

Resistance to Change: HBCUs and Online Learning

by *Patrice W. Glenn Jones and Elizabeth K. Davenport*

Changes in the academy have coincided with social shifts, community growth, student needs, and global conversions. During the 1990s, online learning began to receive national attention, and since 2010, online course enrollment has consistently increased.¹ In 2014, 28 percent of all students attending post-secondary, degree-granting institutions were enrolled in at least one online course, while 13 percent were enrolled in programs offered completely online.²

Public, private, and for-profit institutions alike see opportunity in online learning to expand enrollment and offset cuts in state and federal funding, as well as to offer convenient scheduling for students. However, even as they face ongoing declines in student enrollment and persistent questions about their long-term

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viability, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are rarely among them. Why have these institutions not embraced online learning? This article explores the absence of online learning programs among HBCUs, and whether this lack is due primarily to resistance to change or shortage of resources. The authors also offer strategies to increase online learning programs at HBCUs.³

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HBCU EVOLUTION

In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Land-Grant Act, giving federal land to states with the purpose of endowing and supporting “at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach sub-branches of learning as we are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts.”⁴ All but

one of the institutions that benefitted from the government’s investment were white institutions. Noting this disparity, the subsequent Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 mandated that states “open their land-grant institutions to Black students or allocate monies to Black institutions that could serve as alternatives to their white counterparts.”⁵

In 1900, nearly 4,500 African Americans were enrolled at HBCUs; by 1938, they numbered 28,000; and by 1953, more than 78,000. Much like the African American church, HBCUs became the “ebony towers” of the African American community, and attending one was considered an honor and privilege.⁶ Their students were empowered “to express their social and cultural heritage as a part of the college experience,” and seek change in their lives and communities.⁷ Often HBCUs were “at the forefront of exploring and searching for answers to problems and concerns of their communities.”⁸ This includes preserving culture, prospering community, equipping a new generation, and modeling what’s best about America.⁹ Without other educational options, generations of African Americans attended HBCUs and were instilled with a life-long sense of loyalty to and pride in their alma maters.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

The availability of cellular phones and the development of the Internet are two of the most significant advances of the latter 20th century. These, along with other technological innovations, have changed the way we communicate, shop, and collaborate. We also have seen a shift in how students learn and teachers teach.

In 1993, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation piloted online courses, and by 2001, a few courses grew into 571 courses and 300 full online degree programs. By 2003, 81 percent of all U.S. post-secondary institutions offered “at least one fully online or blended course” and 34 percent offered degree programs online; during the fall of 2005, nearly 3.2 million students enrolled in at least one online course.¹⁰ What was once unfamiliar is now the benchmark instructional-delivery method for stu-

dents at both public and private institutions.¹¹ In 2008, 97 percent of all two-year community colleges offered online courses, and in 2014, 60 percent of students at for-profit institutions were enrolled in online courses.¹²

Online learning, which for the purpose of this article is defined as technology-mediated instruction that occurs exclusively or significantly through the Internet via a computer or mobile technology (e.g., tablet or cellular phone), initially was perceived as passing pedagogical fad. But it has shown itself to be a viable method of learning and possibly the future of education, even among HBCUs. While there are many terms associated with online learning, including virtual learning, e-learning, and distance learning (a term that includes any education outside of the physical classroom, including correspondence courses), emphasis here will be placed on online courses and programs supported by mobile and virtual technology.

These online learning technologies continue to transform the higher education landscape. For example, Stanford Medical School has expanded online learning to include multi-modal virtual instruction, incorporating

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videos, discussions, simulations, mobile technology, role-playing, and more. For many for-profit higher education institutions, online classrooms provide the means to recruit and retain students, both traditional and non-traditional, by offering them access to education from any location.

Despite such innovations, many scholars and practitioners are still skeptical about online learning. This resistance is often fueled by stigma more than valid concerns, experiences, or data. Similarly, the national

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narrative around HBCUs has been damaged by generalizations and racial stereotypes that are immensely negative. Proclaimed as “academic disaster areas,” Black institutions often are described as “subpar learning environments” with decreasing enrollment, low matriculation rates, fiscal mismanagement, and inefficient leadership.¹³ The widely broadcasted financial hardships and accreditation concerns at a few institutions have led to broad

questions about the survival of HBCUs—notwithstanding their significant impact on higher education.¹⁴ Many ask: can HBCUs be saved?

THE PROBLEM

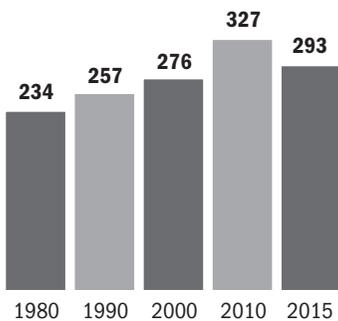
Since their founding, HBCUs have had an enormous impact on the education of Black Americans. While they make up just four percent of U.S. colleges and universities, HBCUs grant nearly 25 percent of the bachelor’s degrees awarded to the nation’s African American students; furthermore, 27 percent of African Americans with bachelor’s degrees in STEM areas earned them at HBCUs.¹⁵ At the same time, they have had a limited presence in the virtual learning landscape, with only about 20 percent of HBCUs offering online courses in 2010.¹⁶ While that number is increasing, the growth of online programming among HBCUs is, at best, slow. Meanwhile, HBCUs face some challenges, especially concerning enrollment. According to the Pew Research Center:

Overall enrollment at [HBCUs], including non-Black students, has risen over the past several decades [see Table 1], albeit at a much slower rate than at universities overall. NCES figures show that in fall 2015, the combined total enrollment of all HBCUs was 293,000, compared with 234,000 in 1980. By comparison, enrollment at all universities and colleges nearly doubled during this time.¹⁷ Affirmative action, school desegregation, rising incomes, and increased access to financial aid have resulted in more African Americans attending primarily white institutions. In fall 1980, 17 percent of African American college students were enrolled at HBCUs. By 2000, that share had declined to 13 percent, and in 2015, to just nine percent.¹⁸

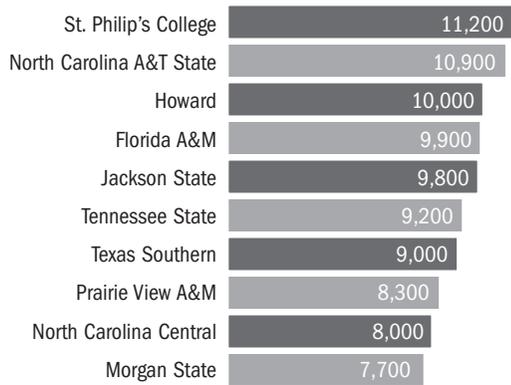
TABLE 1. ENROLLMENT IN HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

In 2015, nearly 300,000 students attended an HBCU

Total enrollment at historically black colleges or universities, in thousands



10 largest HBCUs, by 2015 enrollment



Note: Congress defines historically black colleges and universities as degree-granting institutions established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating black Americans. Analysis includes both part- and full-time students enrolled at two- and four-year colleges. Total enrollment includes students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of fall-enrollment data from the U.S. department of Education National Center for education Statistics.

Meanwhile, today's students are different. Often characterized by their appreciation and knowledge of technology and social connectedness, they bring new expectations, attitudes, and limitations to college.¹⁹ They anticipate that technology will "play a large role in the learning process by allowing access to vast areas of informational sources to be incorporated into the delivery of knowledge through multimedia modes with an emphasis on entertainment during the learning process."²⁰ Together, the

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issue of declining enrollment plus the emerging profile of today's learners points to an obvious solution to the problem of HBCUs viability. That solution is increased opportunities for online learning. And yet, HBCUs trail in implementing online programs and advancing virtual and mobile technology. Why? According to some, the answer is resistance.

WHY RESISTANCE?

Resistance stems from a natural reluctance to embrace change, and in this case, new technologies. But 20 years into the business of online learning, can we still consider this mode of instruction "new"? Our research points to seven explanations for the resistance among HBCUs to embrace online learning. They are: (1) fear of losing students, (2) inequitable computer access, (3) acceptance of stigma, (4) lack of funding, (5) competition, (6) flaws in organizational structure, and (7) faculty resistance.

Fear of Losing Students

In addition to waning enrollment, many HBCUs struggle to keep the students they have. Among HBCUs, the average student retention rate is 66 percent.²¹ Meanwhile, retention rates often are seven to 20 percent lower in online courses than face-to-face courses.²² This difference, and fear that it could exacerbate HBCUs' retention challenges, may contribute to HBCUs' sluggish implementation of online education. However, in a key study of New York community college students, researchers found

that while online students underperformed face-to-face students at the course level, online students also attained their degrees at higher rates.²³ Other studies have found no significant differences.²⁴ Necessity and demand will drive plans to expand online learning continue. For example, as of fall 2017, approximately four percent of Florida A&M University courses were offered online, but the strategic plan calls for increasing that rate to 25 percent by 2020 and enrolling at least 1,000 students via distance learning. The fear of losing students is paradoxical.

Inequitable Computer Access

Many HBCU students are first-generation college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and, therefore, are less likely to own updated technology or have access to the Internet. In 2015, only 51 percent of African Americans maintained a high-speed Internet connection in their homes while that number was 70 percent among white Americans.²⁵ This difference likely influences the number of online learners among HBCU students. Additionally, for many of these traditional-aged, low-income students, the prospect of leaving home is an incentive. For on-campus students without personal computers or reliable forms of mobile technology, online learning makes students dependent upon on-campus technology. And, while many HBCUs have learning labs and computer centers, student access may be restricted and students may be reluctant to depend on them. These limitations are further exacerbated by many African American students' documented preferences regarding face-to-face student-teacher interaction.²⁶

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Acceptance of Stigma

For years, many scholars concluded that African Americans were inadequately prepared for online courses and programs, and HBCUs and their students have long been discredited by others. This has always been and comes as no surprise, even today. However, what would be surprising

is if HBCU leaders succumbed to the stigma associated with their students' ability to learn in online environments.

Race and age have been identified as factors that influence online student achievement. In a study of 40,000 community and technical college students, researchers determined that younger, African American males from low socioeconomic backgrounds were among the students with the lowest success in online courses.²⁷ However, other studies sup-

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port the converse; some indicate that student-learning outcomes have increased for online compared to traditional learners, and students, at times, were more satisfied in online courses.²⁸ Furthermore, the online environment offers students the opportunity to learn more by doing; this is particularly important among African American students whose preferences for learning often are more kinesthetic and action-based.²⁹ Ultimately, gaps in

achievement exist between African American and white students in just about every aspect of learning. These gaps, which are likely arbitrary and biased, do not conclude that African American students cannot perform in online courses. For the most part, most would agree that any achievement disparity is linked to inequities in preparation, instructional quality, access to resources, and even funding.

Lack of Funding

Technology requires a constant cash flow. For HBCUs struggling to stay afloat, the costs can be a stretch, or even an impossibility. As Ivory Toldson, former executive director of the White House Initiative on HBCUs, stated, "In many ways, HBCU funding mirrors the economy, which was falling off a fiscal cliff near the end of the Bush administration... (and) has yet to make a full recovery."³⁰ More than 70 percent of HBCU students receive Pell Grants, and fewer donations from alumni and smaller endowments often fuel some of the financial challenges

HBCUs face.³¹ Unlike administrators at institutions where funding is less dependent upon federal aid, many HBCU leaders must weigh cuts to faculty and staff versus investments in learning technologies. Additionally, if HBCUs are not already engaged in virtual and mobile learning technologies, it is unlikely these leaders would favor new spending in online learning.

Making the community aware of technology needs at HBCUs must be a priority. HBCUs should take advantage of social media, e-mail and other communications to spread the word about their technology needs and to solicit donations. Funding should be prioritized for technology initiatives and their importance should be recognized.³²

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Competition

Perhaps the most significant factor crippling HBCUs today is the prevalence of online for-profit programs. Like HBCUs, for-profit colleges are more likely to serve minority students, including single parents, with lower family incomes and weaker test scores and academic backgrounds.³³ In 2009, nearly two million students attended U.S. for-profit colleges, up from 300,000 in 1986.³⁴ In 2010, as many as 10 percent of all U.S. college students were estimated to be enrolled in for-profit institutions. These institutions take in considerably more Pell Grant dollars per student than non-profits that serve similar students.³⁶ As HBCUs compete for the same federal dollars, for-profits pose a substantial threat. At schools like University of Phoenix Online, once the highest producer of African American graduates, students who need college-work-family flexibility are finding it outside HBCU campuses.

Traditionally HBCUs have been viewed as places for underdogs, but online for-profit programs have seized that particular marketplace by offering convenience and a wide array of programs. With flexible admissions requirements, shorter programs, career-placement promises, and

aggressive marketing strategies, leaders of these institutions capitalize on the same demographic of students as HBCUs, including African American students and other students of color.

Flaws in Organizational Structure

Another factor potentially contributing to resistance among HBCUs is flaws in their organizational structure, including frequent turnover

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among their leaders. Without consistent, visionary leaders, it is unlikely that any institution—including HBCUs—could establish viable online learning programs. Many primarily white institutions have welcomed innovation as essential to university education, and their early integration of online learning has afforded them an opportunity to learn from poor technology choices, failed management, and the like. However,

HBCUs, with their reluctant start, have missed much of this learning curve and thus have not created the organizational structure to advance and maintain online learning and other education innovations. For example, HBCUs are just beginning to widely employ online learning staff specialists. Instead, to save money, the roles of online learning and instructional design specialists have been relegated to information technology (IT) staff. Though valuable in maintaining the integrity of network systems, IT staff often lack the instructional knowledge to work with faculty to design and develop didactic and engaging online learning programs.

Faculty Resistance

Many faculty have been wary of online education, in general, and reluctant to move their courses online, specifically. This is particularly true at non-profit institutions, both public and private, and among faculty who have never facilitated online courses.³⁷ According to Gibson, Harris, and Colaric, acceptance of online instruction is correlated with acceptance of

technology generally.³⁸ Furthermore, while younger faculty tend to embrace the use of technology, many HBCU faculty are older. Their resistance to technology often develops from worry over the stability of their jobs. Faculty also are concerned about their visibility in an online course, their ability to convey personality in the environment, and student perceptions of their authenticity.³⁹ Still, it is important to note that the perceptions of faculty who have never taught online courses are in complete opposition to those of faculty with the most experience in online courses.

RESISTANCE AMID SUCCESS

Some insist that technology does not fulfill the needs of their students. Among the top schools who are not even considering offering online degrees is Atlanta's all-women Spelman College, which boasts the highest graduation rate (83 percent) among all HBCUs, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education. Said Spelman President Beverly Daniel Tatum in a written statement to *U.S. News and World Report*:

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The mission of Spelman College is focused on developing the intellectual, ethical, and leadership potential of our students. We believe that we can do that best in the context of a residential campus experience where students can engage in a variety of meaningful learning opportunities with faculty, staff and each other, in and out of the classroom. While we encourage the use of technology and support faculty in their use of the web and other technology-based teaching tools, an online degree program is not desired at this time because it falls outside of our current strategic focus.⁴⁰

Some would argue that Spelman's resistance to online learning is necessary to maintain its elite status among HBCUs. Online learning, after all, increases access. With their current success, Spelman may be

poised to persist with online resistance, maintaining a conformist selectivity. However, for most HBCUs, online learning provides a necessary lifeline for failing enrollment and dwindling success rates.

STRATEGIES FOR HBCUS

So how do HBCU academic teams begin to increase online course offerings? The simple answer is “strategically.” Ultimately expansion into

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online learning requires consideration of institutional culture and regulatory guidelines, as well as for specific student and faculty needs. However, nine research-based steps likely will improve HBCUs’ online student success and faculty satisfaction:

1. Engage instructional designers and virtual learning specialists.

To save money, some institutions have not hired instructional design and virtual learning specialists, instead adding those responsibilities to the workloads of IT staff. While both groups of practitioners contribute to the quality of online courses, they are not interchangeable. Course design matters. When students have clear directions and expectations, they are less likely to drop out of their online courses.⁴¹ Directions and expectations often depend on the quality of course design and language used. While faculty serve as subject-matter experts, not all are able to convert their face-to-face practices to the online environment. Instructional designers and virtual learning specialists can help create videos, audio files, and other instructional components to engage their online learners. They are uniquely qualified to support online faculty and to evaluate online courses for quality, integrity, and efficacy. Intentional course design and curriculum support promotes more in-depth learning.⁴²

2. Train online faculty.

A healthy relationship has been found between an instructor's social presence in a course and their students' success.⁴³ Effective online instructors embrace personal intrusion. They permit students to call and text, respond to e-mails promptly, and even reach out to students who have been absent. Many novice online faculty do not understand the implications of their online social presence and accessibility to students. Online faculty who allow the greater imposition in their personal lives encourage the greatest perception of faculty engagement and student-instructor interaction, and counter feelings of student isolation. Furthermore, the type and timeliness of instructional feedback contributes to online student engagement and learning.⁴⁴ Providing all faculty with professional development training will establish generalized, and institution-specific best practices, as well as guidelines for developing content and timely feedback.

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3. Orient all students to the online learning environment.

Before any student is enrolled in an online course, they should complete an online orientation. This limited workshop, designed and facilitated by the distance learning team of instructional designers and online faculty, would address self-efficacy, self-directed learning skills, learning management system functionality, communicating with peers and faculty, as well as time management. Because online learners are self-directed, discipline is important. Researchers who investigated self-efficacy, self-regulation, and performance among African American HBCU students found that student performance related significantly to Internet self-efficacy.⁴⁵ They also found that self-efficacy correlated positively with self-regulation. Too many students lack the ability to self-direct their learning, while instructors expect them to have this basic knowledge.⁴⁶

4. Expand online learning in graduate and upper-level undergraduate courses.

While some research has found no correlation between age and online learning performance, other studies point to better performance among older students in an online environment.⁴⁷ With these findings in mind, many universities offer more online courses for graduate students. Older students often are more self-regulated and, with the increasing responsibilities of adulthood, often more determined and intrinsically motivated to complete their programs.

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Faculty should consider prior experience and practical application of professional content to create more in-depth meaning for online graduate and upper-level undergraduate students. It is essential to establish structures that support expansion of online learning among adult students.

5. Select a strategic number of online courses for first- and second-year students.

As previously mentioned, some research suggests that younger students from low socio-economic backgrounds struggle in online environments. Consequently, the calculated selection of first- and second-year courses is important. For the most part, the online environment is text-based, although advancements in video and audio modalities have supplemented word-intensive platforms; therefore, writing courses and text-heavy courses provide logical transitions to the online environment. Thus, HBCUs should consider offering first- and second-year text and writing-based courses (e.g., English, humanities, and literature) to honors freshmen and those with previous online experience. Developmental courses, however, should not be offered online. HBCUs also should consider research that suggests students perform worst in social sciences and professional courses.⁴⁸

Hybrid courses, which are commonly identified as courses with 30 to 79 percent of the content delivered online, provide a great alternative to

entirely online courses for first- and second-year students. A U.S. Department of Education report indicated that blending face-to-face and computer-supported learning modalities were more efficient than one or the other.⁴⁹ Thus, HBCUs should consider testing various hybrid and also web-assisted courses (defined as those with one to 29 percent of content delivered online.)

6. Market fully online degree programs to a diverse population of students.

Students of other races attend HBCUs, and they are welcome. However, the idea of specifically recruiting students of other races and ethnicities to HBCUs is controversial. To some, it contradicts the mission of HBCUs. However, the need for diversity is evident. Therefore, HBCU administrators should consider marketing online programs to nontraditional (ages 27 and older), second-career, graduate, and international students, as well as military veterans, to fulfill diversity initiatives.

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7. Give extra consideration when enrolling male students in online courses.

Improving learning outcomes for African American males has become a national initiative. According to Palacios and Wood, male students tend to perform better in face-to-face courses; therefore, synchronous components, like interactive web conferences, are valuable in the course design of online courses with high numbers of male students.⁵⁰ HBCU administrators should ensure that various modalities (e.g., audio, video, and synchronous) are used, and establish enrollment practices so that advisors consider the number of male students enrolled in each online course. Academic advisors should familiarize themselves with the online courses that have higher completion rates among all students and specifically males.

8. Designate specific advisors to enroll and monitor new and undergraduate male online students.

Some research suggests African American male students are reluctant to engage with faculty because of stereotypical ideas about African American male student intelligence; this apprehension results in withdrawal.⁵¹ Taking down the virtual veil that exists within many online learning environments could improve African American male student engagement.

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Faculty-student relationships characterized by safety, empowerment, acceptance, and nurturing are likely to improve student learning. Therefore, an advisor who exercises both intrusive and nurtured advising, working in conjunction with faculty, can promote an increased sense of these qualities among African American male students enrolled in online courses.⁵² Phone calls, e-mails, and in-person contacts (when possible) are necessary.

9. Expand online learning through online and face-to-face student support services.

Engage students where they are. The number of students using cellular phones is greater than those using computers. According to the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, many HBCU students rely on institution-provided access to computers and the Internet.⁵³ It is vital to expand the reach of online learning through mobile technology and apps that support subject-matter content and student self-efficacy. Furthermore, the number of traditional on-campus students enrolled in online courses is increasing. Therefore, it is also important to maintain on-campus resources, such as work spaces with computer and Internet access, tutoring, and other academic and student support services. HBCU administrators also should consider structuring hybrid and web-assisted courses so that first- and second-year, on-campus students are required to use these supports. These services would promote a sense

of community and engagement among on-campus students and faculty in online courses.

CONCLUSION

As Durkheim states, “Education is culturally specific, and education is rooted in and reflects the conditions, worldview, and purposes of its parent society.”⁵⁴ Today, HBCU leaders are asked to defend the relevancy of their institutions, particularly in relation to the demands of a global, technological society. HBCUs have been slow to develop online programs and courses, but they can no longer resist the online learning movement. As these institutions navigate their way forward amidst funding deficiencies and technological advances, online learning will provide a viable strategy for sustainability.

It doesn’t make sense to rely on diminishing state and federal funds to fuel our institutions. In the face of funding cuts and enrollment challenges, HBCUs must strategically expand access and opportunity by appealing to a larger demographic of students. The African American population is not homogeneous, and there is diversity in the learning needs of potential HBCU students. For some HBCUs, diversity via online program expansion is a means of survival. Moreover, with smartphones serving as a primary mode of communication and information, HBCUs must actively innovate and integrate mobile learning technology for course management and learning support. The innovation associated with effective implementation of online learning programs and courses may be costly, but HBCUs cannot afford to operate without this technology. The price of resistance is one that many of the nation’s HBCUs cannot afford. [nea](#)

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