

The modern role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities:

Do they have a future?

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Overview

Summary

Albert L. Samuels' book "Is Separate Unequal?" presents an argument for the continuation of publically-funded Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the face of what he perceives to be the threat of their elimination as a result of court rulings that have indirectly caused the question in the book title to arise. *Brown v. the Board of Education* and cases in its wake have ensured integration at the primary and secondary levels but have never proffered a ruling about the justification for majority-black colleges and universities. Samuels argues that such institutions do not have policies enforcing segregation and provide a high-quality service to many black students, rendering them justifiable. In this unit based on the premise of Samuels' book, students will explore the creation of these institutions, evaluate the benefit they provide, and develop an argument pertaining to their continuation. This unit is relevant for high school students because it leads them through an evaluation of modern college options which may apply to their own future, fosters critical thinking and expression, and emphasizes a history of a large segment of the American population which may have been marginalized in their previous studies of American history.

Learning Objectives (L.O.)

L.O.1. Summarize the origin of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States.

L.O.2 Read and reflect upon factual experiences of select individuals who attended institutions in which they were a minority.

L.O.3. Analyze differences between the website content of a modern majority-white college or university and a Historically Black College or University and reflect upon the findings.

L.O.4. Develop and support an argument pertaining to continued public support of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Topic Background

The creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) was originally part of “a broad social movement aimed at providing education to the emancipated slaves” (Samuels, 32). It has been well documented that most slaves had been denied access to education and, upon their emancipation, remained segregated from many institutions of white society, including education. Supporters of public education for blacks believed that segregated institutions of higher learning were necessary to overcome resistance to integrated opportunities in white institutions (Samuels, 33). If left to the control of white institutions, particularly in the South, black educational opportunities would have been inferior to those of whites because Southern whites were motivated to maintain hegemony over blacks (Samuels, 34). In fact, many state laws in the South forbade black attendance at white universities (Samuels, 34). In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court legitimized the practice of segregation, declaring that separate facilities for blacks were legally permissible as long as they were equal (Samuels, 29). Thus, a dual system of public higher education became formalized. However, the facilities and the funding of these institutions were far from equal.

From the outset, black colleges did not receive equitable federal aid and were often excluded from research benefits that came from initiatives like the Morrill Act’s land grant program (Samuels, 38). In addition, they even struggled to get funds from their own state. For

example, the State of Mississippi created Alcorn State, a black university, out of fear that blacks would attempt to enroll in the University of Mississippi (Samuels, 92). Yet state aid for Alcorn State was greatly reduced not long after its creation, indicating Mississippi's limited intention to promote successful outcomes for the university (Samuels, 93). This example was replicated in the 1940s when many Southern states upgraded HBCUs to stave off integration of white institutions (Samuels, 53).

The inequitable beginning of publically-funded black colleges and universities left them at a disadvantage. Inequities at the primary and secondary levels left black students underprepared for higher learning and necessitated that HBCUs offer programs to remedy academic deficiencies of students (Samuels, 69). In Mississippi at the turn of the century, "African Americans represented 60 percent of the school-aged population, but black schools only received 19 percent of the state's funds" (Samuels, 94). It is reasonably understood that diverting already limited resources to remedial coursework significantly hampered the ability of HBCUs to compete with white institutions academically, thereby casting them as inferior in the eyes of white society.

In 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* integrated primary and secondary schools in the United States. While *Brown* did not directly apply to higher education, there was a push for the application of its principles at colleges and universities. As a result, *Brown* raised the question of whether publically-funded black colleges still had a right to exist: "Plagued by a legacy of neglect and underfunding and saddled by a perception of inferiority, HBCUs faced the very distinct possibility of elimination in the push toward desegregation of higher education" (Samuels, 25).

The *Brown* “opinion did not make clear whether the harm of the *Plessy* regime was segregation itself or the state’s role in legally imposing it” (Samuels, 68). This remains a crucial question today. Supporters of HBCUs argue:

Legal access to white universities would not be an adequate remedy for black students who continued to be the victims of discrimination. In fact, they feared that a ‘desegregation only’ remedy might actually *decrease* educational opportunities for most African American students by thrusting them into a more competitive educational marketplace for which many of them were not prepared (Samuels, 69).

What’s more, it can be argued that white colleges and universities were the violators of the Constitution, not HBCUs which never barred whites from attending (Samuels, 165). Therefore, desegregation or outright elimination of HBCUs raises further legal questions about the legitimacy of such institutions.

Even upon the eventual integration of white colleges and universities, supporters argued for the continuation of HBCUs:

Black educators believed that the legacy of Jim Crow segregation left many prospective black college students unprepared to compete with white students on an equal basis; thus, if black institutions ceased to exist, many blacks would be denied the opportunity to pursue higher education altogether (Samuels, 76).

In fact, in 1969 ten states were charged with still operating dual systems of higher education and were ordered to desegregate (Samuels, 79). In the face of such conditions, supporters of HBCUs continue to insist that such institutions must exist to counteract racism.

To this day, supporters of HBCUs maintain that psychological implications result in some black students performing better in black settings like HBCUs than they would in white

settings (Samuels, 175). Data from 1990 further demonstrated the positive benefits of HBCUs: while they enrolled 17 percent of African American college students nationally, they accounted for 27 percent of African American college graduates (Samuels, 175). What's more, defenders of HBCUs argue that it would be unwise to dismantle black colleges given America's track record of discrimination at white institutions and the role of HBCUs in promoting educational and cultural needs of black youth (Samuels, 48).

Activities

The Origin of HBCUs (L.O.1)

1. In small groups, review primary source material from the antebellum period about the attitude of whites towards the education of slaves. Each group should complete the following two statements:

- a. The position of white government on the education of slaves was:
- b. The strongest motivating factor for these state governments was likely:

The two historical documents the students should review can be found at the following website: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>.

They are a South Carolina Act from 1740 and a portion of the Virginia Revised Code of 1819.

2. Read Samuels' account (pp. 92-97) of Alcorn State and its unfair support from the State of Mississippi long after slavery was abolished. Note the tables on pages 95 and 96 regarding state appropriation of funds. As a class, discuss answers to the above questions only this time substitute the term "African Americans" for "slaves" and evaluate if the motives of state government changed at all after the abolition of slavery.

3. Read and discuss U.S. Congressman James E. Clyburn's column in support of HBCUs, found at <http://clyburn.house.gov/statements/049218hbcus.html>.

The Mission of HBCUs (L.O.3)

1. Divide into small groups. Using classroom computers, access 15-20 websites of HBCUs from the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities found at the following website: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/list/whhbcu/edlite-list.html>. Each group should visit 2-3 different school websites with each group looking at a different collection of schools. Have the students identify the mission statement of each school and then develop their own brief summary statement about what the essential missions are of their collective group of schools.

Example...

Mission of Howard University: *Howard University is a comprehensive, research-oriented, historically Black private university providing an educational experience of exceptional quality to students of high academic potential with particular emphasis upon the provision of educational opportunities to promising Black students. Further, the University is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a cadre of faculty who are, through their teaching and research, committed to the development of distinguished and compassionate graduates and to the quest for solutions to human and social problems in the United States and throughout the world.*

Mission of Morehouse College: *The mission of Morehouse College is to develop men with disciplined minds who will lead lives of leadership and service. A private historically black liberal arts college for men, Morehouse realizes this mission by emphasizing the intellectual and character development of its students. In addition, the College assumes special responsibility for teaching the history and culture of black people.*

***Mission of Elizabeth City State University:** Through teaching, research, and community engagement, Elizabeth City State University provides a student-centered environment, delivered in a manner that enhances student learning, while preparing its graduates for leadership roles and lifelong learning. The university is also a leader in facilitating sustainable economic growth, while safeguarding the unique culture and natural resources of the region.*

2. As a class, review each group's summary statement to determine if the missions of all HBCUS are similar to one another.
3. As a class, pull up the web sites of 3 major public, non-HBCU universities and compare how those schools' mission statements compare to the mission statements of the HBCUs.
4. Students should individually write a one paragraph analysis of the missions of non-HBCUs and HBCUs describing their similarities or dissimilarities.

Individual College Experiences (L.O.2)

1. Read and discuss the following excerpts about individual college experiences:
 - “Whistling Vivaldi” by Claude M. Steele – Chapter 9, Section 1, pp. 152-154
 - “Balm in Gilead” by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot – Chapter 5, pp. 94 to the end of first paragraph on page 104.
 - “The Warmth of Other Suns” by Isabel Wilkerson – Part 2, section beginning on p. 115 to end of section on p.118.
2. First discuss collectively then respond in writing individually (1-2 page essay):
 - a. Identify 5 feelings/emotions you observed of the individuals in the excerpts.
 - b. How would you want your college experience to be the same or different?

Academic Comparisons (L.O.3)

1. Each student should select a major that they are interested in pursuing when in college.
2. Identify a HBCU that offers that major or a similar major. Next, identify a non-HBCU public university that offers the same major as the HBCU. The two selected institutions will be the focus of each student's work. The following website will be useful in identifying which schools offer the student's selected major:

<http://www.collegemajors101.com/>

3. Compare the appropriate department websites of each university. Take notice of faculty profiles, course offerings, entrance requirements, etc.
4. Write an evaluative critique of the two pages. Make observations of strengths and weaknesses, comparisons, unintended messages, etc. Overall, does one program seem stronger or more attractive than the other?

Position Paper (L.O.4)

1. The teacher should return to each student their previous written work from the unit with evaluative feedback (Analysis of school mission statements, essay response to individual student accounts, evaluative critique of HBCU v. non-HBCU department web pages).
2. Using these pieces and other teacher-provided sources from the unit bibliography, students should develop a 2-3 page essay supporting their position on whether HBCUs deserve continued public support. The essay should address rationale for their argument related to both academics and socio-emotional factors.

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