

THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT AND HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Marybeth Gasman
University of Pennsylvania

Since I began conducting research pertaining to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in 1994, I have been asked one persistent, and frankly annoying, question: ‘Are HBCUs relevant?’

As a professor of higher education, I have never been asked whether any other type of institution is relevant. By and large, most people believe that colleges and universities are important players in moving society forward and are needed. However, when it comes to HBCUs, the tables turn and people continually ask whether or not these institutions are important, relevant, and if they matter.

For most of my career, I have answered this question with data. I usually note that HBCUs provide one of many choices for African Americans and other students with regard to college. I make mention that these venerable institutions boast tuition costs that are half the cost of colleges and universities overall. I note all of the highly ranked academic programs at many HBCUs. I also roll out all of the data that show that HBCUs disproportionately prepare students for graduate and professional school, especially in science, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy. I explain that research demonstrates Black students feel empowered and that they are valued at HBCUs. They know that they are wanted.

I often push back at those who ask me the ‘relevancy’ question as well, noting that the main reason it happens is that people tend to see historically Black institutions as ‘segregated.’ We see White as the norm and don’t always notice that predominantly White institutions are often segregated and, moreover, these institutions have a long history of systematically segregating African Americans when they were admitted.. HBCUs have never refused non-Blacks admissions and in fact, some of the first HBCU students were White; currently 13 percent of HBCU students are White.

The idea of seeing HBCUs as segregated took root after *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled segregation to be unconstitutional, when, just like Black elementary, middle and high schools, Black colleges were assumed to be unnecessary by many. First, it was wrongly assumed that educational institutions at all levels would quickly integrate. And second, it was assumed that the Black institutions were inferior and so Blacks would need to integrate into White institutions. Yes, Black colleges had fewer resources but they had a long and impressive history of building the Black middle class. Fewer monetary resources does not equal inferiority. We must not forget the value of human resources and community.

In 2013, the ‘relevant’ question began to take on new meaning. As the rapid killing of Black men and women took place in cities throughout the country, the treatment of African Americans on college campuses became a hot button issue. The Black Lives Matter Movement, which also began in 2013 took hold in great forces on campuses and lead to the removal of leadership and vast changes in policy. However, at the same time, many African Americans—parents and future students—were watching the vile incidents on campuses and beginning to wonder if predominantly White institutions were healthy environments for learning and more importantly, if they were safe.

At the same time, HBCUs began to see an increase in new student enrollment. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics nearly 38 percent of HBCUs reported a 10 percent increase in undergraduate student enrollment between fall semesters 2013 and 2014. And since 2014, the increases have continued with over 40 HBCUs (nearly 40% of the 105 in existence), boasting increases in new student enrollments between 10% and 50%. Although it is too soon to make a direct connection between the racial strife on predominantly White campuses, attention brought about related to this strife by the Black Lives Matter movement, and the increases in enrollment at HBCUs, we do know anecdotally that parents are concerned about sending their children to unsafe environments and that students are concerned they will not be able to learn or valued at predominantly White institutions. It is my hope that researchers focused on HBCUs will begin to conduct qualitative interviews and survey research with incoming HBCU students.

In 2017, I was still asked the relevancy question with regard HBCUs but I expanded my answer to include issues of inclusion, having a safe and empowering learning environment, being valued for your contributions to the academic community, as well as your cultural background. These features of HBCUs have always been in existence but I think they are even more important

right now, especially as we move into an era of deep and open hatred and racism fueled by the president of the United States, with no apologies. HBCUs have always been important but they are priceless, essential, and fundamental to the lives of African Americans in the 21st Century.

HBCUs continue to play an important role in our society. However, what the Black Lives Matter movement shows us consistently is that predominantly White institutions need to change, to step up and embrace difference, and to be truly inclusive. And doing so means that some policies will need to change, some traditions will need to end, and more oversight will be needed in order to ensure that African Americans have choices for their educational endeavors. HBCUs should not be left to do all of the hard work. Instead, predominantly White institutions should look to them as examples and for guidance in empowering African American students by providing a safe environment and truly valuing their contributions.

HBCUs are places where Black lives have always mattered but there is nothing but will stopping all colleges and universities from valuing Black lives in the same way.

Marybeth Gasman is the Judy & Howard Berkowitz Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She also serves as the Director of the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/volume-14-issue-1-fall-2017-15-years-urban-education-special-anniversary-edition-journal/black-lives>