

Accreditation, Quality and HBCUs - Match or Mismatch?

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There is much misinformation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding about the approximately 100 historically black colleges and universities abbreviated as HBCUs. These iconic institutions are both privately and publicly operated and have their own unique identities but often are very much driven by a common mission. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU 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 [of Education] 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.” The U. S. Department of Education goes on to further state that “HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents.”¹



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The “mis” prefixes have manifested over the years because these institutions have been framed as last-chance institutions that often missioned around serving students who did not have the academic acumen to succeed at other institutions. The historical fact is that HBCUs were the opening doors for students who were segregationally denied admission to predominantly white institutions (PWI). History and current evidence have dispelled that major misrepresentation and performance data have borne time and time again that HBCUs graduate students who are competitive and contributors to growing economies both nationally and globally.

It is no secret that many HBCUs struggle with potential closures because their mission-driven populations are unable to bear full responsibility for financing their education. Many HBCUs can have anywhere from 50-90 percent of the student population who require federal financial aid or institutional assistance. For decades, HBCUs have creatively and resourcefully found ways to support these students; and that steadfast mission-driven support has allowed students to fulfill not only their personal dreams but also fulfill the dreams of their families.

Despite the everyday, yearly challenges and commitment to provide quality academic experiences, HBCUs have maintained an equal commitment to quality institutional assurances. The standard bearer for quality assurance has been regional institutional accreditation and academic program accreditation. In recent years, some HBCUs have explored national accreditations like Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS). This national accreditation organization founded in 1979 is particularly a fit for HBCUs that have a religious base and are founded on principles of Christian education.

Regional accreditation organizations establish performance standards that guarantee to the public that institutions are good stewards of public trust. The standards of the six regional accrediting organizations are unique to the region and to the profit and non-profit institutions of the region; however, there are commonalities of focus that run through all of the regions.

Program accreditation is similar to regional accreditations. Specific academic programs have standards of performance for departments and students. These standards (*and they vary by academic program*) are specific to the major academic concentrations of a particular college. The focus for program accreditation is also grounded in continuous improvement. HBCUs pursue academic quality intentionally because it is the anchor for change and innovation. Change and innovation are the benchmarks for student success.

Central State University, the only state HBCU in Ohio, must meet the same accreditation standards as the other 126 four-year colleges and universities—state, private and independent. The standards are rigorous, ambitious but attainable. The continuous improvement model undergirds the regional review processes and, as everyone knows, “improvement comes with a cost.” The public will be hard-pressed to find any HBCU that will rail against affirmation of quality, standards, public trust or continuous improvement. HBCUs are certainly congruent with that commitment. What is often a “mis-match” for underfunded HBCUs that are mission-focused to support all students and families is the amount of energy, time and financial resources required to meet the standards. When most institutions rely on student tuition to fund progressive education efforts, many HBCUs lack the abundance of those resources needed to implement long-range improvement plans that can be projected 10-15 years out. Yet, HBCUs have learned to adjust their operations to meet regional and program standards because quality assurances are the hallmark of quality outcomes.

The “match” of accreditation processes and HBCUs speaks to an ethos that is inherent on many minority serving campuses. Students graduating from HBCUs develop the cultural identity of the institution, which includes personal resourcefulness; quality performance; continuously improving; and the characteristic attributes of determination and perseverance.

When HBCUs celebrate their accomplishments, accreditation success is proclaimed as the highest of those accolades. The success is pivotal because it is not a spur-of-the-moment achievement. Accreditation approvals are embedded in the day-to-day self-study process: the documenting of evidence that reflect the standards and the consistent reflection of “how can we be better.” These processes are continuous and require every administrator, faculty and staff working collaboratively to provide quality outcomes for students, families, stakeholders and the public. Quality assurances evidenced by accreditation affirmations are not minor achievements. These institutions may make sacrificial decisions on other initiatives but academic quality will never be compromised. There is a historical responsibility that HBCUs own and a commitment to somehow right history by advancing the progress of underserved population. As many of my colleagues would say, “It’s personal.”

Accreditation affirmation confirms the purpose of collaborative ownership for institutional quality. It is the institution that chooses this pathway to be purposefully driven to provide the best collegiate academic experience possible. It is not an easy pathway but definitely a worthy one. Historically Black Colleges and Universities have always implemented high quality services and the thousands of students graduating from these institutions are changing the trajectory of communities all over the nation and abroad. There is a combined value associated with high performing institutions as evidenced by accredited universities and students who have been nurtured in this environment.

¹ <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/>

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