



Meeting at the margins: culturally affirming practices at HBCUs for underserved populations

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Abstract

Drawing upon theories concerning culturally informed pedagogy and college environments, this qualitative study utilizes grounded theory techniques to explore the culturally affirming practices that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) faculty and administrators employ to create inclusive and supportive environments for populations often marginalized in US higher education—especially low-income and first-generation college students. In doing so, we focus on practice(s) that meet the unique needs of these students as an extension of existing research on high-impact practices (HIPs). While we take up these issues within the context of the US, we consider the implications within national and international domains. The findings highlight three approaches to cultural affirmation: centering students' experiences in humanizing and validating ways; prioritizing relevant and relatable educational experiences; and understanding the balancing act that many students must negotiate due to multiple life demands. As a complement to existing research about supportive HBCU environments from the student perspective, this study highlights the voices of HBCU faculty and administrators given their ability to cultivate and shape student success practices on campus. In doing so, we discuss insights from HBCU contexts about not only serving Black students, but also those from other marginalized backgrounds. This study expands existing research concerning culturally informed practices at HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions; emphasizes their contributions to the global higher education community; and highlights strategies that other institutions can employ to create more inclusive spaces for various underserved students. Implications for student success practice(s); pedagogy and academic development; and higher education policy are discussed.

Keywords Historically Black Colleges and Universities · Culturally relevant education · Black students · Educational practices · Minority-serving institutions · Faculty · Administrators · Higher education policy

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Our core mission is in trying to reach people who have been left on the margins or outside of the mainstream to a large extent.

-Dr. John, Administrator and Faculty Member, Chappelle University

Many higher education scholars within the United States (US) have examined the relationship between various educational activities and student outcomes, with an emphasis on improving key metrics such as learning (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kilgo et al., 2015) and retention (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Provencher & Kassel, 2019). However, much of this research concerning practices to promote student success is centered within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018) and offers a one-size-fits-all approach that does not attend to students' cultural backgrounds. Research across various countries notes the need for educational practices that are tailored to students' unique backgrounds (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021; Piepenburg & Fervers, 2021). In the US, this is especially true for certain racial groups and students from low-income families who are often marginalized within colleges and universities (Harper, 2009; Pendakur & Furr, 2016). Nonetheless, little is known about the nuances of various practices to promote student success at different types of higher education institutions, and additional insights are needed from key campus stakeholders about how they promote success for students from underserved populations. This study seeks to address this gap by examining strategies that faculty and administrators at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) within the US enact to promote success among students from various marginalized communities. Faculty and administrator insight is useful, considering their ability to cultivate and shape student success practices on campus. While this study focuses on Black institutions in the US, the findings have far-reaching implications for colleges and universities in other countries that are interested in developing inclusive practices for marginalized groups. Ultimately, this research builds upon other work highlighting the global contributions of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) in supporting students often at the margins of higher education (Hallmark & Gasman, 2018).

Literature indicates that HBCU campuses are often welcoming environments for Black students (Johnson & McGowan, 2017), but less is known about HBCUs' commitment to serving students with other marginalized identities. While HBCU student populations can be diverse (Gasman & Nguyen, 2015), these institutions educate many underserved and underrepresented students, some of whom are low-income and first-generation college attendees. Also, HBCUs enroll a high percentage of students who lacked proper access to college preparation resources during K-12 (Williams et al., 2019). Each of these are common characteristics of marginalized groups in the US and other countries.

Given their student population, this study examines the ways HBCUs employ culturally affirming practices to meet the needs of students whose marginalization extends beyond their racial/ethnic backgrounds. In doing so, this research highlights the experiences of HBCU faculty and administrators and the strategies they use to promote success for marginalized students. We examine the pedagogical and environmental aspects of HBCUs that cater to students from low-income families. Also, we highlight affirming practices meant to address obstacles that often accompany lower-income levels, such as being a first-generation college student, experiencing life circumstances that can make college more challenging (e.g., familial financial responsibilities), and having limited knowledge about the college-going process. Based upon existing studies which highlights the disadvantages that low-income (Kezar et al., 2015; Soria et al., 2013) and first-generation students (Means & Pyne, 2017; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012a, b) experience in college, we

conceptualize these as markers of marginalization within US higher education. The following research question guides this analysis: What culturally affirming practices do HBCU faculty and administrators enact to promote successful outcomes for marginalized students? From an equity perspective, we hope that this study will expand existing research concerning culturally informed practices at MSIs (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), emphasize their contributions to the global higher education community (Hallmark & Gasman, 2018), and highlight strategies that other institutions can employ to create more inclusive spaces for underserved students.

Literature review

HBCUs were established in the US before 1964 with a mission to educate Black Americans, and these institutions continue to identify with their struggle for equality (Commodore, 2018). The founding of these institutions is rooted in historical apartheid within the US, and most were established after the Civil War (Albritton, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). The need for these institutions is rooted in the history of US racism which (1) legitimized the enslavement of Black individuals, (2) made educating this population illegal, and (3) relegated their education primarily to segregated institutions once it was legalized (Williams et al., 2019). Hence, HBCUs have historically played a critical role in providing higher education access for Black communities afflicted with structural educational opportunity barriers. Despite these contributions, historically and contemporarily, HBCUs have stood in opposition to systemic forces that often seek to malign their legacies and thwart their survival (Williams et al., 2019, 2021; Williams & Davis, 2019). For example, the US Supreme Court has questioned their value and academic prowess in landmark cases, and policymakers in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi have championed mergers with PWIs and the closure of HBCUs (Kim & Conrad, 2006). Ultimately, HBCUs continue to be scrutinized without fair acknowledgement of their contributions to higher education.

Beyond traditional student success conceptualizations: impactful practices at HBCUs

A number of studies concerning student success within various national contexts have discussed best practices to foster better outcomes. These practices include pre-college counseling (Piepenburg & Fervers, 2021), supports to facilitate the transition into higher education (McGhie, 2017; Mittelmeier et al., 2019), advancing teacher effectiveness (Hsin-I et al., 2021), and improving departmental culture (Schendel, 2016). Within the US, a seminal cornerstone in student success literature focuses on high-impact practices (HIPs) and how they relate to key outcomes for college students such as learning and retention (Kuh, 2008). HIPs include first-year experience, mentored undergraduate research, and internships—common initiatives in student affairs and academic affairs to promote student success. Hence, many US institutions have adopted these practices, and they have been studied in various institutional contexts. For example, HBCU literature notes that faculty on these campuses have consistently fostered research opportunities for students (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Washington Lockett et al., 2018). While research notes the importance of HIPs on student success outcomes (Kuh, 2008), it also provides insights about highly impactful practices at HBCUs which go beyond traditional conceptualizations.

HBCU environments have been heralded for having lower student-faculty ratios and more student-faculty interactions than PWIs—positive predictors of student development success (Kim & Conrad, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Also, HBCUs provide positive social and psychological environments for Black students, which allows for greater retention and graduation rates (Allen, 1992), and greater confidence in their success post-graduation (Roy, 2019). Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) demonstrated that Black students succeed academically at HBCUs due to their institutional cultures, which promote and sustain social and academic support on campus. Previous studies have also underscored HBCUs' ability to uniquely adapt to students' needs. For example, Palmer et al. (2010) noted that Black men are academically successful on these campuses despite financial difficulties or other potentially derailing issues.

Redefining high-impact practices in HBCU contexts

HBCUs have long been purveyors of highly impactful student success strategies, though they may not have traditionally been conceptualized as HIPs. Kuh and colleagues' (Kuh et al., 2005) original operationalization of this set of "ideal" educational experiences was normed on 20 institutions, but only 2 HBCUs were included. The remainder were PWIs. Consequently, as Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018) contend, HIPs reflect and were originated in Whiteness, neglecting a large sector of institutions and student populations. Thus, it is imperative that higher education researchers continue to explore, refine, and redefine student success practices—especially as they pertain to HBCUs.

In contrast to the deficit-laden fallacies that surround HBCU communities, extant scholarship that centers these institutions highlights their successes (Gasman et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2009). HBCUs are premiere arenas for championing and expanding educational opportunities for Black students across the African diaspora. However, there is limited understanding of "how" HBCUs uniquely promote and engender a culture of success. A myriad of students from various backgrounds and identities deemed "at-risk" within the broader educational landscape pursue education at HBCUs. Thus, HBCUs have been tasked with (re)creating their own HIPs and strategies that support student success. HBCU practices and policies illustrate a historical legacy of providing education and student support, specifically for students from economically marginalized backgrounds (Gasman et al., 2017). Furthermore, these institutions attract high-achieving Black students while embracing the responsibility to grant college access for students whom many PWIs often deem unworthy of acceptance. Overall, HBCU students are nurtured and supported, both socially and academically, via their interactions with HBCU faculty and administrators. It is this unique relational culture that attracts and retains HBCU students, despite the perceived K-12 challenges that may follow them beyond high school (Baker et al., 2021).

To date, no existing research has systematically examined impactful practices on HBCU campuses in a way that redefines traditional notions of HIPs. Therefore, this study highlights and centers educational practices within HBCU settings that address the specific needs of students with various marginalized identities. In doing so, we examine culturally affirming practices these institutions use to meet students deemed "at the margins" and promote their success.

Theoretical underpinnings

This study is informed by existing theories regarding culturally affirming educational practices and institutional contexts—namely culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012), along with culturally engaging campus environments (Museus, 2008). These theoretical lenses are largely situated within US scholarship, but compliment research in other geographic contexts that problematizes deficit models concerning marginalized students and practices of subjectivity (Leyton, 2020). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has a long-standing history within US K-12 literature and encompasses three key areas: academic success (i.e., encouraging students' intellectual growth); cultural competence (i.e., helping students celebrate their culture while developing an appreciation for others); and socio-political consciousness (i.e., using academic learning to address real-world problems) (Ladson-Billings, 2014). CRP was developed in response to teaching and learning practices and research that employed a deficit lens and often labeled Black students as *at-risk* and *disadvantaged*. While this theory was initially conceived to explore successful approaches for educating Black students, it has also been used to promote culturally informed pedagogy for other racially marginalized groups within the US (Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Pak, 2018).

As a counter to deficit perspectives about Black and other racially marginalized students, CRP pushes scholars, educators, and practitioners to acknowledge the cultural resources that these students bring to educational settings. Moreover, it argues that these cultural assets can help to foster students' educational advancement (Ladson-Billings, 2014). CRP emphasizes the need to infuse an appreciation of these assets into the process of preparing *educators* and advocates linking learning principles to understanding and valuing students' cultural backgrounds. Overall, CRP highlights educators' need to connect with their students' overall life circumstances, families, and communities to promote student success. Building upon CRP, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) advocates similar principles while emphasizing the need to sustain students' cultural backgrounds instead of excluding those from the educational process (Paris, 2012). CSP advocates the repositioning of consistently marginalized students "into a place of normativity" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76) by making these students "subjects in the instructional process not mere objects" of it (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76), thereby challenging exclusionary educational practices which fail to acknowledge and sustain the cultural assets of students from various communities—especially those who are not from White, middle-class backgrounds (Paris, 2012).

Culturally relevant and sustaining practices have been discussed extensively in US K-12 education as asset-based approaches for educating students from marginalized communities. However, they are less commonly discussed in post-secondary education. Nonetheless, at an organizational level, culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) have become a topic of discussion within US higher education literature (Museus, 2014). The CECE model provides a holistic understanding of factors that affect college student success for a racially diverse student population (Museus, 2014). While the CECE model notes many influences on student success, one of its key contributions is a discussion of the relationship between campus environments and successful outcomes. CECE suggests that there are specific characteristics of a culturally engaging campus environment. Among others, these include *culturally relevant knowledge* (i.e., the extent to which students are able to learn about their cultures and communities of origin); *culturally validating environments* (i.e., students' interactions with educators that validate students' backgrounds and identities); *humanizing educational environments* (i.e., student interactions with institutional agents

that express commitment and care, and prioritize creating meaningful relationships); and the *availability of holistic support* (i.e., the availability of faculty or staff to serve as conduits between students and broader support networks on campus). The author notes that these campus features may influence various outcomes such as students' academic performance and sense of belonging (Museus, 2014).

Informed by theories regarding culturally affirming educational practices and institutional environments, this study examines how such practices and environments are curated by HBCU faculty and administrators. Although the noted theories have generally been used to discuss cultural affirmation along racial/ethnic dimensions, we extend it to address issues of cultural relevance in other domains, including students' socio-economic and first-generation statuses. In doing so, we acknowledge that there are cultural motifs affiliated not only with students' racial/ethnic heritage, but also their economic class and identity as first-generation college students (Kezar et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2012a, b). As noted by Kezar and colleagues (Kezar et al., 2015), low-income students "may not find existing programs relevant to their experiences" and "are often absent from campus structures, suggesting a lack of culturally relevant programming and services" (p. 242). Accordingly, an understanding of how higher education settings embrace the economic aspect of students' cultural backgrounds is important, especially because more low-income students are attending college (NCES, 2018).

There are also cultural aspects of going to college related to first-generation status. First-generation students often find the college environment and the college-going process unfamiliar (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kouzoukas, 2020). Also, research emphasizes a cultural mismatch between first-generation students' backgrounds and norms on many college campuses (Stephens et al. 2012a, b). Overall, this literature highlights institutional cultures that privilege students who are not first-generation, and a mismatch between the college environment and the lived experiences of students whose families have limited prior college knowledge. Nonetheless, there are often embedded assumptions that all students know how to navigate college campuses and the college experience successfully.

HBCUs provide an interesting context for studying cultural affirmation not only for Black students (Douglas, 2012; Johnson & McGowan, 2017), but also students with other markers of marginalization. Given the historical intersections between race, class, and opportunity in the US (Brown & De Lissoy, 2011), many Black students at Black colleges also occupy other oppressed identities. For example, nearly 70% of HBCU students are from low-income families (US Department of Education, n.d.). While economic status is frequently discussed as a way to identify students' (and families') financial resources, existing research notes how it is often considered a major contributor to their class and socio-economic status, and an instrument of subjugation and exploitation for those without financial resources (Wright, 2015). Hence, in addition to being a demographic characteristic, students' being from lower-income families can also reflect larger structural challenges they may incur related to economic power and privilege.

About 40% of HBCU students are the first in their families to attend college (US Department of Education, n.d.), unsurprising estimates given the long-standing correlations between economic background and post-secondary opportunity (NCES, 2018), as well as the history of structural racial biases within the US that have hindered Black American's educational advancement (Saunders et al., 2016; Williams & Toldson, 2020; Williams et al., 2019, 2020). Accordingly, in addition to serving the needs of a marginalized Black populace, HBCUs have historically offered opportunities to students with limited financial resources and familial college-going knowledge. We seek to better understand HBCU practices and environments that acknowledge, embrace, and accommodate the needs of students from these oppressed communities in culturally relevant, sustaining, and engaging ways.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes grounded theory techniques to highlight the culturally affirming strategies that HBCU faculty and administrators employ to promote success for marginalized communities. While research articulates how HBCU environments connect with Black students' racial backgrounds (Douglas, 2012), few studies discuss HBCU students' other oppressed identities. Moreover, literature concerning how HBCU faculty and senior-level leaders impact these distinct educational contexts and engage students is scant. We endeavored to amplify the narratives of HBCUs and their faculty and administrators because these entities are often ignored within conversations regarding higher education and student success practice. Nonetheless, given their student demographics, HBCUs are uniquely positioned to offer insights about serving various marginalized groups.

Data collection

The data presented derives from a larger study of HBCUs and their contributions to higher education that was conducted by the first author who is the study's principal investigator (PI). The subset of data that we utilize centers HBCU faculty and administrators who work directly with students. Participants were identified using combined purposeful sampling strategies (Patton, 2015). Initially, key informant sampling was used to identify HBCU faculty and administrators with keen insights about student success practices (Patton, 2015). Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to gather recommendations from key informants about additional information-rich participants (Patton, 2015).

The PI conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant over a 2-year timespan, each lasting 45–75 min. The PI was cognizant of participants' multiple responsibilities and time constraints. Hence, interviews occurred either in person or via phone, based upon each participants' availability. The vast majority were conducted via phone. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim.

Meet the participants

This study includes sixteen participants—six men and ten women. Table 1 includes select background information about each of them. Study participants and their institutions are represented by pseudonyms so that each remains anonymous. At the time of the interviews, most participants worked at private HBCUs that are classified as small or medium in size (US Department of Education, n.d.). Also, the majority worked at institutions where over half of the students were from low-income families, with five working at institutions where at least three out of every four students indicated high financial need. Ten participants worked at institutions where at least 30% of their students were the first in their families to attend college. Eight were full-time administrators. Half were faculty, although six of these also had administrative roles. Participants had varying years of experience; eight had been at their current institution for more than 10 years and five had other professional experiences at HBCUs. Most indicated having worked in various positions while at their current institution. Over half were also HBCU graduates.

Table 1 Background information on study participants and institutional affiliation

Name (pseudonym)	(Institution pseudonym)	Institutional type	Role	Gender	Years of service at current institution*	Prior HBCU professional experience	Attended HBCU**	Percentage of low-income students	Percentage of 1st gen. students
Mr. Lewis	West University	Private	Administration	M	10+	No	Yes	51–75	31–60
Dr. Furber	Rucker College	Private	Administration	W	10+	No	No	25–50	31–60
Ms. Griffin	Brown College	Private	Administration	W	1 to 10	Yes	No	Over 75	31–60
Ms. Gaines	Johnson College	Private	Administration	W	1 to 10	No	No	Over 75	31–60
Dr. Fountain	Carrie College	Private	Faculty and administration	M	1 to 10	No	No	Over 75	15–30
Dr. Hightower	Amos College	Private	Faculty	W	1 to 10	No	Yes	25–50	31–60
Dr. Borders	James University	Private	Faculty and administration	W	10+	No	Yes	51–75	31–60
Dr. Hickman	Alexander University	Private	Faculty and administration	M	1 to 10	No	No	51–75	31–60
Dr. Cochran	Cain College	Private	Faculty and administration	W	1 to 10	Yes	Yes	Over 75	15–30
Dr. Sarah	Williams University	Private	Administration	W	10+	No	Yes	51–75	15–30
Dr. Middleton	Hamilton College	Private	Administration	W	10+	Yes	Yes	Over 75	31–60
Dr. Jordan	Lankford University	Public	Faculty	W	10+	Yes	Yes	51–75	31–60
Dr. John	Chappelle University	Public	Faculty and administration	M	1 to 10	Yes	Yes	51–75	15–30
Ms. Wilkes	Bozeman College	Private	Administration	W	10+	No	Yes	25–50	31–60
Dr. Allen	McPherson University	Private	Faculty and administration	M	10+	No	No	51–75	31–60
Dr. James	Emma University	Private	Administration	M	1 to 10	No	Yes	51–75	15–30

* Years of service represents the range during which the participant has professionally served at an HBCU in any capacity (not exclusively in the current role(s))

** Attended an HBCU for undergraduate studies

Analysis procedures

As a research team, we analyzed the data inductively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We started with collective coding exercises to establish consistent practices across the group and promote reliable data analyses. Team members read the transcripts for initial understanding; coded data; discussed developing codes; and conducted a consensus-building exercise to address any discrepancies between or within codes. Also, each member kept detailed notes (i.e., memos) about similarities across interviews, questions to consider as a group, and key decisions made during the analysis process (e.g., data coding, consensus building). This information was used to create an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and document developing findings.

The research team met regularly to discuss developing codes and the accompanying data. These discussions allowed them to note similarities in codes and potential difference in interpretation. When needed, additional consensus-building discussions with the entire group ensued. The codes discussed during these meetings were used to create a codebook for the entire team that included a list of all codes and members' thoughts about what should be included or excluded in a given code. Using the codebook, each team member revisited all transcripts for additional data not identified in the initial process. While the team utilized a priori codes during this phase of the analysis, we remained open to identifying new codes as we revisited the data and shared new developments across the group. We reviewed the codebook continuously to ensure that each code was distinct, and data was compared with the developing codes (i.e., constant comparison). Also, the research team conducted a consensus-building exercise to identify complementary codes that could be combined into categories, thus moving the data closer to themes.

Findings

Common themes emerged which illustrate how HBCU faculty and administrators centered students' experiences; prioritized relevant and relatable education; and appreciated the balancing act that many marginalized students must engage. The following findings highlight participants' experiences and culturally affirming efforts to support student success.

Knowing, responding, and cultural affirmation: centering students' experiences in humanizing and validating ways

As noted, HBCUs provide a haven of support for students often marginalized within higher education. Hence, participants discussed practices they employed to create a culturally engaging environment that was humanizing and validating for low-income and first-generation students. Doing so required being cognizant of students' backgrounds and centering their personal experiences within the educational enterprise (i.e., connecting with students' life circumstances in order to advance academic success). Participants discussed the importance of connecting with students and knowing who they are on a deeper level to create validating and humanizing environments. Dr. Cochran, an administrator and faculty

member at Cain College, shared the following insights which illustrate the importance of knowing students and responding to their needs:

I think our students choose to come to college because they want more or...want better, or because they want different...it is our responsibility to find out where they come from, find out what they need, and be able to provide it...

As noted by Dr. Cochran, to better serve students at HBCUs, it is important to understand their stories and individual backgrounds.

Validating students also entailed a deep understanding of the diversity that exists even among students of the same race. For example, although HBCUs are educational homes for many students marginalized within K-12, their students are not monolithic. Dr. Fuber, an administrator at Rucker College, shared the following comments which illustrate the variety of needs that HBCUs must be prepared to address:

HBCU communities provide a critical function in educating students...at all skill levels... there are many HBCUs that are very selective... but they also have opportunities for students who have backgrounds that may not have given them an opportunity to show the full extent of their talent. They provide a culture for that talent to flourish, and that's very important.

As Dr. Fuber suggested, validating students requires faculty and administrators to appreciate the range of prior educational exposure and experience they bring to these institutions. Nonetheless, research notes how these institutions have been particularly helpful for students from academically and economically marginalized backgrounds (Palmer et al, 2009).

Participants also discussed the importance of recognizing barriers that can impede students' progress, and embracing opportunities to make a difference in students' lives as strategies to create humanizing and validating environments. Dr. James, an administrator from Emma University, made the following comments that denote humanizing and validating environments when discussing his efforts to help students who may stop-out because of finances:

Students in HBCUs stop-out or dropout for multiple reasons... Many have nothing to do with academics. ... Some are purely socioeconomic factors that impede their ability to...afford a four-year program and somebody has to care for those students... somebody has to say, this is our mission... we are unabashed and unembarrassed in saying... we want to receive these young people.

The process of centering students' experiences was not undertaken with timidity. As suggested by Dr. James, HBCU faculty and administrators embrace this humanizing and validating process "unabashed and unembarrassed" with the understanding that this is a critical element of students' success.

Culturally affirming responsiveness to students' unique circumstance

After connecting to students' life circumstances, participants underscored the importance of responding to their needs in culturally affirming ways. One approach was to create humanizing and validating environments that encouraged students to understand that they were capable of success. Oftentimes, this required undoing past psychological damage that

often accompanies having a marginalized identity in education. Ms. Griffin, an administrator at Brown College, noted:

A lot of these kids didn't come from places where they got praise every day... [HBCUs] provide a place for African American students and others to be in a small environment, and to be able to have support systems that they normally would not get at other schools.

Ms. Griffin's comments illustrate a key component of HBCUs' approach to student success. To be culturally relevant and sustaining, and to create a culturally validating and humanizing environment, HBCUs must juggle multiple curriculums to respond to the needs of students from various marginalized backgrounds. One curriculum exposes students to the basic skills and competencies of a college education. While this (common) curriculum is essential, individuals at HBCUs also must be proficient in executing a non-normative *invisible curriculum* to help students unlearn prior educational discouragement. This invisible curriculum involves understanding prior discouragement, reframing students' thoughts about their intellectual potential, and establishing high expectations coupled with consistent encouragement.

Another aspect of culturally affirming responsiveness involved creating a humanizing educational environment that prioritizes meaningful relationships. Many faculty members' dedication to students' academic development extended beyond current students. They created humanizing environments by developing and sustaining relationships with students even after instruction. Such connections are often important to ensure that students feel a sense of belonging—particularly low-income and first-generation students. Cain College's Dr. Cochran stated:

... the students that I had last semester, I told them even though I wasn't their professor or instructor of record, they could always come by my office if they needed help with the current math class that they're taking... I want to know how they're doing. I always try to offer myself as a resource to them.

Participants discussed how they remained in contact with students beyond the classroom to serve as a resource concerning academic and other issues. Such a disposition is essential in an environment where students have varying levels of college preparation and might doubt their academic potential. This type of approach is important for implementing the invisible curriculum noted previously. A commitment to ensuring the visibility of marginalized students and enacting the invisible curriculum reflects culturally affirming practices that create humanizing and validating environments and are common on many HBCU campuses.

Like faculty, administrators echoed the importance of creating validating and humanizing campus environments. Dr. Middleton, an administrator at Hamilton College, shared the following when discussing how his institution responds to students with financial challenges:

It's a very familial environment here... It's a culture of expectations, but...[students] know that they can go to the president's office. They know they can go to the provost's office. They know that they can go to any staff person. If they have a problem or any situation, that they can stop me on the sidewalk and say, "I won't be able to go home for the holidays. I need assistance."

Existing research notes that students describe HBCU environments as familial (Palmer et al., 2010; Washington Lockett et al, 2018). However, less is known about the specific

strategies that faculty and administrators employ to *create* familial environments. As a complement to research about HBCU students, the insights in this study illustrate the dispositions that key HBCU campus stakeholders adopt which create familial environments and illustrate humanizing commitments to care. This level of support may go beyond academic affairs and include helping students navigate other life circumstances common to those with economic constraints. Overall, participants in this study described culturally affirming practices that sought to better understand students' backgrounds, connect with their life circumstances, and "meet students where they are" in preparing them for their futures.

Prioritizing relevant and relatable educational experiences: culturally relevant knowledge, validation, and humanization

The HBCU faculty and administrators in this study discussed culturally affirming approaches that prioritize culturally relevant knowledge, cultural validation, and cultural humanization by creating educational experiences aligned with students' lived experiences. A common theme was the desire to provide relevant and relatable educational opportunities. The participants discussed incorporating aspects of students' identities into coursework and academic services. Such an emphasis is culturally affirming in its attempts to bring students' background into a "place of normativity" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76) by linking learning to students' cultural backgrounds.

Many faculty members noted the importance of students being able to make connections between class materials and their life circumstances. These faculty members purposely included content about marginalized communities—particularly those from which students originated. This helped students to meet the intended learning outcomes while also learning more about themselves and elevating their socio-political consciousness. Dr. John, a faculty member and administrator at Chappelle University, took such an approach when discussing populations with economic challenges and wealth gaps in his history classes. Similar experiences were shared by other faculty.

[Most students] at Chappelle University come from... one of the more economically challenged parts of the state and it becomes now personal because we start talking about things that relate to the communities out of which they have come and they begin to see themselves and making connections between what we're talking about.

Insights from Dr. John illustrate HBCU practices of centering students' experiences in the classroom to create an engaging environment where culturally relevant knowledge is valued. These approaches sustain students' cultural backgrounds by offering course materials that validate aspects of students' identities. Often these pedagogical decisions were intended to increase students' awareness of important social justice issues affecting their communities.

In some instances, participants indicated a need to retool traditional practices to align with the needs of students who have non-traditional financial constraints. Ms. Griffin at Brown College shared an example of an internship opportunity where such retooling was essential:

[An organization] has never been on this college campus, and they had offered two internships, and I couldn't get two students to apply for the internships. One of the reasons is... You gotta have a good credit record... [The organization] made the

presentation... and then [a representative] calls me and she says, “We don’t have any students.” I said, “Well, no students applied.”... Because they gotta have a good credit score.... That’s the focus right now... One of my colleagues is bringing her executives to talk about what it means to have good credit.

While internships are often discussed as HIPs in higher education (Kuh, 2008), many participants in this study were acutely aware that existing models needed to reflect students’ realities. In the previous example, students would not qualify for an internship because of credit complications—an issue for many from low-income communities. Accordingly, Brown College needed to teach students basic financial awareness to prepare them to take advantage of such an opportunity. This illustrates how HBCU faculty and administrators validate students’ identities by foregrounding their backgrounds. Furthermore, these institutional agents prioritized making the academic experience relevant for lower-income students.

Understanding the balancing act: validation, holistic support, and helping students manage multiple life demands

Many participants indicated that their students juggled multiple demands that could impede academic progress. Some had family obligations as spouses and parents. Some worked while in school or had financial obligations to other family members. The strains resulting from these multiple roles can make focusing on college difficult. Dr. Borders, a faculty member and administrator at James University, described such a scenario:

I see a lot of our students who are working almost full time, or sending money back to their families, or commuting and therefore, the focus is not on school ...We [have] a lot of working parents who are trying to juggle both.

Often, HBCU students must balance multiple life roles while attending college. Many participants helped to create culturally validating environments by acknowledging these demanding circumstances, and providing advice about navigating a complex terrain of family, work, and school responsibilities. Dr. Jordan from Lankford University shared the following insight about mentoring students through various life-related responsibilities and post-secondary plans:

I find that one of the things besides helping them be successful in the classroom, is just navigating through college period to get that degree. Some are working, some are keeping families together. And so the mentoring is a big part of what I do...just to give them someone that they can come to and talk to about possible graduate work or what can I do with this degree in history or ‘how can I segue this into a job?’

Dr. Jordan indicates how students’ backgrounds shaped their college experiences and mentoring relationships. Sometimes mentorship commenced even before students were formally enrolled and manifested via holistic support that extended beyond the institution. Dr. Furber, an administrator from Rucker College, shared an example:

[A congressperson] called me last night. She’s got a student she sent...his mother... has multiple sclerosis, he’s Pell eligible...she basically said to me, “If this boy doesn’t make it here, he’s not going to make it. Can you help him?” So immediately this morning I get on the phone with the registrar... We’re trying to figure out

...where next semester's resources are coming from, not [just] this semester, next semester. Because he's going to need help...

Students at HBCUs often occupy various marginalized identities which have the potential to disrupt their academic pursuits—including low-income status. While it is commonly known that students' financial strains can infringe on college affordability (Delaney, 2014; Perna, 2010), participants in this study noted that such challenges can also hinder students' *college availability* (i.e., students' ability to engage the learning process). Many students have financial responsibilities to others in their families. This often necessitates working. Moreover, students may have to assist family in other ways to maintain the household. From a culturally validating perspective, our study participants acknowledged the juggling act that many of their students encountered. Instead of creating an environment of cultural incongruence (Kuh & Love, 2000), and cultural dissonance (Museus, 2008), where students felt detached from the cultural norms of their families, participants exercised cultural integration (Museus et al., 2012) by validating students' various life circumstances. Furthermore, these HBCU leaders provided holistic support to help students balance those life circumstances while attending college.

Discussion

Since their establishment, HBCUs have been at the center of conversations about Black education; however, HBCUs often serve students with a variety of marginalized identities (e.g., low-income status, first-generation). Moreover, HBCU students often have family obligations beyond those generally expected of undergraduates. Students from these various demographics regularly find the college environment misaligned with their backgrounds, and HBCUs are often the bedrock of educational opportunity for students who may experience such cultural dissonance (Museus, 2008). Accordingly, these institutions can provide critical insights about successful practices for many students at the margins of higher education. To illuminate these contributions, this study gained insight from HBCU faculty and administrators about the culturally affirming practices that they enact to create campus environments which center cultural relevance and sustainability. This study affirms previous scholarship that focuses on the culturally engaging academic and social environments HBCU students' experience (Gasman et al., 2017). However, by focusing on faculty and administrators, this research builds upon existing literature to discuss *how* these environments are created. Below we outline implications for serving marginalized students by: distinguishing student success practice and practices; reimagining curriculum development; and advancing equity-focused higher education policy.

Distinguishing practice from practices: recommendations for other institutional contexts

This research has implications beyond HBCU environments and provides insights that can shape student success strategies at other institutions within the US and globally. To extrapolate these connections, it is important to distinguish student *success practices* from the actual *practice of student success*, as underscored in other literature (Taylor, 2020). While *student success practices* emphasize specific interventions often framed as high impact (e.g., internships), the *practice of student success* first centers institutional logics that

shape students' outcomes, and then aligns specific practices to complement those logics. As noted by Taylor (2020, p. 1092), "attention to the ideologies that undergird institutional policies is necessary for effective and equitable student success practices. Following trends and adopting practices without considering their inherent ideologies...runs the risk of haphazardly inviting challenges..." Accordingly, we argue that institutions must attend to the ideologies that they bring to the practice of student success before attempting to implement specific practices (Williams et al., 2021; Williams & Taylor, in press).

Study participants shared dispositions that first sought to understand who their students were and their specific needs. This underscores their overall commitments to helping students cope with different life circumstances. Only then could they identify affirming practices geared toward cultural relevance, sustainability, and engagement, thereby meeting students where they were. These findings illustrate the intensive labor involved in creating culturally affirming environments and suggest that institutions should first prioritize validating and humanizing connections that center students' personal histories. Afterwards, faculty and administrators should develop interventions tailored to students' needs. As suggested in other research, this may require avoiding "reductionist conceptions of student success" (Taylor, 2020, p. 1091) and instead inculcating "intersectional frameworks into guiding policies and structures" (Taylor, 2020, p. 1092) related to student success. This approach is more likely to foster successful outcomes for marginalized students than cookie-cutter approaches that disregard their unique experiences. Moreover, such approaches should be supported within larger policy discussions to support student success by pushing for deeper engagement between campus leaders and students.

An anti-deficit invisible curriculum: cultural affirmation, learning and unlearning

Our findings also have implications for reimagining curriculum and offer insights to shape student success practice(s) for marginalized students at other types of institutions. This involves appreciating the common and invisible curriculums needed to address the unique experiences of many marginalized students. Existing scholarship notes the various curricula that can exist within educational spaces (Jackson, 1990; Esposito, 2011; Margolis, 2001). For example, the concept of hidden curricula is often used to describe unspoken rules and norms that students are expected to master to successfully traverse the classroom (Jackson, 1990). Such curricula can be used to reinforce social inequities across the education continuum (Anyon, 1980; Esposito, 2011; Margolis, 2001). In contrast to the oppressive forces of hidden curricula, we suggest that the HBCUs in this study enacted an *anti-deficit invisible curriculum* to disrupt the status quo. At these institutions, the common curriculum focuses on traditional educational content. In addition, the invisible curriculum imagines students in non-deficit ways and seeks to dismantle psychological barriers by reframing students' conceptions of their intellectual potential. This anti-deficit invisible curriculum validates students by acknowledging their prior educational marginalization and helping them to unlearn negative perceptions about their abilities.

As other institutions marry cultural affirmation and (anti-deficit invisible) curriculum development, it is important that faculty and administrators understand the nuances necessary to approach this process in affirming ways that include *unlearning* as well as *learning*. This involves centering marginalized students' identities and understanding the various social factors that place students in marginalizing predicaments. Stated differently, the

concept of marginalization should be reframed as a verb that describes the act of marginalizing, as opposed to the adjective of being marginalized. This is likely a(n) (un)learning process that many faculty and administrators will need to engage in first. Afterwards, they should help students to reimagine their potential where necessary. Again, this process is unlikely to only involve students. It may often be necessary for faculty and administrators to engage in similar reimagining processes to help students see beyond (mis)perceived limitations. After this, other aspects of a culturally affirming curriculum should develop marginalized students' socio-political consciousness in ways that connect them to their communities and equip them to be change agents who dismantle marginalizing social factors. This facet of curriculum development can complement traditional approaches, but it takes the additional step of understanding who students are and helping them to develop into change agents.

Cultural affirmation and equity-focused higher education policy: a 3-pronged approach to accountability

The US Department of Education is currently engaging in a negotiated rule-making process and seeking stakeholder recommendations about various policy issues including federal financial aid programs, as well as approaches to address gaps in important student outcomes (Whistle et al., 2021). One important strategy for advancing equitable student outcomes is to advance *equitable institutional environments*. Stated differently, what if metrics concerning students' experiences were a central element of higher education accountability discourse, like graduation and loan default rates? A focus on institutional contexts and the marginalizing campus experiences of various groups could help to address commonly discussed gaps in student outcomes. How students experience the campus environment is an important intermediary step toward their success on that campus.

More low-income students and first-generation students are attending college (NCES, 2018; RTI International, 2019); hence, there is a need for increased institutional attention to the experiences of these demographics to ensure their equitable success. Unfortunately, instead of celebrating institutions that have a long-standing history of serving marginalized students, these institutions are often similarly marginalized in conversations about best practice(s). In an era of elevated attention to equity issues, we argue for a three-pronged approach to institutional accountability where inputs, experiences, and outputs hold equal weight. This requires considering who institutions serve (i.e., student demographics) and how they serve (i.e., how students experience those environments), along with the outputs of service (i.e., student outcomes). Current accountability discussions narrowly focus only on outputs. We suggest a need to pivot.

In recent years, many colleges and universities have implemented institutional climate studies. While this data has generally been used for internal administrative purposes, metrics concerning institutional climate—especially for marginalized students—could also be an important part of large-scale national datasets and related data collection efforts to examine larger trends. Within the US, such data could be added to the Integrated Postsecondary Data System and become a key metric on the college scorecard to ensure a form of equity-centered public accountability. Other countries may consider similar approaches. Prioritizing this type of data and making it publicly available would signal to institutions the importance of equity issues related to campus climate. Large-scale attention to these

issues could also help to move the needle on traditional metrics commonly at the center of higher education policy discussions.

Conclusion

Discussions of higher education and successful practices are often framed from the student perspective, providing insights concerning students' experiences and how they navigate college (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Kilgo et al., 2015; Kuh, 2008; Provencher & Kassel, 2019). However, additional information about practices that better meet the needs of marginalized students is necessary. To begin addressing this issue, we draw upon theories concerning culturally informed pedagogy and college environments to highlight the contributions of HBCU faculty and administrators to student success. We examine how these campus leaders create culturally engaging environments, and how they adopt practices grounded in the cultural backgrounds of marginalized students—particularly low-income and first-generation college students. Our findings highlight three approaches to cultural affirmation enacted by these HBCU stakeholders: centering students' experiences in humanizing and validating ways; prioritizing relevant and relatable educational experiences; and understanding the balancing act that many students must negotiate due to multiple life demands. By focusing on HBCU faculty and administrators, we hope to provide a perspective from a collective of institutions founded to serve students typically at the margins of educational opportunity and to offer models for other types of institutions. Moreover, we hope that our findings will help to (1) ignite self-reflection at other types of institutions concerning how institutional practice(s) and initiatives are (mis)aligned with the cultural backgrounds of various students; and (2) offer insights about potential ways to meet students at the margins by centering their experiences. It is vital that future research continue to expand how we view higher education practice(s) and reimagine practice(s) in a culturally informed manner.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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