Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
A Student Perspective

Edited by Robert T. Palmer, Larry J. Walker, Ramon B. Goings, Charmaine Troy, Chaz T. Gipson, and Felecia Commodore
Highlighting the voices and experiences of Black graduate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), this book features the perspectives of students from a variety of academic backgrounds and institutional settings. Contributors discuss their motivation to attend an HBCU for graduate studies, their experiences, and how these helped prepare them for their careers. To be prepared to serve the increasing number of Black students with access to graduate programs at HBCUs, university administrators, faculty, and staff require a better understanding of these students’ needs and how to meet them. Addressing some of today’s most urgent issues and educational challenges, this book expands the literature on HBCUs and provides insight into the role their graduate schools play in building a diverse academic and professional community.

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The overall mission of Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) plays a vital role in providing educational opportunities for Blacks who would otherwise be denied access to college (Redd, 2000). Until the midpoint of the twentieth century, more than 90 percent of the Black students enrolled in higher education in this country were educated in HBCUs (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

HBCUs are essential in providing a supportive and nurturing environment for Black students, regardless of their academic and social circumstances. Furthermore, HBCUs have been known to provide the kind of academic and social environment that many Blacks need to survive and persist through college. As a current dean of a College of Education at a predominantly White institution (PWI) and as a former dean of a College of Education at an Historically Black University, I am aware of the role that both PWIs and HBCUs play in providing quality graduate programs to its students. There are extraordinary Black students in graduate programs across this nation who are academically outstanding and will be sure to make a difference in their careers and communities. Whereas previous research has contributed to our understanding of the impact that HBCUs have on Black undergraduate students, the literature is limited when it comes to highlighting the voices and experiences of Black graduate students. Palmer, Walker, Goings, Troy, Gipson, and Commodore edited this volume, entitled *Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): A Student Perspective*, which helps fills that void by introducing the perspectives of graduate students from a variety of academic backgrounds and institutional settings. As colleges and universities are welcoming more and more students within their graduate programs, the number of Black students who have access to these programs will continue to increase. With this in mind, university administrators, faculty, and staff must be prepared to serve these students. Through current research, these university officials can achieve a better understanding of what Black students at the graduate level need. Thus, it would be helpful to know what educational challenges exist for these students upon entering graduate school.
The Palmer et al. edited volume is an excellent start to gain an understanding. Their book provides a better understanding of graduate education at HBCUs through voices of individuals who are currently enrolled in graduate programs at HBCUs or who have pursued graduate studies at an HBCU. Furthermore, Palmer et al. called upon a wide range of contributors to provide narratives that highlighted their motivation to attend an HBCU for their graduate education and revealed how their institutions prepared them for current and future career success. Anyone interested in the state of graduate education in HBCUs and its effects on Black students should have a vested interest in this volume. The editors addresses some of today’s most urgent issues facing Black graduate students at HBCUs, and this book will not only expand the literature on graduate education at HBCUs but will also serve as an important text for a variety of higher education courses. As an academic dean, I highly recommend that this volume to be included in university and college bookstores across the United States and placed on the bookshelves of all Black graduate students as they matriculate through their respective programs.

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References


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Ramon B. Goings: This book is dedicated to my lovely wife, Renee. Your support and encouragement keep me grounded and motivated to make an impact on the world. Last, this book is dedicated to the late brother Adedire Asosanya, a bright young Morgan State student, fraternity brother, and personal friend who lost his life too soon. First I would like to thank my fellow coeditors, Dr. Robert Palmer, Dr. Larry Walker, Mr. Chaz Gipson, Ms. Charmaine Troy, and Dr. Felicia Commodore, for their hard work and dedication to the development of this book. I would also like to give special thanks to my professors in the Department of Advanced Studies, Leadership, and Policy at Morgan State University for nurturing and supporting my development as an emerging scholar. The sacrifices you all made for my scholarly development continue to build on the legacy of HBCUs and their ability to develop Black scholars prepared to tackle pressing issues impacting the Black community.

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mother, Henrietta Troy, who instilled in me strength, knowledge, and a love for education.

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Felicia Commodore: Anytime I am given the opportunity to aid in creating a platform for HBCU voices to be heard, it is a privilege. I would like to thank Rob Palmer for the opportunity to work alongside him and all the brilliant scholars who made this book come to fruition. You have been a great colleague and mentor, and I am ever grateful for every chance I get to work with you. I would also like to thank my other fellow coeditors, Ramon, Chaz, Larry, and Charmaine. What great company in which to be included, and I look forward to collaborating for years to come. I would also like to thank all the authors who contributed. Your hard work and dedication are appreciated. And thank you to my friends who push me, my family who prays for me, and my roommate, Nekeya, who puts up with me. I dedicate this book to anyone who has heard no far more times than yes. Sometimes it takes hearing no to push you to where you are supposed to be, and it only takes one yes to launch you into your destiny.
Introduction

The purpose of the book is to provide meaningful context on graduate education at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In order to achieve this objective, my colleagues and I encouraged chapter contributors to discuss their experiences as graduate students at HBCUs. Specifically, chapter contributors focused on reasons they attended HBCUs for graduate education, their experiences and challenges at these institutions, the extent that HBCUs prepared them for postgraduate life, and the importance of discussing and examining graduate education at HBCUs. The book consists of twelve chapters. In chapter 1, Robert T. Palmer, Larry J. Walker, Ramon Goings, Charmaine Troy, Chaz Gipson, and Felecia Commodore not only discuss the significance and overall intent of this book, but they also give insight into their experiences as graduate students at HBCUs. This chapter concludes by discussing implications for future research on graduate education at HBCUs.

In chapter 2, Lamar Hylton focuses on the journey of a doctoral student attending the same institution in which he received his undergraduate degree. Specifically, he explores issues of navigating the cultural and political landscape of a familiar institution, the tension felt during personal and professional transitions, and the lessons he learned that assisted in his career trajectory. In chapter 3, Tiffany F. Boykin presents a narrative of her journey to the PhD at an HBCU. She delineates the impact that faculty interaction had on cultivating a positive academic and social experience at her HBCU. Her chapter concludes with recommendations for prospective HBCU doctoral students.

In chapter 4, Antonio L. Ellis, Christopher N. Smith, and Janatus A. Barnett reflect on their experiences as graduate students at HBCUs. One of the most compelling narratives of this chapter is Ellis’s story of being encouraged by professors not to attend an HBCU for graduate school. Ellis notes that his professors suggested that people who receive graduate degrees from HBCUs are less likely to be employed compared to persons who studied at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Unfortunately, Ellis took the advice of these professors seriously. Therefore, after completing his undergraduate work at an HBCU, he attended a PWI for his graduate degree but
transferred back to an HBCU due to experiences with incivility from faculty and administrators. In essence, this chapter is a testament to the important role of graduate education at HBCUs.

In chapter 5, Sheree Alexander focuses on her journey to school leadership beginning with her experiences attending a PWI and later, an HBCU for graduate school. Her chapter is a testament to the important role that HBCUs play in cultivating an affirming, caring, and nurturing environment for graduate students. Her chapter also speaks to how HBCUs prepare students to be leaders within the urban community. In chapter 6, Kimberly Hardy delineates how the faculty and staff at the HBCU she attended for graduate school would not allow her to choose mediocrity. She also reflects on the transformation that occurred when she realized that faculty at her HBCU were truly invested in her success.

In chapter 7, Julius Davis discusses how his desire to revitalize his community led him to an HBCU for his doctoral education. The chapter also highlights how faculty members provided an intellectual environment where he received support to conduct research on the intersection between Black students’ mathematical experiences, race, and racism. Last, his chapter underscores how attending an HBCU provides an opportunity to conduct liberatory research that not only impacts Black students in schools but also the communities where they reside. In chapter 8, Kimberly R. Eldridge explores the perspective of a doctoral student at an HBCU in the southeastern United States. Specifically, her chapter discusses the role of the cohort model, the role of an online program, and how this online/cohort model might affect the success of the student. Her chapter also gives attention to the role and value of the HBCU family, the overall learning process, and the importance of the online/cohort model of the graduate program.

In chapter 9, Stevie L. Lawrence II highlights the uniqueness of the graduate school experience at both of the HBCUs he attended. His chapter focuses on the success of both graduate programs nationally, detailed personal accounts, and how pursuing graduate education at these institutions has contributed to his personal, spiritual, and professional development. In conjunction with these points, his chapter highlights the motivation for attending graduate school at an HBCU, along with providing recommendations for students considering attending graduate school at an historically Black institution. In chapter 10, Tara D. Miller discusses her experience as a graduate student at two HBCUs. Important themes in her chapter include how HBCUs are incubators for developing brilliant scholastic minds. She also focuses on how critics try to disparage the rich reputations of administrators, faculty, and students at these important institutions. Critical to her chapter is the role that faculty play in the development of students’ educational pathways to success.

In chapter 11, Herbert Robinson Marbury offers a critical perspective on his experience as a student at Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), which has been the largest predominantly Black professional graduate
school of theology. Specifically, his chapter focuses on aspects of the school’s mission that compelled him to enroll. Moreover, he also discusses his experience at ITC as a student. Finally, he reflects on how the school prepared him for his current vocational life. In the last chapter, F. Abron Franklin articulates the role of the HBCU in the development of the Black intelligentsia. He particular, he emphasizes that HBCUs create a safe space for advancing the intellectual imagination and intellectual resiliency of the Black graduate student.
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1 Contextualizing Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Robert T. Palmer, Larry J. Walker, Ramon B. Goings, Charmaine Troy, Chaz T. Gipson, and Felecia Commodore

In 2012, my colleagues and I released a book on graduate education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). We thought this book was critical because little research had provided context on graduate education at HBCUs. Having attended an HBCU for our doctoral degrees, we wish we had a book that provided a holistic view of graduate education at HBCUs when we thought about attending one for our graduate education. Whereas we felt that this book, *Black Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Trends, Experiences, and Outcomes*, was critical and offered necessary insight into HBCU graduate education, we thought we had inadvertently limited the accessibility of this book because it was weighted down by academic jargon. This limitation birthed the idea for this current book, *Graduate Education at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Student Perspective*.

Whereas both books are immensely important to the scholarly discourse on HBCUs, this book is different because students who attended HBCUs for their graduate education are providing a personal scholarly narrative to offer insight into their experiences of pursuing graduate education at HBCUs. This book, as well as the latter, is integral because it helps to demystify graduate education at HBCUs. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of academic and nonacademic publications on HBCUs. These sources have explored a wealth of topics, including the overall relevance of HBCUs to the landscape of higher education, leadership and faculty governance, and the experiences of diverse student populations.

A frequent theme in some of HBCU literature, which is often cited to highlight the value-added aspect of HBCUs, is their ability to admit students who are academically underprepared and graduate them with the skills to enter the most competitive predominantly White institutions (PWIs) for graduate school (*The Educational Effectiveness of Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, 2010). Whereas discussing the value-added component of HBCUs is critical, this characterization seems to imply that graduate education at HBCUs is somehow inferior to their PWI counterparts. Moreover, there have been articles published in prominent new publications (e.g.,
Wall Street Journal) that have attacked HBCUs for their low graduation rates, mismanagement of funding, and being irrelevant in today's higher education landscape without acknowledging how these institutions graduate thousands of Black students each year while being inequitably funded by state and federal government. Although not specifically targeting HBCU graduate education, these articles have the propensity to hinder the number of students enrolling in HBCUs to pursue graduate studies.

The purpose of this book as well as this chapter is to provide some authentic context about graduate education at HBCUs. To do this, the subsequent part of this chapter will review the limited literature on HBCU graduate education. Five personal narratives of chapter authors who pursued graduate education at HBCUs will follow this review of literature. These narratives will provide insight into reasons the authors attended graduate education at HBCUs and discuss their experiences. This chapter will conclude with thoughts about graduate education at HBCUs and discuss future research possibilities.

Brief Review of the Literature on HBCU Graduate Education

Admittedly, empirical research on graduate education is quite limited (Gassman & Williams, 2012; Lundy-Wagner, 2012). Nevertheless, a few scholarly articles have focused on HBCU graduate education. For example, Fountaine (2008) used a seven-part questionnaire to examine factors related to persistence and the academic experiences of 190 doctoral students across thirteen public and private HBCUs. Some of the factors included in the questionnaire were the student's background, pre-enrollment, financing, student-faculty interaction, student-peer interaction, doctoral experience, and time to degree completion. Her findings revealed the importance of managing the expectations of students before enrollment, the significance of meaningful faculty-student interactions, and how positive interactions with peers were critical to the success of doctoral students at HBCUs. Similarly, in a qualitative study that investigated the enrollment decisions and educational experiences of eight students who pursued graduate education at HBCUs (seven of whom earned their doctoral degrees from HBCUs), Palmer (2012) found that faculty-student interaction and positive encounters with peers were vital factors to the success of the participants in his study. Despite this, however, participants complained about the lack of customer service from staff, condescending interactions with administrators, and lack of resource parity with their PWI counterparts. In spite of this, they highly valued their HBCU graduate experience. Some even received all or most of all their degrees from HBCUs.

In addition to research highlighting the importance of meaningful faculty-student interaction and positive peer support on the success of graduate students at HBCUs, research has shown that 9 percent of full-time Black faculty
earned their doctorate degrees from HBCUs and that more than half return to HBCUs as faculty members (Perna, 2001). This finding is noteworthy and highlights the critical role that graduate education at HBCUs plays in producing Black faculty. The student body of graduate programs at HBCUs is quite diverse. First, it is important to note that graduate programs at HBCUs have historically enrolled a large number of individuals who are non-Black (Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004). Indeed, according to Conrad, Brier, and Braxton (1997), more than 20 percent of HBCU graduate students were White in 2002. The student diversity of HBCU graduate programs might be somewhat higher today given that the student populations of HBCUs in general have become more diverse (Gasman et al., 2013; Palmer & Maramba, 2015a, 2015b).

Whereas research has shown that HBCUs provide supportive environments for graduate students (e.g., Fountaine, 2008) as discussed, very little is known about the experiences of graduate students attending HBCUs. Moreover, there are limited scholarly contributions that explore the HBCU experience from firsthand accounts of individuals who have attended them. Starting with our own experiences attending HBCUs for graduate school, we believe this book will provide the reader with detailed information about how to navigate the HBCU campus environment and how these institutions have prepared and propelled us for future success.

**Personal Scholarly Narratives**

**Robert T. Palmer**

I initially became interested in attending an HBCU for my undergraduate experience because I was interested in learning more about my culture as a Black man. In high school, teachers talked slavery and the civil rights movement, but aside from this, they did not provide a comprehensive lesson on the achievements and many contributions Blacks made to the United States. Thus, by attending an HBCU, I was seeking cultural empowerment. To this end, I made sure to include an HBCU among the colleges I applied to for my baccalaureate degree. Whereas I was admitted into that HBCU, my mother thought I should attend a PWI because she felt that the quality of education would be better. Being young and naive, I did not challenge her thinking; I acquiesced.

After I completed my baccalaureate degree, I attended graduate school for my master’s degree at another PWI. It was there I started to research HBCUs more intensively. My research of HBCUs revealed that they provided an empowering environment that helped to facilitate a sense of role modeling, leadership development, cultural nourishment, psychological wellness, and academic success for Black students in general and Black men in particular. These aspects intrigued me greatly and made me yearn even more for a
“taste” of the HBCU experience. This was especially true because most of my experiences at PWIs were void of some of these characteristics. Whereas I was successful academically at the PWIs I attended, most of my experiences were marred by racial microaggressions and alienation, which resulted in psychological fatigue.

Given that the PhD represented one of my last opportunities to get a sense of the HBCU experience, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree at an HBCU. Before attending, however, I had some major misconceptions about graduate education at an HBCU. One of the main misconceptions stemmed from funding or lack thereof. Because most of the literature emphasized that HBCUs, particularly public HBCUs, were underfunded compared to the PWI counterparts, I thought I would have to take out a loan to fund my doctoral degree. This was far from the truth. When I was admitted into my program at the HBCU I attended, I received a graduate assistantship, which paid me a small stipend and with the exception of fees, covered my tuition.

When I started my PhD program, I was amazed at how different my experiences were from the experiences at the PWIs I had attended. For one, many of the faculty members in my program were Black or Latino. This was totally different from my educational experience, especially at the two PWIs I had attended. Having faculty with whom I was able to identify motivated me because it let me know that I could actually earn my PhD because they had done so too. In this regard, these faculty members became my source of inspiration, encouragement, and resiliency. They were also tougher on me than faculty at the PWIs I had attended. When I doubted myself, they pushed me to excel and helped me to discover untapped potential. Aside from this, the faculty in my program also created a family-oriented environment. This sense of family support manifested itself in different ways. For example, one year, a professor in my program knew I was going to be alone for the Thanksgiving holiday. As a result, he ordered food for one of my classes just before the semester break. The class was rather small, but he ordered a large amount of food. After we ate as a class, he asked me to take the leftovers home because he wanted me to have a Thanksgiving meal over the holiday break. I was so appreciative of his thoughtfulness and fatherly interactions. The family support I experienced from the faculty in my PhD program played an integral role in my success, and it is one of the reasons I am so passionate about researching and advocating for HBCUs today.

Aside from faculty support, the friendships that I made with peers in my PhD program were another defining aspect of my experience in my graduate program at the HBCU. These relationships were different than the ones I had formed with peers at the PWI I had attended for my master’s. In that program, there were only a few Black students, and I would often be the only Black person in my class. Being the only one was particularly problematic when we had to do group work; in this situation I would often be the last person my peers would select for assignments. Moreover, when I was a part
of a group, being the only Black person, I felt that I had to work harder than my peers to disprove the stereotypical notion that Blacks were lazy and intellectually inept.

The relationships, however, I formed with peers in my PhD program were void of these issues. The aspect that excited me most was the fact that we were young, ambitious, Black and Brown students, striving to earn “the three magic letters”: PhD. These commonalities resulted in us forming supportive and nurturing bonds, which helped me to get through some difficult times in my program and played a salient role in my ability to earn my PhD in higher education administration in 2007.

Larry J. Walker

HBCUs played a vital role preparing me for a variety of societal challenges. For instance, my experience as a graduate student at Howard University taught me how swift demographic changes can alter the social fabric of established neighborhoods, whereas my tenure at Morgan State University highlighted the importance of closing racial gaps. My time at Howard provided the opportunity to work with the local community to examine how changes in the racial composition of the city will impact underserved communities. The enriching experiences at both institutions were consistent with my undergraduate experience attending the nation’s oldest HBCU, Cheyney University. Although some pundits lament the importance of HBCUs in today’s society, I benefitted from attending HBCUs located in urban enclaves with a focus on social justice. Thus, I learned to deconstruct economic, educational, political, and social issues that continue to hamper efforts to improve conditions in neighborhoods. In retrospect, I’m glad I didn’t allow my apprehension of attending two HBCUs for graduate school to influence my decision after completing my bachelor’s degree. Based on conversations with colleagues who attended PWIs, I realize the nurturing HBCU environment helped propel my career.

There are a few distinct experiences related to attending HBCUs for graduate school that helped to shape my professional experiences. During my tenure at Howard, a fellow student brought to my attention a fellowship opportunity that changed my life. Eventually I applied and was selected for a congressional fellowship with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. This life-changing experience allowed me to interact with powerful national and international leaders. After several years of working in politics, I applied the skills from my policy experience to improving conditions in communities of color. Attending Howard was directly related to my time working on Capitol Hill. Professors and colleagues encouraged me to apply to the program and lay the foundation for the next generation of change agents.

Encouraging me to seek out the fellowship opportunity is consistent with strong support system at HBCUs. They provide critical academic and emotional scaffolding that sustains students through long, cold winters and
hot summers that frequently prevent Black students from completing their
graduate education. Howard and Morgan gave me an opportunity to excel
in encouraging, competitive environments designed to bring out the best
in every student. Committed students worked together inside and outside
the classroom to solve issues that negatively impact the Black community.

There are a number of occasions when I have spent tireless hours col-
laborating with classmates on school- and community-related projects. For
example, while at Howard I helped to design and implement a literacy-based
summer program to improve the skills of students in Washington, DC. In
addition, Morgan State supported efforts to examine the factors that con-
tributed to the events following the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore.
The strong emphasis on social justice is consistent with HBCUs mission to
support the surrounding community.

The focus on communalism and mentorship drew me to both institutions
for graduate school. Professors and students from both schools were com-
mitted to working evening and weekends to encourage students struggling
with academic or personal issues. I learned that once you were part of the
academic community, individuals would sacrifice time and effort to ensure
you were successful. My relationship with professors was the key to my suc-
cess. Developing strong bonds with scholars of color is an invaluable expe-
rience in today’s society. Professors encouraged me to work harder without
making assumptions about my ability to complete my graduate degree.

I am forever indebted to the administrators, faculty, and staff members
who found the time to invest in my future. Without their consistent positive
feedback, I may have failed to obtain my master’s and doctorate. For this
reason, it is vital that HBCUs receive federal, state and local support to
increase the number of college graduates from low- and moderate-income
families. HBCUs have a track record of enrolling and graduating students
with minimal family and community support. They hold the key to increas-
ing the number of students with graduate degrees in critical need areas.
This book provides a platform for successful HBCU graduates to share their
tri umphs and struggles with a new generation of students. It is an important
project that will provide faculty members and researchers with a guide to
help new and returning graduate students.

Ramon Goings

After obtaining my master’s degree, entering a doctoral program was the last
thing on my mind. However, during a conversation with a family member
(Dr. Payne), she began discussing her experiences in her doctoral program
at an HBCU and thought I should consider continuing my education. After
much thought, I began to research programs. Initially I was unsure of the
degree I wanted to pursue; however, because I was serving as a special edu-
cation teacher in an urban school district, I thought completing a program
in urban education would allow me to better serve my students. Through my
research, there were several programs that appealed to me, but it was Morgan
State University’s (MSU) focus on addressing issues impacting urban
schools that stuck out to me most.

As a result of attending two PWIs for my bachelor’s and master’s degrees,
I was in desperate need of an education that embraced the contributions
of Blacks in education. For far too long I was immersed in an education
that solely embraced a Eurocentric viewpoint. I didn’t have the opportu-
nity to read any literature by Black Americans in any of my courses. More
importantly, I never felt fully invested in these subjects because my cultural
experiences were not reflected in my reading materials; thus I felt that my
experience did not matter in those fields. Attending MSU provided an oppor-
tunity for me to find my Black consciousness.

My Student Experience at MSU

MSU was a perfect fit for me because my classes were focused on the ways
in which Black Americans have contributed to the education field. I needed
the exposure to reeducate myself. In addition, this was the opportunity to
be taught by Black professors generally, and males specifically. This was my
first opportunity to envision myself as a college professor.

As a student, I had the opportunity to interact with professors with simi-
lar interests. For instance, during a presentation in qualitative research, my
professor brought in a guest lecturer to discuss his research and qualita-
tive methods. Because this scholar focused on issues around Black males,
I believed he would be the perfect mentor to support my scholarly devel-
oment. After our first encounter, this professor and I developed a rapport
and presented at international and national conferences and have written
several journal articles together. I am not sure that if I attended a non-HBCU
I would have had the opportunity to make this type of connection. My
MSU professor believed that in order to become scholars, we had to be
surrounded by scholars from MSU and outside of the institution. It was
these types of mentorship opportunities that propelled me to persist in my
doctoral program. I knew I was not only continuing my program for me but
to show my mentors that their investment would not be in vain.

Preparing for the Future

During my final year in the doctoral program when I was completing my dis-
sertation research on the academic and social experiences of high-achieving
Black males attending HBCUs, my peers and faculty were always there to
support me. For instance, one of my classmates and fellow coeditor of this
book (Dr. Walker) and I always worked together and pushed each other to
get through the dissertation phase. Because we started the program together,
we developed our own cohort to ensure we did not leave the other behind.
Not only did our relationship result in me completing my dissertation, but
we have also continued to support each other as we explore various research and employment opportunities.

HBCUs, for many reasons described in the opening of this chapter, have been under attack. However, this book provides the reader with a direct counter-narrative that shows how HBCUs prepare students for success in their chosen careers. I know that without attending an HBCU, I may have never thought to conduct research on Black males at these institutions. Because of my positive experiences at MSU, I will always serve as an advocate for HBCUs.

Charmaine Troy

Making the decision to enroll into a doctoral program was a choice accompanied by a mixture of excitement, doubt, and preparation for change. The process was met with both challenges and positive experiences. Selecting an institution that met my needs and the ability to finance the degree added to the challenge of seeking the doctorate degree. After receiving my bachelor’s degree from a PWI and my master’s degree from an HBCU, I had to make the decision on which type of institution to attend. There were many perks to attending a PWI as an undergraduate student that I enjoyed. For example, I enjoyed the minority programs on campus and the camaraderie among minority students. There was an overwhelming amount of resources that the school offered for its students. There were also ample resources for financing my undergraduate degree. However, many of the experiences I enjoyed during my undergraduate years were outside of the classroom. There was a shortage of minority professors in the classroom, leaving me with no opportunity to learn from someone who looked like me. In addition to that, there were limited opportunities to receive guidance from professors during and after class due to class size.

In comparison to my experience at a PWI during my undergraduate years was my experience as a master’s student at an HBCU. My journey of change began with opting to try attending an HBCU for my master’s degree after ten years of working. I heard about the experience of attending an HBCU from some friends who chose to attend them during our undergraduate years. However, I wanted to experience the journey for myself. My journey was one of inclusion and satisfaction inside and outside of the classroom. I felt welcomed by faculty and staff. I felt of a sense of inclusion from faculty during class and much-needed guidance outside of the classroom. All of these positive experiences during my master’s program played a part in my decision to enroll in an HBCU for my doctorate degree. However, the challenges of financing the degree and limited graduate assistantships almost dissuaded me from applying to Morgan State University. Ultimately, my decision to attend Morgan State as a doctoral student was due to the ability to receive graduate funding, the availability of my program of choice, and cost.
The Journey of Change and Acceptance

I began the doctoral program at Morgan State during the summer. I recall my first day of class and how nervous I was. It was probably not in my best interest to begin the doctoral program in the summer due to limited courses and no workshops for new students. However, I made the best of it by talking to my classmates about their experiences in the program on my first day. Consequently, I began to navigate the doctoral program the way that I knew how: networking with students, faculty, and administrators on campus; reading the required material; completing coursework; and being active in class discussion. Little did I know that in order to be successful on the journey, I would be required to go beyond my level of comfort. My journey required a change in not only lifestyle but also acceptance of what it meant to obtain a PhD. It also meant connecting with other scholars outside of Morgan State University in order to gain writing opportunities.

Eliminating Self-Doubt

As a master’s student, I was very confident in my ability to navigate the program. Scholars have suggested that that it takes the entire institutional village to produce competent, successful graduates (Hale, 2006). I attribute my success to the positive interactions I had with my graduate faculty at North Carolina Central University. As a result of my positive interactions with my graduate faculty, I experienced success in my course work and related endeavors. However, I arrived to the doctoral program full of self-doubt about my ability to complete the journey. Specifically, I questioned myself on my ability to keep up with coursework, complete the dissertation, and raise my child all at the same time. I was able to overcome my self-doubt through universal inclusion, thought-provoking conversations, nurturing relationships with faculty and administrators, and defining my research agenda with faculty.

My decision to attend an HBCU is one of the best decisions that I have ever made. Enrolling into an HBCU for graduate education had its ups and downs but has been a rewarding experience overall.

Chaz T. Gipson

I attended an HBCU because it was introduced to me as the experience of a lifetime and a way of escape, personal growth, and professional development. While growing up, I faced many challenges that first-generation lower-income students face. I grew up in public housing and was often bullied by the “cool kids” in school. Growing up in a single-parent household, I did not reap the benefits typically afforded to those who constantly have the wisdom and simple assurances provided by a father figure or any other male role model, which sometimes made my journey into manhood challenging. In addition, I often watched my mother struggle to make ends meet
so we could survive. Other than my teachers and other school professionals, I did not cross paths with people with college backgrounds, credentials, or professional degrees, which occasionally caused me to question my ability to succeed. In high school, my counselor introduced me to the TRIO program, which eventually afforded me the opportunity to attend college. TRIO programs are federal outreach and student service programs designed to identify and provide services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Attending an HBCU for my undergraduate studies and participating in TRIO-Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services were all very essential to my growth and development as a scholar; however, my acceptance into the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Scholarship Program became a major turning point in my life in terms of my pursuit of a doctoral degree. The Ronald E. McNair Scholarship Program seeks to increase the attainment of post-baccalaureate degrees from underrepresented segments of society. During my time in the program, in addition to academic counseling and activities designed to assist scholars in securing admissions and financial assistance, I was introduced to graduate study and other opportunities during an intensive summer research experience. This experience, along with great mentorship, resulted in my participation in the Fifteenth Annual Southeastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program (SAEOPP) Research Conference. There, I presented on my research topic “How Do Health Beliefs Affect Health Behaviors among African American Male College Students.” I left the convening as the first-place winner for the Division of Social & Behavioral Sciences and received the Ronald E. McNair Award of Excellence. Mrs. Cheryl McNair, the wife of Ronald McNair, told me how proud she was to see another Black male doing great things and that I was destined for that PhD.

Afterward, I enrolled into an HBCU on the East Coast. When I was first accepted into graduate school, I was dubious. I applied with skepticism, partly because I wanted “diversity.” I made the mistake of believing the diversity of a college or university was only found in the students’ variety of skin color and race. Coming from a predominantly Black neighborhood and a diverse city and completing my undergraduate education at an HBCU, I thought I had experienced a multitude of perspectives in regard to the various topics I have conducted research on over the years. However, as I attended my HBCU graduate orientation, I was astonished by the beauty, intelligence, and compassion of my future graduate colleagues who were hungry for success. Being on campus and seeing so many scholarly graduate students of color with advanced research profiles and interests deepened my desire to be around my own people in this inspiring and collegial environment. When I actually began my graduate studies, I felt challenged, intellectually and politically, and it happened not at Brown, not at Harvard, and not at Georgetown, but at another HBCU. Additionally, I knew that I wanted to dedicate my life to helping students who looked just like me. Driven by the belief that my true talent was rooted somewhere within the
realm of academia, and my contribution to my generation and society would be formulated and strengthened within the walls of classrooms surrounded by peers who challenged me on an even more advanced level, I quickly emerged into the graduate culture at my HBCU with much more motivation, determination, and care.

Once I was admitted into the graduate program at the HBCU that I decided to attend, I received a graduate assistantship working partially in graduate admissions and partially in student life and affairs. This covered my tuition and paid a $20,000 stipend. Additionally, I worked in Residence Life as a graduate resident’s advisor, which covered my housing and meal plan. As I successfully matriculated throughout graduate school, I completed my master’s in education and was offered an opportunity to enroll into the PhD program, fully funded, in exchange for teaching a few undergraduate courses. Already having an established community with a budding circle of friends and aspiring scholars, along with consistent mentorship from faculty members who truly cared about my success, I wholeheartedly embraced my doctoral studies.

Through perseverance, resilience, and determination I have reached the midpoint in my doctoral studies, while working full time to take care of my mother, Regina Gipson, who suffered with lupus. Sadly, she transitioned on January 1, 2015. When she passed, I was distraught and no longer had a desire to continue my doctoral studies. Faculty members, mentors, and friends in the HBCU graduate community were very encouraging, understanding, and supportive during this time. These past few months have been beyond rough, and I struggle daily, wondering in sorrow how I will continue to make it. I constantly replay in my mind her last few words to me: “Chaz, promise me that you will get your doctorate degree and make a major difference in the field of higher education and the world as you have always dreamed.” As I struggle to write this statement, it is written in her honor. After taking nearly a year away from my HBCU graduate education, I have resumed with full force, yet I remember the last words of my mother and the commitment I made as a Ronald McNair Scholar, which is to pursue and obtain my PhD. Additionally, I have been named as a current White House HBCU ALL-STAR, which is an initiative started by the Obama administration to highlight HBCU student trailblazers.

If it had not been for TRIO, all of my supportive mentors, my close relatives, the HBCU community experience, and my mother, I do not think I would be as far along in reaching the goals I have set. I will continue to serve God, work hard, give back to my community by being a role model for others, advocate for HBCUs while encouraging my undergraduate students and mentees to consider attending an HBCU for their graduate education, and strive for excellence in all I attempt to do. Last, I will ensure that my mother, Regina Gipson’s last wishes are realized and make my success happen as a tribute to her, knowing she is smiling down and walking with me every step of the way.
Concluding Thoughts and a Discussion of Future Research Possibilities for Graduate Education at HBCUs

Advanced degrees are vehicles for Black students to attain higher income as well as increased social capital (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Yet, merely gaining access to graduate programs is not enough. Black graduate students have to be properly supported and given adequate financial and social resources to ensure their successes in their graduate programs and beyond. Due to the mission of HBCUs and the uniqueness of a number of their programs, these institutions are well positioned to provide this support to Black graduate students. This volume aids in understanding not only how this support and environment occurs but also aids in a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black students in these programs.

In gaining a deeper understanding of the inner workings, policies, and practices of HBCU graduate programs, the narrative surrounding HBCUs becomes more diverse. Currently, most literature and research regarding HBCU education focuses on undergraduate programs and undergraduate student experiences. In addition, this research is often comparative in nature to PWIs. This current framework is problematic and at its core racially prejudiced. The chapters in this volume, through the power of the narrative, in turn shift the larger HBCU narrative. The volume gives the reader insight into HBCU graduate programs through the authentic lenses and voices of actual members of the HBCU graduate program community. HBCU graduate programs are provided a platform through their own students free of an outside filter. Furthermore, this volume diversifies the narrative around Black graduate students. Literature often narrows Black graduate student voices to a singular expression. In this volume, the prismatic nature of Black graduate students and their experiences is highlighted. This approach fights the tendency to consider the Black graduate student experience as monolithic. All graduate student experiences are unique, and therefore it is important to include a diverse, wide array of student voices when discussing graduate school experiences. As many persons are encouraging students, particularly students of color, to pursue advanced degrees, volumes such as this add to the information and resources that can aid students in selecting what institutional types they would like to attend and graduate experiences they desire to engage.

Graduate school can be a challenging time in one’s life, both academically and personally. Furthermore, having a space that culturally supports students can be instrumental in having a positive and successful graduate school experience. For a majority of my doctoral experience at a PWI, I found myself the only Black woman in the department—including faculty. Although I received support from various persons, there were concerns, issues, and experiences that I found myself having to search outside to find support, advice, and Black female mentors. As a Black woman graduate student, having a community that could support me in that process was invaluable. HBCUs tend to have more diverse faculty than their PWI counterparts...
Black students who attend HBCUs have a greater chance of not only seeing more faculty of color in their field but also having a mentor and advisor who is also Black. For certain fields of study students may find they are the only Black student in their department. Attending an HBCU not only increases their chances of a diverse cohort and department but also lessens the chance of experiencing isolation.

This volume lays the foundation for future research regarding HBCU graduate programs as well as HBCU graduate student experiences. In learning more about HBCU graduate student experiences, researchers will be able to identify effective practices and policies to be explored in more depth, ultimately adding to various student development and institutional practice theory and literature. Also, as more is learned about graduate students of color, particularly Black men and women, more must be understood regarding how various institutional and program types play a role in those students’ academic, professional, economic, and social successes. This volume also gives way to learning more about HBCU graduate programs’ relationship with Black students’ psychosocial development. HBCUs have played a major role in creating what we deem today as the “Black middle class.” However, as the definition of “middle class” begins to shift, this proposition will need to be revisited, along with how HBCUs contribute not merely through undergraduate education but through graduate and professional education as well. Going a step further, more must be understood as to how HBCUs contribute to the building of the overall “middle class,” especially when many HBCU graduate programs are more demographically diverse than their PWI counterparts. Last, through students’ experiences and perspectives, future researchers can begin to explore institutional decision-making and structures that ultimately have an impact on graduate students. Along with this, researchers can also determine what external factors can affect institutions at large and individual students specifically.

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Free to Conduct Research of Race and Racism in My West Baltimore Community


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Twice the Experiences

The Significant Value of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

A Liberating Spirituality
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