Case Study Exploration of HBCU Campus Involvement: Howard University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Overview

Using an intrinsic case study design, this study examined the campus involvement experiences of undergraduate students at Howard University since the onset of the pandemic. Informed by 17 individual interviews and one focus group, this executive summary offers research-informed implications for practice tailored to HBCU student affairs professionals.

Significance

Student affairs research has documented the various ways in which HBCUs serve students (e.g., Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Yet, not enough attention has been given to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on campus involvement, especially at HBCUs. Why is this important for student affairs professionals?
- **Sense of belonging** (Strayhorn, 2021) is critical to first-year students as they are vulnerable to feelings of **loneliness, isolation, and rejection**. The pandemic added a new layer of isolation for students and exacerbated issues of **mental health**.
- HBCU student affairs professionals can play a pivotal role in shaping the lives of students as recent reports show that HBCUs are experiencing an enrollment renaissance given their ability to provide **racially and culturally affirming environments for students** amid racial tensions in the U.S. (Williams et al., 2021).

Key Findings

- Students continue to experience feelings of **trauma, fear, and anxiety** which were heightened as a result of the pandemic. This degree of uncertainty has inhibited students from wanting to get more involved.
- Despite voicing concerns related to the student protest during AY 2021-2022, **students spoke positively of their residential experience**, which they attributed to developing close friendships with peers and **greater sense of belonging**.
- Students frequently discussed **elitism** on campus, namely how **wealth, power, and prestige** foster an elitist environment on campus. Students described a social hierarchy pre-determined by their social economic status, family name, and their social network, which hindered their ability to find sense of belonging.
- Despite many barriers, our participants believed that their **HBCU experience** provided them with a **nourishing and empowering college environment.**

Highlights – Student Quotes

On HBCU *Sense of Belonging*:

> "I always remember that I am Black, that I have to try twice as hard, but now I never have to give someone a reason to push me out of this space or tell me 'I don't belong, or I'm not qualified, or I don't fit in.' Coming to an HBCU has allowed me to not have to worry about that. It's a sense of peace…and I wouldn't trade it for anything"

On *Elitism*:

> "I think a lot of organizations aspire to have the same type of selectivity as the Divine Nine…which is why I look at some organizations sideways if they're trying to replicate Divine Nine organizations. The Divine Nine

can do their own thing, because that's them and that's their history, but I feel like we don't need that type of selectivity in every student organization."

On the *Value of Residential Experiences:*

> "I definitely see how sense of belonging is a lot different … I see how just the culture is a lot different … my freshman year, everybody lived in the same place. And now it's like I literally have to text my friends on Sunday for something two weeks out because we don't know where everybody's going to be at and it's just really difficult to plan things."

Implications for Practice

- Elitism has been ignored in scholarly debates around campus involvement at HBCUs. Our participants expressed that elitism at an HBCU is difficult to talk about because most students choose to attend an HBCU to experience a sense of belonging within *Black culture and family*. **How does your campus programming address issues of elitism as a barrier for student involvement?**
- Our research underscored the critical role that **residence halls** play in finding connection, which students linked to their overall satisfaction with their "HBCU experience." Students remembered how they felt when they arrived to campus. **How does your residential programming and staff training address the specific needs of first-year students?** Namely, is your programming and staff training prepared to **address feelings of isolation and does it provide clear avenues for students to find opportunities for involvement?**
- Our findings showed that we should be more intentional about implementing programming that relates to the traditions of the institution (e.g., Homecoming). Namely, we learned that when students found dissatisfaction with the current programming offering, they formed their own groups and used social media to express disappointment with the institution. **As student affairs educators, how are you linking programming to already existing traditions, and are you mindful of *touchpoints*[1] as an extension of campus involvement offerings?**

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[1] "Touchpoints" are defined as meaningful student development moments or opportunities, which are small yet highly impactful day-to-day natural interactions that develop long-term bonds and sense of belonging among students.

References

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