

# The role of HBCU's: preparing a new generation of leaders

By Bruce Copeland

Elizabeth City State University has the highest graduation rate of all HBCUs. ECSU also has the highest retention rate in the entire University of North Carolina system, along with the second highest graduation rate.

Knowing this about our very own HBU, it would seem odd that anyone could question the importance and the need for HBCUs in this society. Yet these things have been questioned by those who feel that HBCU are unnecessary now that blacks are being recruited by and accepted into mainstream colleges and universities.

But how valid is this criticism?

ECSU was founded in 1891, years after the founding of many other HBCUs, like Fisk and Howard. Still, ECSU was founded for the same reason as the earlier HBCUs: blacks weren't being admitted into mainstream institutions for higher learning. Up until the 1940s, blacks who wanted post-high school education had little choice but to go to a HBCU.

Many HBCU students are aware of the invaluable role HBCU's have played in providing opportunities for generations of African-Americans. In the words of

one Winston-Salem State University student: We (blacks) should continue to support our own and keep the traditions going."

According to a 1992 poll enrollment at HBCUs has jumped 17 percent since 1986. The jump in enrollment reflects a current renaissance of black awareness among African American youth as well as financial aid limitations and increased hostility toward Black students at mainstream institutions.

Television has also been an important factor in the increased enrollment at black colleges. Shows like "A Different World" and "School Daze," both about life at fictitious Black colleges, have increased public awareness about the value and importance of HBCUs.

What special benefits do HBCU's offer its students?

Many black students say they feel more at home at an HBCU. And they point out that black colleges support and reaffirm African-American culture in ways that mainstream universities do not.

When asked why he decided to attend an HBCU, a Norfolk State University student said, "I wanted to learn more about my culture and I felt I could find out more about

black history at a black college. I came from a predominantly white high school so I was thirsty for this knowledge."

A Winston-Salem State student--also from a predominantly white high school--said "I wanted to fill my cultural void." And a Hampton University student chose his school because "I just wanted to go somewhere where I would be comfortable."

Dr. Glenda Griffin, an ECSU English professor, agrees that HBCU's offer the opportunity for more interaction between teachers and students.

"Students are happier at HBCUs because there is a sense of belonging," says Griffin. "HBCUs often act as equalizers for students who, coming from predominantly white high schools, are not allowed to know what they have to offer."

Aknowledging that some prejudices exist against black colleges, Griffin recalls that a high school guidance counsellor told her daughter that her grades "were too good to be wasted at a black college."

Griffin's daughter went to Griffin's alma-mater, North Carolina Central University, and later earned a master's degree from Columbia University.

Many students at HBCUs say that their colleges are superior, rather than inferior, especially for undergraduate studies.

"The students make the institution," says Griffin. "HBCUs are not inferior to other schools."

A Norfolk State student believes that "black colleges give black students more in-depth training." And ECSU's Mike Myrick says that "being at a black college shows black students that they can succeed and make positive contributions to this society."

An ECSU professor agrees and poses the question:

"Why should HBCUs be turned into mainstream institutions when there's no talk of doing such to Catholic schools and Jewish schools?"

Many supporters of HBCU's believe that black colleges and universities need to change their curriculums and attitudes to adapt to the needs of their students.

"HBCUs need to be more Afrocentric," says Griffin, "and blacks need to be more supportive of HBCUs."

Griffin also believes that "black students need to be more assertive so more can qualify for things like ECSU's Incentive Scholarship Program of which many whites are taking full advantage."

Griffin, and other educators as well, say the bottom line is the role that HBCU's play in training and preparing "tomorrow's black leaders." Adds Griffin: "I'm particularly proud of the Black leaders we have here at ECSU."

Student leaders at ECSU and other HBCU's should draw inspiration from the fact that one of the world's greatest leaders, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a graduate of an HBCU in Georgia--Morehouse College.

Although HBCUs make up less than 10 percent of American colleges and universities--and their enrollments make up around five percent of all college students--HBCUs enroll over 30 percent of all blacks attending college.

With this in mind, it should be clear that HBCUs are vital to America's progress, especially for African-Americans. In the words Griffin, "There's too much at stake for our people not to be prepared and HBCUs are doing a good job of preparing them."



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