



LEGACIES OF EXCELLENCE

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.



According to Section 322(2) of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*, a historically black college or university (HBCU) is defined as:

...any Historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.

Many of these institutions of higher education were founded after the Civil War, and they are a mixture of both public and private universities primarily located in the South. Today, in the United States and Virgin Islands, there are 101 historically Black colleges or universities. As a whole, nine percent of Black college students in the United States attended an HBCU in 2015. In the Gulf South states, there are fifteen HBCUs in Alabama, four HBCUs in Florida, six HBCUs in Louisiana, six HBCUs in Mississippi, and nine

HBCUs in Texas. To its own detriment, American society as a whole has yet to recognize that these universities have played a critical role in every aspect of American society.

Some might ask why HBCUs continue to exist so many years after the passage of civil rights legislation in the mid-twentieth century. C. Rob Shorette II explains:

In a re-segregating society, where race and economic class matter more than ever and contemporary accounts from students of color reveal chilly racial climates at predominantly white universities across the country, the future of HBCUs is most important for black Americans. Many of these students rightly view HBCUs as one of the few remaining safe spaces for black intellectual and personal development.¹

Moreover, in a country where those in power routinely engage in racist dog whistles and academics openly attack the very notion of diversity itself, HBCUs have gained new importance as cultural spaces where blackness can be expressed unapologetically and in all of its multiplicity.

Historically black colleges and universities are important today for the same reason they were important for previous black generations during the darkest days of Jim Crow: they are safe spaces.

The positive impact of HBCUs extends beyond black students to how they have shaped the wider American culture. First, HBCUs provided the space for black philosophies to germinate. From Booker T. Washington's notions of how a black institution of higher education should function to W.E.B. DuBois's notion of double consciousness and the idea that United States could actually be a liberal democracy, these central philosophies and political projects in the American experience may not have lasted past the deaths of their originators without HBCUs.

Second, Jim Crow itself was dismantled by HBCU alumni like attorney A.P. Tureaud, and, later, the first black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Even ubiquitous ideas such as intersectionality were first formulated on the HBCU campus, as was the case with Pauli Murray and her landmark work *States' Laws on Race and Color*.² Murray's book laid the intellectual foundation for the direct challenge to the constitutionality of Jim Crow in the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

In addition, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Morehouse man who graduated from the University in 1948—just as his father and grandfather had done in 1930 and 1898, respectively. It was at Morehouse that King was first exposed to the study of racism, theology, the works of Gandhi, and nonviolence. From his Morehouse roots, Dr. King changed the very political and cultural foundations of United States to such a degree that he is rightly seen as a modern day founding father.

In addition to their cultural impact on America, HBCU's also have clear economic impacts on the states where they exist. According to the United Negro College Fund, in 2014 HBCUs had the following impact in terms of dollars and jobs:³

State	HBCU Economic Impact in Dollars	Total Employment Impact (jobs)
Alabama	\$1.5 Billion	15,602
Florida	\$833 Million	7,817
Louisiana	\$923 Million	8,454
Mississippi	\$774 Million	7,775
Texas	\$1.3 Billion	11,409

HBCUs are integral to the economic stability and prosperity of the states where they exist. For the five Gulf South states, the combined economic impact of HBCUs is \$5.33 billion dollars, which in turn generate other social and economic benefits for each of the states and municipalities in which they are located. This is in addition to the increased lifetime earnings of HBCU graduates, many of whom remain in the states and localities in which they are educated.

Louisiana has a particularly interesting history in regard to its historically black colleges and universities. Louisiana is home to the Southern University system which is the only black college system in the country. Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans is the only historically black Roman Catholic university in the United States—founded in 1925 by Saint Catherine Drexel. Xavier is also the alma mater of the first female mayor of New Orleans, LaToya Cantrell, sworn into office in 2018.

In many places in the south, including my native Baton Rouge, a black child can matriculate from kindergarten to a law degree, doctoral degree, or a medical degree and never once set foot in a place where they are the minority. While this appears to those who live in the American south as an ordinary occurrence, for the rest of the country this is a unique experience. The HBCUs are fundamental institutions in both southern American culture and the American experience as a whole. In an increasingly racist time, they are ready-made and tested sites of resistance; but, more importantly, HBCUs are sites of black excellence from which we all benefit.

ENDNOTES

- Shorette, R.C. (2015, January 15) *Black Colleges Matter* retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/01/15/essay-why-historically-black-colleges-matter-because-they-serve-black-students>
- Murray, P. (Ed.). (1997). *States' Laws on Race and Color*. University of Georgia Press. (Originally published in 1950)
- All data gathered from *HBCUs Make America Strong: The Positive Economic Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities* retrieved from: <https://www.uncf.org/hbcu-impact>

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