

Voices of Black Leadership: Town-Gown Relationships and the Black Community

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perspectives of 27 Black community leaders from Black communities in the United States about town-gown relationships in their communities. Utilizing the responses of the participants, a basic thematic analysis was conducted, and participants' findings discussed. Emergent themes included issues of mistrust, division, desire for community improvement, and the positive relationships with Black colleges and universities. The researchers offer suggestions to university administrators, community engagement coordinators, and institutions about their approach to create meaningful and collaborative partnerships with Black communities.

Keywords: Black counternarratives, community relationships, university engagement, community leaders

Black Communities in the United States

Research addressing the Black community in the United States is a complicated endeavor because *the Black community* is not a monolithic entity. Black communities possess numerous components including diverse socioeconomic statuses, housing types, education structures, urban or rural settings, and historic or new developments, among other characteristics (Tamir, 2021). This multiplicity is also the result of an evolution of the nation from 1619 when the first recorded enslaved Africans were brought to America (Hannah-Jones, 2021); to the shaping of America's neighborhoods via publicly accepted and exacerbated unethical social behaviors such as redlining in housing markets and segregation at educational institutions brought on by Jim Crow laws (Wright, 2020); to the rise of the Black Bourgeoisie (Franklin Frazier, 1957); to today's middle- and upper-class Black communities (Bart, 2018; Graham, 1999). However, issues of poverty (Sullivan & Ziegert, 2021), education (Sealey-Ruiz et al., 2014), mental health (Majors et al., 2020), and housing (Beider, 2012) continue to be of concern to Black communities nationwide.

Town-Gown Relationships and University Community Engagement

"Town and gown is a term dating from medieval Europe identifying distinct spheres for the university (gown) and for lay people in the communities (town)" (Mayfield, 2001, p. 237). When describing the relationship between institutions and neighboring communities, many terms have surfaced over the years including "engaged universities" (Mayfield, 2001), "university-community partnerships" (Martin et al., 2005), and "community-academic partnerships" (King et al., 2017). Nonetheless, community engagement has emerged as a significant priority for many colleges and universities nationwide (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Unfortunately, within the university environment many individuals often held the opinion that the community outside the four walls of campus was morally corrupt. As such, institutions often created policies to ensure their students were "protected" from the community, effectively separating the university from its surrounding neighborhood (Bruning et al., 2006). However, over time universities attempted to develop mutually

beneficial relationships with neighboring communities. However, many universities viewed communities as clients rather than a relational partner (Mayfield, 2001). Although town-gown relations were historically strained, in recent years an increasing number of colleges and universities have tried to develop strategies, find common ground, and create programs that engage the community to enhance the relationships (Bruning et al., 2006). Regrettably, engagement has been one-sided, whereby universities strategically dispatch students, faculty, and staff into the community for events but rarely invite individuals from the neighboring community to campus (Bruning et al., 2006).

A strategy adopted by many universities for community engagement focuses on providing students with experiences and access to resources in the community. With this approach, engagement usually takes the form of student teaching, internships, and volunteer opportunities in the community. Universities traditionally benefit from these exchanges due to students having occasions to learn valuable “real world” experiences and gain skills that complement academic curricula, introduce civic responsibility, and provide leadership opportunities. Likewise, communities benefit from the volunteerism and talent expended by these students (Bruning et al., 2006). A second strategy often used by universities for improving town-gown relations is providing university expertise to a community. Mullins and Gilderbloom (2002) reported that those universities that have developed community partnerships often provided professional expertise (leadership training), economic development (job training, housing, secondary education), and enhancements to quality of life (public safety, education, and providing recreational programs) to the communities’ constituents (Bruning et al., 2006).

Town-Gown Relationship in Black Communities

Town-gown relationships specifically between universities and Black communities

in the United States have been marked by tension, conflict, and racism (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018). A pivotal period on the national stage for town-gown relationships between Black communities and universities was after World War II. A shift in the nation to a “knowledge economy” whereby the economic growth of the country was dependent on the acquisition of information and education, coupled with the educational support from the GI Bill, increased the number of students pursuing higher education (Taylor et al., 2018) and subsequently universities needed space to accommodate their growing population of students, faculty, and staff. Neighboring Black communities often became targeted locations for expansion (Taylor et al., 2018). While the Black populations in urban spaces grew, so did increased disinvestment from these spaces (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Ferman et al., 2021). Simultaneously, universities regarded adjacent Black communities as threats to safety and recruitment and aimed to “maintain...a space of whiteness” through urban renewal (Kahler & Harrison, 2020, p. 62). Aided in their effort by the Housing Act of 1949, universities within cities sought to remove neighborhoods coined as “blights” and “slums”—code for Black neighborhoods—through the acquisition of land in these neighborhoods (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018).

Today the term *gentrification* is common in most cities in the United States, and commonly involves some semblance of cultural displacement, especially of low-income minority populations including Black populations (Wiltse-Ahmad, 2019). Unfortunately, the continued growth and development of colleges and universities often catalyze this gentrification (Stewart, 2019; Mowbray, 2019; Revington et al., 2021). However, it must be acknowledged that “colleges and universities are vital institutions at the heart of many U.S. cities. Higher education institutions attract and educate students, are often among the largest employers in their communities, and spark innovation to fuel the local economy (Ehlenz

& Mawhorter, 2022). Therefore, a balanced understanding of universities' and communities' goals, aims, and existence must be appreciated.

Kahler and Harrison (2020) use the example of the University of South Carolina as an illustration of a university's disregard for the Black communities they disrupt in the process of removal for renewal. The University of South Carolina took over two Black neighborhoods, displacing residents without an adequate plan for their relocation, which spurred tension and conflict. When the university decided to use some of the area for residential development, the to-be-displaced residents hoped for a multi-ethnic neighborhood where prices were affordable enough for them to return. The university made efforts to ease tension with local residents and made it appear that they were involving residents in planning. However, the resulting high price of the land demonstrated the university's goals were counter to the goals of the Black community. The predominantly Black and economically impoverished neighborhood transformed into a predominantly White, upper-class, and exclusive enclave. These processes of removal for renewal occur across the nation with universities whitening the space as they build campus facilities or expand housing (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Ferman et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2018). Today universities continue to undertake self-interested, market-driven renewal that does not disrupt the systemic realities of racism but disrupts and displaces Black people out of their communities (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Ferman et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2018). Thus, town-gown relations between universities and Black communities remain strained, and these communities continue to resist universities' intrusion (Ferman et al., 2021).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Embedded in counternarrative research is an acute understanding that significant disparities exist between more frequently

articulated narratives originating from dominant social groups, and alternate sets of expressions from subdominant groups that receive disproportionately negligible acknowledgment within a prescribed social system. Oftentimes the narratives of the dominant group, or *master narratives* (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), are representative of the beliefs of groups that possess power and/or privilege and simultaneously possess the ability to disseminate their beliefs. Unfortunately, these master narratives are commonly perceived as the only version of reality. Subsequently, the realities and expressions of subdominant groups and communities go unheard, unacknowledged, and ignored; and can be erroneously regarded as nonexistent. Thus, counternarratives are necessary to elucidate the lived experiences, perceptions, thoughts, realities, and beliefs of populations whose voices may be marginalized, intentionally or unintentionally, by the master narrative.

Lueg and Lundholt (2020) assert that there are different dimensions of social realities that exist within a given space. Thus, counternarratives are necessary to develop a more complete social picture and inclusive reality. McGibbon et al. (2014) share that the "[d]evelopment of a consistent counternarrative is necessary if we are to work toward decolonizing practices" (p. 186), indicating the acknowledgment of the power differential between groups and the marginalization of subdominant groups. Additionally, counternarratives can serve to empower overlooked communities (Mora, 2014) and provide valuable insight, which can assist in community building and the augmentation of social policy utilizing perspectives from multiple communities.

Colleges and universities often are the initiators, designers, and reporters of interactions with their local communities; therefore, it is imperative to make a concerted effort to amass the perspectives of community members about town-gown relationships. Weerts and Sandmann (2008) discuss extensively the intricate nature of universities'

engagement with communities, including the political, social, and accountability pressures exerted on institutions to be of public good and meet “public needs.” However, relationships with Black communities are additionally strained by negative stigmas, stereotypes, and distrust oftentimes originating from university communities (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018), compounding the one-sided nature of the university-community engagement (Bruning et al., 2006). Weerts and Sandmann (2008) assert that a “two-way approach” is necessary when “interacting with community partners to address societal needs” (p. 74). At the center of this study about town-gown relationships are the voices of Black community members, which provide a counternarrative that is important in initiating steps to decolonize one-sided practices with community engagement in higher education.

METHODS

The purpose of the study was to garner the perceptions of Black community leaders about the relationship between local colleges and universities and their specific Black communities. The research team’s institutional research board (IRB) approved the study, and it was executed using the approved protocol. Black leaders from 61 Black communities across the United States were sent an electronic survey with quantitative and qualitative items addressing their observations, values, and experiences with university-community partnerships. In addition, participants were asked about the type of university-community relations they would like to see established in their communities. One section of the survey comprised five open-ended qualitative query items of which four were used for this analysis. The fifth open-ended question was designed to provide an opportunity for participants to share any information pertaining to town-gown relationships that may not have been addressed in the survey; and, as such, data from that question were not used for the analysis. The four items from the survey used for the analysis were:

Item 1. Briefly share what you know about any partnerships with colleges and/or universities and the community?

Item 2. Describe your perception of the relationship between the community and the local college and/or university?

Item 3. Describe in your own words what types of activities and engagement you would like to see occur between the local college(s) and/or university (universities) and the community?

Item 4. Please share any thoughts or information that you would like as it pertains to your community and its relationship with the local college and/university?

A basic thematic analysis of the data collected from these four items was conducted by a research team composed of three individuals.

Selection of Black Communities and Black Leaders

The researchers used (a) the U.S. Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/data.html>) and (b) zip codes, through <https://www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/>, to review cities’ demographics within the United States. Those with significant populations of 25% or more Black residents were designated as Black communities. From that list, the researchers explored which of those cities had any type of higher education institution located within 10 miles of that city. Higher education institution types included community colleges or 2-year institutions, 4-year institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). After reviewing the initial list of cities, the researchers looked at other suburbs and towns in which there were communities, neighborhoods, or districts where Black individuals comprised 25% or more of that community. Once the locations were decided upon, the researchers conducted Internet searches for schools, churches, government officials, businesses, and civic organizations; subsequently, Black individuals

who held leadership roles within these institutions were selected. A spreadsheet of these individuals was developed, and emails were sent to them requesting their participation with the electronic link for the survey.

Participants

Participants recruited for the study were Black adult individuals who were identified as leaders in their community through the positions/titles they held in their respective organizations. Leaders in this study were defined as principals and teachers at the local schools, religious and church leaders, business owners, leaders of civic organizations, and governmental officials within their respective communities. These individuals were selected based on information provided by public websites from their specific organizations located within the communities. From the survey responses, all participants identified as African American, although other African Diasporic population identities were offered for participants to indicate such as African (born in a nation located within Africa), African-parented, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, etc. During the pilot stage of the study, 38 individuals responded to the survey of which 27 responded to the open-ended qualitative items. Thirteen of the participants identified as women and 14 identified as men. Most participants were 35 to 44 years old (9); eight participants were 55 to 64 years old; seven were 45 to 55 years old; and three participants were 25 to 34 years old. Twenty-three participants earned a post-secondary academic degree (bachelor's degree, 2; master's degree, 15; doctoral or terminal degree, 6).

Analysis Process

Data collected from this segment of the study were both static and anonymous. The research team recognized the static nature of the data as a limitation. However, since little has been done to elucidate the experiences of Black communities, the narratives were considered extremely important in the discourse

of community engagement, especially in the exploration of counternarratives. Subsequently, the researchers conducted a basic thematic analysis and adhered to Braun and Clark's (2006) phases of a thematic analysis: (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) discerning themes from the data, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) developing names and definitions for themes, and (6) writing the findings.

The research team determined they would use a two-stage coding strategy before the coding process commenced. Both initial (open) and axial coding were performed on the data (Saldaña, 2015). The first stage involved the initial open coding whereby each researcher independently line-by-line broke down the raw data into discrete parts and identified topics, trends, and categories without the influence of the other team members. Each member developed their own codes from the data. During the second stage, the team convened after the independent open coding to engage in an extensive discussion about the codes they each derived from the data and their individual observation of patterns within the data. This second stage also involved a discussion about the connectivity between the set of codes, and as a group, the team identified relevant themes that emerged. The researchers then collectively determined which participants' quotes were most pertinent or representative of each theme.

Limitations and Advantages

The limitations to the study were (a) only four inquiry items were used to yield information from the participants, (b) the researchers' inability to administer follow-up questions for deeper and more nuanced explanations and for additional information to enhance participants' responses, and (c) the inability for the researchers to conduct member-checking of the data. However, there were pertinent advantages to this approach. The online survey format allowed for greater levels of anonymity for the participants as opposed to face-to-face interviews or focus

groups. Anonymity is a significant element when individuals respond to socially delicate or controversial questions (Lavender & Anderson, 2009). Therefore, for this current study, the greater level of anonymity through the design was considered an asset by the team. Concurrently, research has also shown that complete anonymity has the tendency to diminish individuals' accountability resulting in less precise responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Lelkes et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the research team determined the unfiltered candor expressed in the responses is exactly what was desired.

Trustworthiness

The design of this qualitative study adhered to the four elements of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Polit and Beck (2012) describe credibility as the separating out of truth from the data including an acknowledgement of the role of the researcher as the study instrument and analytic lens of the inquiry. Accurateness of the topics was tabulated by the repetition of the words, phrases, and ideas directly from the data. The positionalities of the researchers were recognized as the analytical lens from which the study was designed and executed. When data is consistent over similar conditions, it is referred to as dependability (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The study was dispersed to 61 Black communities across the United States; thus, the data was gathered across similar conditions in similar communities. A study achieves transferability if the data and subsequent findings are pertinent to similar environments and individuals (Houghton et al., 2013). The scope and breadth of this study is transferable to many Black communities and Black community leaders. However, this does not assert that the results are generalizable but that the perceptions captured through the data have the potential to elicit similar sentiments of individuals in similar contexts.

Positionality

Crucial to qualitative endeavors is the

acknowledgment and understanding of researcher positionality, which "describes an individual's worldview and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context" (Holmes 2020, p. 1). Bourke (2014) emphasized that the qualitative researcher should be aware of their lenses in the analysis process and their role in the dissemination of the research materials. Therefore, providing insight on the researchers' identities results in an understanding of the tone and impetus for the study. The members of the research team of this current study all self-identify as Black and have focused their professional, academic, and research activities on Black populations and experiences in the United States. They have all been involved in Black community-based organizations. Collectively they possess over 30 years of work with Black populations.

FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) nonexistent and ingenuine relationships, (b) the Black college connectivity, and (c) desired holistic engagement.

Theme 1: Nonexistent and Ingenuine Relationships

The majority of participants reported that their Black communities had no substantive relationship with the local colleges and universities. This did not infer, however, that no positive town-gown relationships existed whatsoever; but the sentiment that emerged from data provided by the participants indicated that the relationships between the local colleges and universities and the Black communities were perceived as weak at best. Some participants blatantly exclaimed that there was "no established relationship" or "The relationship between my community and local colleges is almost nonexistent." Additionally, some comments alluded to an adversarial rapport. Terminology such as "Them vs Us" and "Us/Them" was used to describe the town-gown relationship.

Another participant described it as “not an existing or favorable relationship.” Additionally, the Black community leaders expressed a feeling of mistrust. One participant said that “any engagement with the neighborhood is research based to leverage federal and non-profit grant opportunities,” alluding to the relationship being ingenuine in nature and only for the advancement of the university’s agenda.

Beyond the research agenda, a social disconnection was also expressed based on a belief that gentrification relates to the local college and the lack of college/university faculty and staff who live within the community. A participant stated, “The college is a part of the gentrification within the Black neighborhood.” These remarks provided a modicum of insight on the possible sentiment of mistrust of the colleges and universities having the community’s interest as a focus. The prevailing opinion was that local colleges and universities either did not engage, or meaningfully engage, with the communities or did not take into consideration the needs, interests, and goals of the Black community.

Theme 2: The Black College Connectivity

Contradictorily, yet concurrently, with the opinion of weak town-gown relationships emerged a resoundingly positive sentiment with respect to Historically Black Colleges and Universities’ engagement with their communities. The single most common positive element from the data was the HBCUs. Black colleges were mentioned 14 times individually, and every time HBCUs were mentioned, it was corresponding to activities that the community leaders viewed as positive and reciprocal in nature. Interestingly, the community leaders frequently called these institutions by name, whereas only one Predominantly White Institution was mentioned in the data. One participant shared, “My perception is the community holds [two HBCUs] in high esteem because of them being located in the community.” Another participant stated, “a

local HBCU that open[s] its doors to all, meet you where you are and try her best to build you up to that point of achievement!”

Beyond the praise, participants shared their knowledge of tangible partnerships that the HBCUs had with their Black communities. Participants shared that a local Black church partnered with two HBCUs “at times to accomplish the goal of serving the community in different ways,” and “the HBCU has an unparalleled partnership with the black social action and justice advocacy community,” and one HBCU “has a community engagement office that consistently partners with church leaders as well as community leaders to provide resources for communities that are within the city especially targeting the black community.” From the data, HBCUs developed and fostered meaningful and revered relationships with Black communities.

Theme 3: Desired Holistic Engagement

When the participants were asked about their aspirations for a town-gown relationship, their responses were varied; however, the common thread was that they desired holistic engagement with their local college and/or university. The community leaders realized that engagement with key community units such as schools, families, businesses, and churches was necessary for the development of a meaningful town-gown relationship. Partnering with these units would provide colleges and universities with emic insight into the lived experiences of the community members and allow for the needs of community members to be expressed and addressed. Many participants expressed the need for programs designed to develop and enhance the social, educational, professional, and community-sustaining skills of community members.

The edification of the youth at school age levels was evident. One participant stated, I want to see the university partner with the local school district to provide seminars for low-income residents on the following: how to complete a

resume and job application, how to prepare and effectively interview for a job, how to dress for a job interview, how to manage and save money, how to prepare for home ownership. These are the kinds of topics that help families in this community become self-sufficient.

Another stated, “I would also like to see college/universities partner with high school in supporting students beyond graduation from high school,” and “I would love to see mentorships, bridge programs, multiple trips and visits beginning in middle/junior high school... in school courses that share the pathways and local scholarships.” Thus, schools as a centralized point for operations for a college partnership was a common idea emerging from the data. One participant discussed the way institutions of higher education can provide preparation and pathways to career opportunities for community members. They said,

... educating our youth of the benefits of [attending] community college, trade [school], and the military. Everyone is not meant to attend college and universities, but you can earn a quality lifestyle by driving trucks, [and doing] construction, electrical, plumbing.

However, many participants also discussed ideas that addressed the development of families and adults. One participant noted,

I would like to see a greater emphasis placed on holistic family support offering educational opportunities for all members of the household changing the paradigm for the value of education within the home, and extensive entrepreneurship support for local businesses.

Another shared, “I would like to [see] expanded pathways and financial support for those most at risk and disadvantaged within the community.” Therefore, adult education and lifelong learning was also a concern for the community leaders who participated. However, engagement with the youth was still

the mainstay of the participants’ hopes for town-gown relationships.

DISCUSSION

Black community leaders in this study reported that town-gown relationships between their Black communities and their local colleges and universities are complicated, bifurcated, and tenuous. This echoes Kahler and Harrison’s (2020) and Taylor et al.’s (2018) assertions on a general negative relationship between universities and their neighboring communities. However, the voices in this study provide an opportunity for further conversations and research into the sentiments of Black communities in the United States about community engagement involving institutions of higher education. The findings of this study can provide university engagement personnel, university administrators, civic leaders, and local government officials some insight, which can inform their current activities and the design of future activities. More so, it can inform their paradigm and approach to their communities. Rather than an “us and them” paradigm whereby the college or university dictates the needs of the community through generalizable peer-reviewed research (which undoubtedly provides a crucial backdrop for action), a more nuanced and tailored approach should be devised where community members are involved in the information gathering about the needs of their specific communities.

This study underscores Weerts and Sandmann’s (2008) “two-way approach,” and reinforces the ideology that extensive communication with community partners and their members need to sit at the core of any meaningful and/or successful community engagement initiative. This two-way approach in many ways serves as a philosophy or model for institutions to actively listen to the needs and respect the lives of their community neighbors to avoid social disruption and displacement. Some colleges and universities, understanding their limitations, acquired

mediators to assist in facilitating two-way approaches to build meaningful and symbiotic relationships with their communities. Marketing firms such as Creative Communication Associates in New York are one such entity that assist universities in pivoting from a position where the institutions must be:

mindful of bridges that may need to be strengthened (or even mended) ... Identify past challenges and missteps, understand where wrong turns were made, and take steps to move forward with a different approach. Although this will require some uncomfortable humility, just as with any long-term relationship (para. 14).

Although this approach may seem corporate in its structure, it can provide colleges and universities opportunities for self-reflection on the historical and residual relationships with their neighboring communities while recognizing their possible role in the creation of a mistrusting relationship. However, more importantly, mediation may enable colleges and universities to find ways to genuinely bring community members, community leaders, and residents to the table when building partnerships.

Another two-way approach may also involve providing multiple opportunities to intentionally place community members and university constituents together in various programs that address their coexistence. Chenoweth (2017) cites Penn State University's holistic and ongoing effort to foster a positive relationship. She states,

Part of easing this struggle means breaking the tradition of only hearing from one another when something goes wrong. One simple yet powerful example is a mixture of neighborhood residents, civic reps, and fraternities working together. The Neighbor-to-Neighbor program was launched in 2010 to pair fraternities with local families so they can get to know each other (para. 12).

Therefore, universities being deliberate in intermingling individuals from the university and the community, providing support for each group, and groups consistently engaging beyond moments of crisis is one formula for creating positive town-gown relationships.

As implied by the participants' vision of holistic engagement, Black community leaders keenly understand that colleges and universities offer valuable capital and skills by teaching individuals how to access resources, acquire knowledge, and move into post-secondary pathways and careers. These leaders wish for their neighboring colleges and universities to extend these educational opportunities to their community members, particularly youth. Therefore, there is the potential for universities to address inequitable educational opportunities by creating more meaningful engagement with Black communities that incorporates their interests rather than creating partnerships built wholly on the self-interest of the university. While higher education institutions play an important role within a community by providing research, resources, and students that develop local and national communities (Ehlentz & Mawhorter, 2022), they also have the opportunity and responsibility to shed negative stereotypes of community neighbors (Kahler & Harrison, 2020; Taylor et al., 2018) and must recognize that a genuine, collaborative, and consistent presence can bolster trust while creating psychological and actual pathways for community members to view college as a viable life track. Subsequently, positive educational influence on the community was another desire of the Black leaders of their local colleges and universities. They wanted colleges and universities to be thoroughly immersed in the community and not be on the periphery, thus becoming a constant, reliable, and integrated presence and positive influence on the community's students at all levels. The participants reiterated repeatedly the desire for engagement within the schools, families, businesses, and churches of the Black community.

The sentiments of the Black community leaders were bifurcated across the ethnic composition and type of institution. Although it was not directly expressed by the participants, a disparity existed with respect to the sentiments expressed about Black colleges and universities and those concerning non-Black colleges and universities. There were resounding positive remarks and references about HBCUs. Juxtaposed to this, all the other remarks with respect to unnamed institutions were highly negative and mistrusting. Kahler and Harrison (2020) and Taylor et al. (2018) refer to the tension between Black communities and universities and Lovett (2015) discusses the affinity of Black communities to HBCUs; both were echoed in this study. Thus, bifurcated sentiments of town-gown relationships seem to exist across the lines of race and historical racism within the United States. The pertinent question that emerged from this is, “What can institutions of higher education, specifically PWIs, learn from HBCUs about establishing and maintaining positive town-gown relationship with Black communities?”

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (n.d.),

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are institutions that were established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating Black Americans. These institutions were founded and developed in an environment of legal segregation and, by providing access to higher education, they contributed substantially to the progress Black Americans made in improving their status (para. 1).

Therefore, at the core of Black colleges is an authentic penchant for the upliftment of the Black community. It is possibly this missioned genuineness and institutionalized concern exuded in their approach to and rapport with the Black community that results in more meaningful engagements and relationships with the Black community.

CONCLUSION

Colleges and universities in the United States continue to engage in community outreach programs extensively. However, from this study and others, it is clear oftentimes that town-gown relationships with Black communities are not positive. These relationships can be fraught with mistrust and a history of racial tension layered with a sentiment that neighboring colleges are only concerned with their own research agendas. However, HBCUs appear to foster meaningful connections with the Black community. The findings of this study suggest that other institutions of higher education, including PWIs, should work with and learn from their HBCU counterparts about creating genuine relationships with these communities. This research team has questions and suggestions that colleges and universities may contemplate when developing community relationships.

Colleges and universities are encouraged to discard measurements and indicators that are contrived and developed by entities outside of the Black community and that may be theoretical but not practical. These measures of success and connectivity are originated many times from research and theories. One suggestion is to devise new ways of measuring program success that heavily weight feedback from community members. Invite Black community leaders and members to participate in developing programs so they are designed for their specific community needs. Invite members of the community to college and university campuses regularly so they begin to understand the college environment and how it operates. Additionally, inviting Black community members to campus has the possibility of dissolving social and psychological barriers and stigmas that create an “us vs them” sentiment. Ensure that the conversations between executive leadership and Black community leadership adopt a grassroots approach instead of being filtered through university bureaucracy. It is imperative that

the collective life in the Black community be improved and enhanced through the design of community engagement activities and that economic, social, health, and educational benefits, among others, are part of the framework and outcomes of these activities. Also, activities and relationship building must be long-term so that town-gown relationships are fostered over multiple years and if possible, generations. Colleges and universities should also consider what they can learn from the Black community to improve their institutions. These suggestions and a philosophy of open, holistic, multifaceted, and meaningful collaborations can be extended beyond town-gown relationships with neighboring Black communities, but more so with any community in proximity of one's college or university. Possessing and acting from an ethic of genuine symbiotic partnership and respect for the lives within neighboring communities can allow universities to establish positive town-gown relationships, including those with Black communities.

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