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Full Length Research Paper

Decision-Making Practices of Presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States of America

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This study focused on the decision-making practices of presidents at selected Historically Black Colleges and Universities in an attempt to understand how presidents respond to the more pervasive challenges confronting their institutions through creativity in strategic planning. To investigate this and the related research questions, 17 current and past HBCU presidents were interviewed. Participants included those from public and private, urban and rural institutions. This was a qualitative study that utilized a phenomenological research methodology. The data were analyzed in terms of frequency of recurrent themes and interpreted in relation to the study objectives. Most of the participants reported some degree of shared decision-making, although several clearly stated the president was responsible for the final decisions. Not surprisingly, the majority of participants identified the need for creativity in strategic planning in order to attract and retain high-quality human talent.

Keywords: Decision-Making, Decision-Making, Leadership styles, College Presidents, Historically Black Colleges and Universities

INTRODUCTION

Decision-making is arguably the most important secret behind the success or failure of any organization, whether in academia or industry. Among the many demanding roles such as fundraising and ensuring good relations with the community, college presidents in America are responsible for planning, budgeting and strategic decision-making in all aspects that affect the

college's survival and growth (Cook, 2012). Simon (2009) stresses that college presidents must possess strong skills in organizational strategy, resource management and communication, collaboration, advocacy and professionalism in order for them to ably execute their mandate. Moreover, these leaders must also have the ability to articulate the importance of the college to constituents, supporters, and the community at large. While some colleges and universities presidents are negotiating their recovery from the most severe recession

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in nearly a century (Crow, 2010), the challenges of the 21st century are ubiquitous and increasingly perilous for others. Nearly (2009) more precisely focuses the lens by noting that “in this era of a prolonged recession, funding, and development issues, when traditionally White institutions catch a cold, Historically Black Colleges and Universities get pneumonia” (p. 1).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have not only had to face significant economic crises, but also face mounting social and political issues which have continually threatened their individual survival (Minor, 2008). HBCUs, like many higher education institutions, rely on student tuition dollars, government programs, corporate donations and foundations to sustain their institutions; however, financial instability, accreditation challenges, and questionable governance structures remain paramount (Nearly, 2009).

Gasman et al. (2010) have stated that the reason for HBCUs’ deficiencies and mismanagement, in particular, are typically viewed as a direct result of the leadership and decision-making practices of the president. In fact, presidents of HBCUs are often accused of being autocratic leaders who sacrifice academic quality and uphold segregation through the mission of their colleges and universities (Minor, 2004). However, researchers have theorized that many of these conclusions are drawn in the absence of research relative to HBCU leadership (Gasman et al. 2010). The leadership styles and decision making practices of college presidents have been largely left out in academic studies. This paper presents an empirical study on decision making practices of college presidents and highlights the impact of such practices.

The main objective of the study was to examine the decision-making practices of HBCU presidents. This was achieved by looking at other specific aspects involving their leadership styles, strategic planning and creativity.

Definitions of key terms

Administration refers to that part of a college or university where employees are charged with the responsibility of maintaining and supervising the institution separate from its faculty and/or academics, although some personnel may have joint responsibilities.

Decision-making is considered the process by which those granted authority make determinations on issues under consideration. Also important to understanding governance is the context in which decisions are made (e.g., the political, academic, financial, social, cultural, and situational circumstances that can influence decision making). Decision-making environments are fluid and can, in some cases, influence decisions more than static structures.

Mission refers to a description of a college or university’s purpose for being created, which articulates

that purpose for its students, faculty, staff, and the public. *Perspective* refers generally to a way of regarding situations or topics, etc.; it is the subjective evaluation of a subject or point of view. Perspective also is defined as the wisdom of the deep understanding of people, things, events or situations, that empowers the ability to choose or act to consistently to produce the optimum results with a minimum expenditure of time and energy.

President refers to the chief executive officer of the higher education institution.

21st century refers to the current century of the Anno Domini era or the Common Era in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. It began on January 1, 2001 and will end on December 31, 2100.

College Presidents’ Leadership and Decision Making Practices

Birnbaum (1988) reviewed the cognitive processes used by college presidents to make decisions. He showed that the conditions in which they led, and the biases that resulted, might cause them to overestimate their own effectiveness. He concluded that leadership is in part a social attribution used by both leaders and followers to explain their actions. How college presidents make decisions can impact their effectiveness as institutional leaders.

In a study conducted by Fisher et al. (1988), 485 individuals considered knowledgeable about higher education were asked to identify five college presidents they considered to be effective. The respondents used their own terms to define effective. Of the possible 3,300 presidents, the respondents identified 412 college presidents that they considered effective. The 412 effective presidents represented the four sectors of higher education: 2-year, 4-year, public and private. Fisher et al. (1988) then administered the Fisher/Tack Effective Leadership Inventory to the 412 effective presidents selected and another 412 randomly selected presidents not identified as effective, but were referred to as “representative presidents.” It is important to note that the presidents did not know who had been nominated as an effective president. The results of the study revealed a significant difference between effective and representative presidents. Fisher et al. (1988) found the effective college presidents “to be less collegial and more distant” than representative presidents.

Bing and Dye (1992) opposed the Fisher/Tack model of presidential leadership. It was their belief that Fisher et al. (1988) took a dim view of the ideal of a collegial institution. A president who was labeled as a representative president was considered more as a figurehead and characterized as weak. By contrast, the effective president was described as someone who was silent and rarely shared the reasons for the decisions

made. According to Bing and Dye (1992) the implications of the Fisher/Tack model demonstrated a lack of trust in the faculty, and when faculty was consulted, there was no assurance that their views were regarded. The Fisher/Tack model was characteristic of a hierarchical approach and one Bing and Dye (1992) deemed more admirable in corporate presidents than in the president of a college or university. Bing and Dye (1992) believed that institutions which utilized a solitary decision-making process deteriorated the community atmosphere and discouraged wide participation in the academic life of the institution.

Kaufman (1980) conducted a research study on the effectiveness of college and university presidents. The sample size was 32. In this study, he explored the relationship between the presidents and the governing boards, the problems of leadership in multi-campus systems, and the challenges of increasing centralized administration. He stated that the president's performance could not be separated from a governing board's performance. The study also describes the presidency as a temporary role of leadership rather than a professional career. Kaufman found that much of the discretion (authority and autonomy) of the president had eroded because of uniform procedures, formulas, and policies. In the assessment of the performance of presidents, his research revealed that the system presidency is the least satisfying and least stable of all presidencies. The performance and the role at this level often are shaped by the actions of predecessors in their involvement with the board and the campus presidents. He concluded that a proper balance between autonomy and control are necessary conditions for effective performance in a system presidency. Kaufman (1980) stated that the type of institution, its history, traditions, and ethos would also determine many role expectations. Kofter and Heskett (1992) further concluded that leadership effectiveness is based on a leader's influence over culture and his/her ability to change organizational culture.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to examine HBCU presidents' decision-making practices for confronting and resolving internal and external challenges in their institutions. The results of this study were derived from sociological and humanistic factors involved in major challenges experienced by HBCU presidents. The methodology required the researcher to venture into the world of the participants and retrieve data through in-depth interviews, to analyze the data, and then to describe the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The researchers then compared those lived experiences of HBCU presidents to determine if the

participants share similar experiences, leadership and decision-making practices.

In order to provide a framework for the decision-making practices, the results of the data were grouped based on five theoretical frameworks of leadership: power and influence theory, behavioral theory, trait theory, contingency theory, and symbolic theory. These theories provided a framework to analyze and categorize HBCU presidential leadership styles and to determine how their leadership styles influence decision-making practices pertaining to critical issues. The participants consisted of 17 sitting and former HBCU presidents from 4-year public and private colleges and universities throughout the United States. Due to the distance involved, telephone interviews were used to facilitate the interview process and follow-up interviews were conducted as deemed necessary.

Interview data were recorded and later transcribed to enable analysis using qualitative content data analysis methods as follows: Upon completion of each of the 17 interviews, the data were transcribed and notes were appended to the transcripts. The transcripts were carefully examined for word frequency and conversation analysis as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2003). Words and sentences were examined for content and context, and meanings were cautiously interpreted. Transcripts were analyzed line by line and compared with all other transcripts one by one. As a result of this analysis it became possible to accurately compare the responses to each of the interview questions.

Presentation of results is done using Tables, graphs and direct citations from primary data to emphasize certain aspects of study findings. For purpose of presenting qualitative data in direct "speech", each respondent was given a nick name to hide real identity. Therefore the names cited in the findings are not real names of respondents.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making processes utilized by current and past HBCU presidents. In accomplishing this research, 17 of these individuals were interviewed. Open-ended questions were presented and the interviewees were given ample time to respond. Several participants introduced new directions to the discussion which resulted in rich data and new insights.

As earlier indicated, the main objective of the study was to examine the decision-making practices of HBCU presidents. However, we had to examine creativity in the decision making practices on strategy. This section presents findings from the study:

Table 1 gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	4	23.5	23.5	23.5
	Male	13	76.5	76.5	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 Age bracket

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	41-45 years	2	11.8	11.8	11.8
	56-60 years	4	23.5	23.5	35.3
	61-65 years	7	41.2	41.2	76.5
	66-70 years	1	5.9	5.9	82.4
	71 and above years	3	17.6	17.6	100.0
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 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
	Total	17	100.0	100.0	

Respondents' characteristics

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the background characteristics of respondents in order to understand their gender, age bracket and their current status. Tables 1, 2 and 3 present the results on respondents' gender, age bracket and status respectively:

Results in Table 1 reveal that most respondents were male (76.5%). Female respondents were only 4 (23.5%).

Results in Table 2 indicate that majority of the respondents were in age bracket 61-65 years (41.2%). This was followed by those in age bracket 56-60 years (23.5%) and those in age bracket 71 and above (17.6) respectively. Age bracket 41-45 years contributed 11.8% while age bracket 66-70 years contributed 5.9% respectively.

Results in Table 3 show that most respondents (88.2%) were serving as College Presidents. Only 2 were former presidents (11.8%).

Strategic decision-making

Responses on questions under strategic decision-making revealed that reduced funding from government and other sources has fostered a proactive approach to financial acquisition and management. This is manifested by five-to-ten year strategic plans in place in

many of the participants' institutions. Isaac said that the focus of the plan is on *"developing a unique identity, and then really to go out there and get some students who can go to school anywhere because they're going to graduate; they're going to pay their loans back."*

Nelson's approach to the challenge of developing his small, private college into an institution with the capacity to self-fund included first transforming it to resemble a sustainable, entrepreneurial entity: *"We're going to create ancillary businesses that produce revenue streams that fund the institution,"* he said. He declined to provide further details about the types of businesses under consideration.

Not every president seemed as proactive, however. After discussing governmental funding cutbacks and decreases in charitable giving, James did not offer a comment on how he was working with these constraints other than to add that *"it's a much more strategic approach to how to use money, rather than focusing on the gap the question becomes: How do we move towards achieving the mission on what is available to us?"*

Creativity in decision-making

Another theme that emerged from the data was the role of creativity in the participants' decision-making processes. Francine described herself as visionary, and said this trait was essential for a HBCU president. Like

Nelson, Blake stated that *"I have to evidence a leadership style that promotes creativity and entrepreneurship, but that is based in an evidence model of decision making."* Blake went on to say that he has created an expectation for creativity. *"I'm not looking for people who can just do their job well, I'm looking for folks who can also be very creative and very entrepreneurial in the course of their normal job responsibilities,"* he added. Blake was the only participant who introduced the topic of the global community. *"My style is to really promote an appreciation for diversity and globalism."*

As indicated above, Paul's asking for salary reduction was a creative approach that enabled him to give year-end bonuses to every employee. The ability to choose to lower his own salary was a key point, of course, in supporting Paul's plan to creatively demonstrate two points: (a) In leading by example he had modeled the financial sacrifices he was asking faculty members to take in terms of foregoing raises; and (b) being generous with others wherever possible is repaid with loyalty and a sense of team spirit. *"After that, if you'd said anything bad about me, they would have run you out of town,"* he quipped.

Recommendations for Presidential Decision-Making

Many of the participants' comments could be taken as recommendations for other university presidents, even though these comments were not made in the context of proposing solutions for others.

Ellen and two other participants noted the benefit of networking with colleagues heading other institutions: sharing possible solutions to shared problems. Several interviewees referenced the importance of having a vision of quality and holding high expectations for all stakeholders in this process. When several of the participating presidents began their current position, they had inherited a situation in need of a quick turnaround.

Be a creative risk-taker – then make the decision, even if it encounters resistance. Charles, for example, had to manage the unrest among students when two universities merged. *"Our students demonstrated and marched on the court house, and of course the police were on top of the roof with guns and automatic rifles."* He indicated that he was extremely concerned to ensure an event like the one that plagued the Jackson State University campus did not repeat itself. *"If you check the Jackson history you know somebody came through and shot their dormitory up and killed students. Fortunately, this scenario did not develop and the following year,"* Charles said, *"students were calmly wearing sweatshirts with the name of the new university"*.

The presidents who participated in this study agreed that it is important to always factor in the demographics of the students and understand what their challenges and

concerns are. Nonetheless, the realization that individual students, and sometimes, even whole classes are transient shifts attention toward the view that the quality and reputation of the institution must be maintained.

Some presidents of small, private institutions set forth ideas that might be applicable to public colleges and universities as well. Chief among these was the emphasis on developing more entrepreneurial activities as a sustainable source of revenue. Although the participants who alluded to this approach did not elaborate, the use of creative teams in other settings might be able to devise business models appropriate to their own needs. Retailing more goods and services is one approach that seems to offer great promise.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data indicate that when making decisions, participants exhibited characteristics inherent in the five leadership theories, with the two-way social exchange of Power and Influence Theory, and the legitimate and expert power described by French and Raven (1959) most prominent. Birnbaum (1989) illuminated the discussion of Behavioral Theory by noting that the main criteria are expressing goals and motivating others to action, and many interviewees expressed these in their discussions of personal vision and collaborative decision-making practices. Francine, who described herself as a visionary, stated *"It's almost like that old joke about if you don't know where you're going you might end up somewhere else. You've got to have a vision of what is possible and desirable, and then get buy-in from stakeholders for it to work."*

The elements described by Contingency Theory appeared frequently throughout the data; several presidents stressed the importance of remaining flexible and adjusting to different situations and changing circumstances. *"There's no cookie-cutter solutions to these issues we're facing nowadays,"* George noted. *"You've got to keep your goal clearly in mind but be able to adjust to what the realities are in your situation."* The model of this theory outlined by Fiedler (1967), did not match the findings of this study, however. Fiedler proposed a dichotomy, suggesting that leaders are either task-oriented or relations-oriented, but the data revealed that in practice this line is blurred. Many participants referred to shared governance, and emphasized the importance of giving all constituencies – including students – an opportunity to express their ideas and concerns.

What impact did their decisions have on these issues at their institutions? In addressing this question, the participants cited an array of results ranging from improved physical plants to the resolution of financial and accreditation issues, increased enrollment, and the

enhancement of institutional prestige. Although public funding has decreased significantly, as reported by Hirsch and Weber (1999) and Bowman (2009), presidents have developed innovations to augment these shortfalls. Gasman (2010) noted that the leaders of HBCUs have been forced to develop a variety of creative strategies to restore viability. Participants reported a shift toward entrepreneurial activities, and public institutions are learning to utilize the fundraising tactics favored by private colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

A careful review of the data found no meaningful differences in the decision-making processes or practices based on whether the participant was a current president or had left the position. Responses to interview questions varied widely, but did not reveal any pattern of similarity that could be attributed either to age or to employment status.

During the course of the interviews the data corroborated the finding of many researchers discussed in the literature, while standing in stark contrast to others. This very discrepancy is important to note, however, since it points to the way in which decision-making models and leadership theories have evolved toward more inclusive and creative policies and practices. The expansion of entrepreneurial activities, for example, was mentioned in two of the interviews as a way to generate dependable revenue streams.

The paucity of current literature on the topic of HBCU presidents' leadership and decision-making processes indicates that a proactive approach to solving the complex issues faced by HBCUs is necessary. It seems clear that in these challenging economic times, it behooves institutions to learn from one another, and to avoid pitfalls that others have endured. A more general implication of this study is that collaboration among the presidents of higher learning institutions would result in not only a greater trove of data, but also in development of the interpersonal professional links through which proprietary knowledge and data are shared.

Although many HBCUs are still situated in relatively small, rural towns where the president is held in high regard as a prominent member of the community, the data from this study show that community inclusive leadership has become the norm. Anticipated benefits of this shift in leadership style and decision-making include greater transparency, increased efficiency, and enhanced institutional stability. This leadership model also supports the trend toward the development of entrepreneurial activities in that a team of decision-makers may provide a wider range of creative input than would be generated by a president acting in isolation.

DELIMITATION

Delimitations inherent in this study included the focus on the self-reported decision-making processes of HBCU presidents, specifically in regard to the critical institutional issues stated in the interview protocol. It is assumed that all participants answered the questions posed to them in a truthful manner and that the information they provided accurately reflected their own attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions.

Another delimitation was related to the manner in which participants were selected. With the exception of institutions within the researcher's own university system, and the university where the researcher is enrolled, presidents of other four-year, degree-granting HBCUs were contacted; it is important to note that only presidents who had been in their current position for at least one year were considered. Fifty email invitations were sent to request participation in the study. Although 23 presidents responded, only 17 were interviewed; two were unable to schedule an interview within the time constraints imposed by this study, and four declined to be interviewed due to travel and other concerns.

The structure and content of the interview questions were an additional delimitation. Although they were crafted to elicit the most relevant information regarding participants' decision-making practices and leadership styles, the inclusion of different questions may have led to other types of responses. Due to excessive cost associated with traveling coupled with the time constraints, all interviews were conducted via telephone. The lack of in-person meetings could have resulted in missed cues and miscommunication. To address this concern, follow-up procedures included email correspondence as needed for clarification and expansion of comments.

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