was not deemed especially challenging to participants. Although reported lapses due to sexual harassment or financial improprieties surfaced in the data provided by a few participants, these were generally isolated cases and not patterns of behavior.

One president named accreditation least important, "because that's something you may not be facing right now," and another chose leadership since there had been a series of seven presidents at his institution within the past 11 years. Richard said that what is least important changes from time to time depending on the institutional situation. Two presidents were not asked this question.

Based on the insights presented above and the widely prevalent practice of shared governance, the question of leadership style presented few surprises. Nine participants defined their style of leadership as collaborative, two described it as participatory, and two others said they lead by example. The collaborative style was best exemplified by Alicia, who said this process "brings parties to the table that have a stake in whatever decision is being made, even though the decision may not be made ultimately in their favor." The other participants defined their leadership style in various ways. Quentin said he is a change agent; "I believe in telling people to do their job," he said. Langston, on the other hand, viewed himself as a servant leader by saying:

The presidency is not a profession . . . and you should not enter the presidency with a style that conveys that you are taking yourself too seriously. You are working for people; it's an attitude. Don't believe the bells and whistles that are out there. If there is noise around your appointment, it's about the presidency. It's about the position and it's not so much about you.

Olivia offered another view: "I am not a servant leader, make that clear. That is the minister at the church, not me." She preferred to call her leadership style "eclectic," utilizing a more democratic approach to governance when circumstances allow: "But there are times when you just have to say, 'We will do this.'" Although he did not assign a name to his leadership style, Richard stressed the importance of getting buy-in. "Successful leaders have to have people who are willing to follow you, who are also willing to show initiative when you are not there."

Most presidents reported that they were satisfied with their current leadership processes, although three participants' comments added additional data. Harvey said "I think I would probably include more, besides the formal leadership, more informal input from the faculty." Quentin thought "I probably need to be a little more patient," and Kenneth added "The only change that I would make is, hell, I need to work less!"

When asked what their greatest challenge has been,

most presidents identified budgetary issues of some sort at the most important. Of the 17 presidents, two reported previously managing budgets of \$2 billion; one of these was at a large university system, while the other was during the participant's military career. Other high-end budgets at former institutions ranged from \$30 million to \$500 million. At presidents' current positions as leaders of HBCU's the budgets covered a spectrum from a low of \$13 million at one small campus to a high of \$350 million. A typical lower-end budget averaged \$55 million, and the higher end average was about \$154 million. "But there's never enough," Olivia stated.

Three presidents commented extensively on the effects of severe cuts in state funding. "They were murderous," Harvey said. "We lost almost 25 percent of our state appropriations. That was the critical point that forced us not only to look at administrative cuts, but also at academic and programmatic cuts as well." He explained that the university formulated study teams to examine models used by other institutions to prioritize administrative and academic areas to determine which program areas were producing low numbers of graduates. "This enabled us to see which could be consolidated, merged, or even cut if demand for the program was insufficient."

At George's university, a different finding came to light: "We found out that the university was overstaffed." To preclude the overreliance on staff termination, the solution to this dilemma included unpaid work furloughs, and a voluntary severance program whereby individuals could receive 50 percent of their base salary if they opted to retire.

Michael reported that severe cuts had affected his university as well. He said that within the past three years his university had sustained reductions amounting to approximately \$22 million, and that reduction of another \$10 million was expected. "That creates a tremendous challenge for us," he said. "Our biggest budgetary challenge is creating a sustainable funding model that is not overly reliant upon government resources," Nelson said. He explained that "We're going to create an institution that has the capacity to self-fund so that we are not overly reliant on government, on federal aid."

There was nearly unanimous agreement that the implications of financial aid issues and their relationship to accreditation were of central importance, and presidents' self-reported greatest budgetary challenges frequently centered on these topics. Some participants stressed the interrelatedness of these issues, and included student demographics as a key factor. Issues such as students' academic and financial preparedness were discussed in several interviews. "It's not an easy

job,” Blake said, “because you are serving a different kind of population than some of the other institutions have to serve.”

As indicated by the high rates of student aid at HBCUs, many students come from low wealth families, and may be the first in their family to attend college. James noted that filling out the required forms was a challenge many students could not meet. He expounded by saying:

*There are a lot of socio-cultural issues that get in the way. A huge number of these kids grew up with the lady next door, or grandma or someone else who did not adopt them, so at times they don't have a legal guardian or parent to sign the forms. Then there are others who have creative means for making their living so they don't have a W-2 or income tax form.*

Richard was concerned that even if these students do get financial aid, they may be unable or unwilling to repay their loans, especially if they did not graduate. “They say ‘Why I’m gon repay my loans? I ain’t get no diploma.’” He added that “Our default rate is something that we always have to be concerned about in terms of our accreditation. Even though these people have left our institution, we are still being judged by them.”

Isaac said he frequently had to push for more financial aid to students at his university. “The faculty wants higher salaries and the financial people want to see greater revenue. So the students should pay for it? The students that don’t have anything? They come with nothing basically.” Nelson added that “something as little as \$250 can be catastrophic to them. You know, we have students who would rather not get books and have refund money so they can buy groceries. That is a level of poverty that is just staggering.” He said that, in fact, some students try to remain enrolled for as many years as possible to prolong this arrangement, but give little or no thought to the magnitude of the long-term indebtedness they are incurring.

However, Nelson also pointed out that “it has become apparent by the policies they have enacted that the federal government no longer intends to be supportive of marginal students from under-resourced communities to go to college.” In an attempt to address these closely connected issues, some institutions have responded by raising admission standards; Michael said that he raised admission standards twice. “I believe in access to higher education, but to those who are capable of doing the work,” he said.

When asked what they considered their greatest contribution to their institution, presidents’ responses identified key areas. Alicia felt she had vastly upgraded the technological capabilities, and had moved the campus to a more policy-driven decision-making process. “I think my greatest contribution has been my push in

terms of changing the standards and creating a unique identity,” Isaac said. James felt he had enhanced his institution by “raising its sights.” Since he has been president, the college moved from previously being unranked to the top tier of the *U.S. News & World Report’s* best colleges and universities list, and the graduation rate has increased from 40 percent to 88 percent. Both Michael and Nelson chose the same words to summarize their own most significant contribution: “Changing the culture of the institution,” they replied.

## CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There was consensus among interviewees regarding the difficulties faced by their many students who come from low-income families. These included lack of academic preparedness, unfamiliarity with the financial aid application process, and a lack of other resources to sustain themselves during their course of study. Another consideration was mentioned but not fully developed: the raising of admission standards that had been implemented by Michael and other institutional leaders. It could be expected that a significant number of students would no longer qualify for enrollment, but the fate of such students was not further explored.

Several presidents mentioned that one or more student representatives are included in decision-making processes, but this inclusiveness must be tempered by the realization that “Students are transient. You have to allow students their input, but you have to have them understand that the next group of students may be completely different,” Charles explained.

There is need to examine student demographics in relation to accreditation challenges at HBCUs. 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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