Chapter 12
Historically Black Colleges and Universities Access to Digital Media: An Intersectional Content Analysis of Black Women Social Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT
Black women entrepreneurs have invested in and supported HBCUs since their inception. Communication and technologies are not neutral carriers of information, but transport messages that are embedded in histories of capitalism, exploitation, and inequality. Black women social entrepreneurs view education as a liberating force, with the potential to bring equality within social and political culture. This study will investigate (1) the role of HBCUs in broadband internet access, (2) distance learning at HBCUs, (3) Black women entrepreneurs as charitable givers, and (4) Black alumnae social networking for economic gains. Findings will identify how Black women social entrepreneurs can develop strategies for broadband digital connectivity in conjunction with HBCUs, where digital media communication technologies are used for instruction.

INTRODUCTION
In order to support innovation, Black women entrepreneurs have long invested in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their surrounding neighborhoods since their inception. Black women entrepreneurs support HBCU students and institutions through charitable giving to advance digital media education, while simultaneously benefiting society and enhancing the growth of historically Black institutions.

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With the increasing importance of new digital technologies, equitable access to broadband high-speed internet is essential if people are to remain economically stable and socially connected. Collins and Bilge (2016) have said that digital media are new communications technologies that have become significant to the culture because of their power to reach mass audiences. Fuchs (2014) applied critical theory to communication technologies as transporters of messages that have long been deeply embedded within histories of capitalism, colonialism, militarism, exploitation and inequality. HBCUs have trained Black professionals for careers in new communication technologies, including print journalists, radio and television broadcasters, communication strategists, public relations workers, advertisers and speech communication professionals. Broadband accessibility and technology access groom young students to become computer proficient early in life. This establishes a pipeline of digital media professionals for high-income careers. Black and Brown people are significantly underrepresented in these technology professions.

HBCUs were established with the aim of educating Blacks to empower them to serve their communities, and to socially uplift African-American culture generally (Jean-Marie, 2004; Sims, 1994). Because of their varied backgrounds, these racially diverse schools have students, faculty and administration who bring a range of experiences to the learning environment. Even though HBCUs have been extensively researched, there are few studies that investigate women entrepreneurs who charitably give to these institutions with a specific focus on funding initiatives for digital media equitable access. The purpose of this chapter is to examine two issues: (a) the role of HBCUs in digital media broadband internet connectivity for students, faculty and administration; and (b) women social entrepreneurs who contribute economic and social capital to increase digital media access at HBCUs and surrounding communities.

BACKGROUND

According to Gasman, Abiola and Freeman (2014), HBCUs were initially funded by religious organizations, White philanthropic groups and the U.S. government, particularly as a result of the passage of legislation such as the 1890 Morrill Land-Grant Act. The same economic gaps that were prevalent a century ago between HBCUs and predominately White institutions (PWIs) continue in 2020, as demonstrated by the pervasive differences that exist regarding the way digital media fiber optic technology privileges wealthy universities. HBCUs are credited with graduating over 20 percent of the Black college graduates within the United States, with seven out of ten of the degrees from these institutions being earned by women (Gasman, Abiola, & Freeman, 2014). In response to the increase in female enrollments from the 1990s to the early 2000s, gender parity has been increasingly studied. Although gender gap increases at HBCUs had not been explored widely by policymakers and researchers, individual and institutional challenges resulted from decreased availability of scholarships. These economic trends exacerbated the existing gender parity issues, which suggests that as more females enroll at HBCUs, women will increasingly need to carry a greater burden in funding these institutions through charitable alumni giving.

Allen, Jewell, Griffin and Wolf (2007) have described how HBCUs influence Black culture, improve the life of Black communities, and prepare future Black leaders to change people, their neighborhoods and the world. HBCUs developed leaders who were social change agents. Black women leaders have hoped to empower and inspire the vulnerable through charitable giving within historical organizations. In the early years following the founding of such historical schools, many Black colleges were funded by churches, such as the American Missionary Association, Disciples of Christ and African Methodist
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Episcopal Church (Allen et al., 2007). HBCUs initially struggled, having been provided with little or no federal or state funding. This required them to rely heavily upon White philanthropic organizations and missionary societies to sustain themselves financially and to provide services to the Black community (Allen et al.).

Higher education evolved as colleges became more competitive (Smith & Humberstone, 2018). Between the early 1990s through 2008, college tuition increases were attributed to online and for-profit institutions, and entrepreneurial technology companies, such as Blackboard, which offered instructional databases (Smith & Humberstone, 2018). In addition, the increase of student loans has caused students to become more conscious of their debt (Smith & Humberstone, 2018). Throughout U.S. history, HBCUs have adapted by creating social capital and networks aimed at helping their graduates to be successful (Allen et al., 2007).

Giddings (1984) examined the Black women’s clubs that came into existence around the same time as Booker T. Washington became a prominent figure for HBCUs, business, the press and politics. Washington founded the National Negro Business League in 1900, and later expanded the organization to become a Black Chamber of Commerce, which by 1915 had 600 branches (Giddings, 1984). The club women’s movement felt the power of Washington, who was consulted by U.S. presidents on national political and business decisions. Between 1912 and 1915, his third wife, Margaret Murray Washington, had been an officer of various national clubs, including the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) (Giddings, 1984). These clubwomen supported Washington’s philosophy of self-help, mutual aid, industrial education, and racial pride for Blacks. White donors earmarked funds for career and technical education, so HBCUs added trades to their curriculums to receive this needed financing (Giddings, 1984). School founders and educators, such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Anna Julia Cooper, understood the relevance of industrial education for funding of their schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital and Broadband Internet Access

According to Williams (2009), HBCUs have historically been known as forces of social justice, for educational equity, and for removing other obstacles to equality. Closing the digital divide for HBCUs will require increasing high-speed internet in many underserved parts of the U.S. A current issue for education is providing broadband internet access for communities where HBCUs are located, as well as for students, faculty, staff and administrators at these institutions. Countless contributions have been made to the community by these institutions which have increased economic opportunities, such as employment. Even so, there continue to be serious challenges such as inadequate funding, and lack of digital access for underserved student populations, which interfere with the ability of these institutions to accomplish their historical missions. Alabama State University (2020) hosted a panel with Federal Communications Commission Commissioner Geoffrey Starks, Alabama Senator Bobby Singleton and Selma, Alabama Mayor Darrio Melton.

This panel emphasized that digital media empowers changes in education and concluded that access to such technology is necessary to participate in a global economy. Distance learning education required college professors to be trained to use new technology instructional platforms. The panel also concluded that equitable access to 21st century education through the use of technology should be a right for all
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people, not a luxury for the privileged. Unaffordability of broadband internet intersects with issues of class and race, with only half of African-American homes having online connectivity services (Alabama State University, 2020). Initiatives by Geoffrey Starks addressed the fact that HBCUs are in need of funding for high-speed Internet on campuses. Technology was an instructional tool used in many HBCU classrooms before the COVID-19 pandemic, but when distance learning became the only option, the weak infrastructure had to be built-up or reformed over a short timeframe to ensure that courses continued online (Alabama State University, 2020).

Broadband high-speed Internet should be an affordable utility, just as electricity and water, to meet everyone’s basic needs (Alabama State University, 2020). In 2019, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) launched the Minority Broadband Initiative (MBI) in partnership with HBCUs and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). This initiative aimed to solve broadband deployment challenges in vulnerable communities, particularly cyberinfrastructure or the broad network of technology systems, which HBCUs and TCUs rely upon in order to remain competitive in a digital economy (NTIA, 2020)

Charitable Activism of Black Entrepreneurial Women in Higher Education

This section examines Black women’s literature with a focus on social entrepreneurs. These women have historically been concerned with uplifting African-American social conditions, as demonstrated by them having used their own positions in women’s clubs, education and schools, civil rights, literature and media to contribute to the greater good. Black women’s movements intersected with social entrepreneurship as a collective political activism force. Jean-Marie (2004) investigated the views of Black women HBCU administrators regarding how Black churches have conveyed a sense of hope, refuge and goals for Blacks in transformational social and economic development movements.

Black women’s scholarship about Maggie Walker described her as having a community consciousness. Walker lived and worked in Richmond, Virginia, where her bank and the Independent Order of St. Luke benevolent organization were headquartered (Brown, 1989). Community consciousness included social entrepreneurship goals of racial and class uplift that were critical to the work these women performed in their communities (Brown, 1989). Biographies have chronicled the lives of several trailblazers who contributed to the uplift of the Black community through charitable giving. Mary McLeod Bethune, Madame C. J. Walker, Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey cultivated extensive networks, and as a result of having done so, were able to attain remarkable levels of social and financial achievement.

Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune strongly and successfully used mediated and non-mediated approaches to build interpersonal relationships. McCluskey (2014) emphasized that Bethune focused on race relations and invited both White and Black residents to serve on the board of trustees for her school (McCluskey, 2014). “Her adept use of the press served her well in advancing a broad agenda for better race relations and forced the beautiful and placid playground of business titans to expose its darker side (McCluskey, 2014, p. 68-69).” Once her school was founded, Bethune began traveling to the North to raise funds by speaking to Black and White groups (McCluskey). The membership of her board of trustees included Northerners who travelled South for the winters, such as James N. Gamble of Procter and Gamble (served as board president), John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil, and Samuel White, founder
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of the White Sewing Machine company (McCluskey). HBCU fundraising and development offices who cultivate strong alumni, community and national relationships, as well as international donors, could maintain strong endowments and cash flows.

In 1898, Bethune married Albertus Bethune. In 1899 they had a son, Albert Bethune (McCluskey, 2014). The couple moved from Savannah, Georgia to Florida for better economic opportunities, which led to the founding of the Daytona Educational and Industrial School for Negro Girls in 1904. As the school grew, it merged with Cookman Institute in Jacksonville, Florida in 1923, and became a Methodist Episcopal church institution offering four-year, co-educational studies (McCluskey). Bethune was able to use her own agency and belief in her abilities to found this HBCU, and she served as president of Bethune-Cookman College from 1923-1942 and 1946-1947. Bethune was born in 1875 in Mayesville, South Carolina to Patsy and Samuel McLeod, who had been enslaved (McCluskey, 2014). Narratives that were delivered during her speeches to raise funds for the college pointed to her humble beginnings as the daughter of former slaves, and this helped her gain and keep support of both Whites and Blacks from different classes.

As the founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona, Florida, Mary McLeod Bethune was an avid fundraiser (McCluskey & Smith, 2001). She started her school with $1.50. Early support from the Black church and community, as well as from local Whites, was vital to funding for the school (McCluskey & Smith). By 1936, she was appointed to the advisory board of the National Youth Administration by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She became NYA’s Division of Negro Affairs director, and was the highest paid African-American in government from 1936 to 1944. Her relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt blossomed into a friendship with both her and President Roosevelt that launched Bethune into the role of presidential advisor on racial matters (McCluskey & Smith). Bethune provides an excellent example of Black women who have demonstrated the ability to cultivate religious and community support, as well as being politically engaged and developing relationships from a grassroots level to the highest ranks in government.

Madame C. J. Walker

Madame C. J. Walker was born Sara Breedlove in the delta of Louisiana in 1867 to former slaves (Giddings, 1984). Walker created a formula that caused her shedding hair to grow back rapidly. She mixed together products that she had received from Africa and other places to create hair products. Her early sales strategy involved only door-to-door sales, but she later established beauty salons throughout the U.S., Caribbean and South America (Giddings, 1984). Walker owned advanced factories, laboratories, and hair culture training schools. She hired Black women sales agents on commission to sell hair growers, salves and oil to heal dry scalp skin ailments. As the first female and first African-American millionaire, she employed a sales force of 5,000 Black women spread across several different countries who generated average revenues of $1,000 every day of the week (Giddings).

She attended the 1909 National Association of Colored Women convention, and volunteered to direct a fundraising campaign for Bethune’s school:

She was also known for her generous contributions to Black educational and welfare institutions, especially those that directly benefited women. Upon her death in 1919, her will stipulated that two thirds of her fortune go to various charities, and that her company always be controlled by a woman (Giddings, 1984, p. 188).
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Walker was an innovator and pioneer who created an empire that grew to become the largest Black hair and cosmetic industry in the U.S. According to Krotz (2017), Walker gave funds to HBCUs and Black civic organizations. Her successful business strategy of marketing and advertising her hair products was executed by her sales force of women. Her fortune grew from her hair products that were sold by trained sales agents and applied during services that were performed by hair culturists and scalp specialists. Walker was one of the earliest philanthropists and contributed generously to charitable causes from the profits of her business.

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou contributed her surplus to others who were in need. Angelou (2009) defined charity as acts of service and words that could offer joy and restore hurt feelings. She defined a philanthropist as a lover of humanity who possessed wealth that had often been passed down generationally. In addition to mentoring women and making financial contributions, she left a legacy through her literary writings and oral discourse that reached the masses. Angelou (1993) described philanthropy through classism that separated “the haves and have nots.” She argued that philanthropists often chose to be unrecognized due to the social stigma associated with giving to members of society who had less. Philanthropists gave large sums of money to support organizations, such as the arts, and often set up committees or delegations to act as their representatives to handle the business of the donors separately from the business of recipients.

Some benefactors may desire distance from the recipients of their largess because there is a separation between themselves and the resources they distribute. As inheritors or managers of fortune rather than direct earners, perhaps they feel exiled from the gifts; then it follows that they feel exiled from the recipients (Angelou, 1993, p. 17).

Angelou described herself as a charitable giver who expressed her generosity by giving from her heart to people she called her friends (1993).

Her non-fiction books incorporated her lived experiences as a Black woman who grew up in the U.S. South. After a traumatic childhood event which involved her being raped, she refused to speak for years. She wrote about that experience in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, in which she described how she replaced talking with reading (Angelou, 1969). She was a prolific writer with extensive networks. She wrote many successful non-fiction books that sold well, from which she received substantial sums of money. This demonstrates that Angelou not only had excellent literary talent, but also possessed entrepreneurial abilities.

Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey was and continues to be one of the most powerful, high-profile minority women in television, and has created a billion-dollar media empire. Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao (2013) described her ability to use personal narratives to win over mainstream White female audiences. The success of “The Oprah Winfrey Show” caused her to become one of the wealthiest communications media entrepreneurs in the U.S. Harpo Productions produced the show with Winfrey as the chairman and CEO of the production company (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2013). Between 1986 to 2011, Winfrey regularly taped her show in Chicago, Illinois, gaining 26 million viewers in the United States (Wilson, Gutier-
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rez, & Chao, 2013). She co-founded Oxygen Media, including a women’s cable network, and launched her own cable television channel OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network). Oprah’s Book Club featured books that were usually given to audiences, and the popularity of these segments caused many of the books to become best-sellers (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao). Her talk show broadcasts frequently showed acts of kindness of her giving to audiences.

Since 1993, the Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation (OWCF) has supported people who were in need by contributing millions of dollars to children, families and communities through grants and donations to organizations that have a specific focus on youth education (Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation, 2020). The mission of OWCF is described as follows:

To lead – to educate – to uplift – to inspire – and to empower women and children throughout the world, opening doors so that each person touched can begin to define their own best life – their own possibility for greatness. It is a lasting mission of fulfillment – of teaching, learning and growing” (Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation, 2020).

OWCF has an on-going commitment to three youth education programs for underserved populations: (a) Morehouse College – Oprah Winfrey Scholars Program; (b) Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (OWLAG) – South Africa; and (c) United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Since 1989, the Oprah Winfrey Scholars Program endowment has financed a $12 million investment at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. On the 30th anniversary in 2019, Winfrey made another donation of $13 million, which brought the total amount given to that organization to $25 million (Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation, 2020). In 2019, Winfrey announced a $1 million donation to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) during a fundraising luncheon (Oprah Winfrey Charitable Foundation, 2020). Her philanthropy to HBCUs has been consistent over numerous years, demonstrating her support as an alumna of Tennessee State University.

Critical Theory and Intersectional Views of Social Entrepreneurship

Critical theory has been used to examine communication and technology messages that were embedded in histories of capitalism, exploitation and inequality (Fuchs, 2014). This study used critical theory and intersectionality to investigate social entrepreneurship of Black women in the age of digital media. Collins and Bilge (2016) defined intersectionality as an analytic tool to understand the combined social inequalities of power in societies that are shaped by multiple social divisions, such as race, gender and class. These same authors describe digital media as new communications technologies that reach mass audiences with powerful influences on culture. Black women encountered intersectional oppressions, because they were unable to separate their race and gender, which often affected their ability to earn money because of these multiple discriminations. “Social welfare states had long concerned themselves with protecting the interests of the public, grounded in a belief that democratic institutions could flourish only with a strong citizenry” (Collins & Bilge, p. 16).

Berger and Guidroz (2009) investigated the institutionalization of Black women sisterhoods that began in Black churches, then expanded to the women’s club movement in the late 1800s. Female kinship ties were of great importance to the political identities of African-American women whose agendas primarily focused on race issues. National Black women’s organizations were founded with feminist values to
address many women’s rights issues, yet they remained committed to improving conditions for all Black people (Berger & Guidroz).

May (2015) described intersectionality as an interpretive tool that can be used to examine race, gender and class issues of power and inequalities across history. Intersectional analysis has demonstrated how the wealth gap for women of color was simultaneously racialized and gendered for Black and Latino women who were more often single heads of households (Collins & Bilge, 2016). “[To locate one’s ideas (and self) in legacies of struggle, is not a new rhetorical or political phenomenon (May, 2015, p. 55).” The wealth gap reflected racialized structures in the United States, but this phenomenon was also gendered.

Methodology

This qualitative inquiry examined digital media broadband access policy, distance learning perspectives of HBCU administrators and students, charitable giving by Black women entrepreneurs, and HBCU alumnae social networking with financial benefits. This content analysis used a case study approach to examine issues within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The researcher used her own observations to center and ground this investigation. This set of relevant experiences include the following: (a) having organized panels that featured FCC Commissioner Starks, other government leaders and HBCU presidents; (b) experience with teaching distance learning courses at the Alabama State University, where she is currently employed; (c) and being a Black woman who has owned a media company. Various books, reports, articles, and other documents served as the literature that was examined in this study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the texts that were chosen through Google Scholar and online search engines.

An examination of social entrepreneurship language was used to explore the intersections of Black women charitable givers and HBCU recipients of philanthropy. Texts were analyzed for words associated with fundraising, broadband internet access, Black women social entrepreneurs and Black women at HBCUs. Because of the limited previous scholarship on Black women in history and social entrepreneurship, there were few sources that identified these women as social entrepreneurs. Bill Drayton, founder and CEO of Ashoka, coined the term social entrepreneur in 1972 for pragmatic visionaries who brought entrepreneurial thinking to the most challenging social issues in a global society (Ashoka, 2020). This type of citizen-led service parallels terms such as philanthropist, charitable and giver that have been associated with private, grassroots social impact leadership for ages. All the women who were investigated in this study fit into one or all of those categories. Although they may have not ever been explicitly referred to as social entrepreneurs, all of these women exemplify the attributes of philanthropists and contributors to HBCUs and Black culture.

FINDINGS

This study identified statements of Black women social entrepreneurs that revealed their use of communication technologies. It also identified HBCU student and institutional needs for charitable giving in the digital space. Lack of access to broadband Internet by minorities was an issue that positioned HBCUs as leaders when addressing solutions for digital media literacy and economic opportunities to prevent Black and Brown people from being left behind. In order to remain relevant, faculty at HBCUs rely heavily upon computer technology and digital media for in-classroom and online instructional tools. Consequently, limited digital access, lower bandwidths and older technologies on many majority Black
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campuses put these students, faculty, staff, administrators and the surrounding communities at a serious disadvantage. Race, gender and class are intersecting factors that must be addressed simultaneously with the alumnae of these institutions having leadership roles in the illumination of such inequities. Black women entrepreneurs and charitable givers need to step up to keep these institutions alive and thriving.

Differences in wealth distinguish HBCUs and their students from other more privileged groups who have greater access to digital media. Online access privileges people who have the ability to pay for these services, leaving the less fortunate in vulnerable positions. Elite are protected against having their privacy intruded upon when using technologies because their wealth gives them access to power (Fuchs, 2014). Digital media has offered many college students the ability to enroll in distance learning courses to earn degrees. However, the most vulnerable groups have challenges when taking online classes. This is because, as a result of the high costs associated with these services, they may not have access to high speed Internet in their private homes.

Communications media and journalism programs have embraced innovative teaching strategies for careers outside of traditional paths. Entrepreneurs have made use of innovative communications, particularly digital media, in the 21st century. However, HBCUs, TCUs (Tribal Colleges and Universities), and HSIs (Hispanic-Serving Institutions) still need funds for broadband services, technological equipment, such as wi-fi hotspots, connected devices, routers and modems, compensation to information technology staff and facilitation of online learning or operation of small businesses or non-profit organizations (NTIA, 2020, June). It is imperative that the faculty of these institutions have equal access to the communication technology tools that are necessary to prepare students to compete in a globally-connected, technological world.

This chapter identifies Black women in history as funders and supporters of Black culture, particularly HBCUs. This phenomenon will be examined with critical theory that investigates capitalism, colonialism, equality, exploitation and militarism, and by examining the intersections of race, gender and class. It will also examine women's studies scholarship which has expanded to reclaim the voices of Black women and their organizations that dealt with “multiple consciousness” that combined race, gender and class. Iconic figures in history adopted multiple voices to discuss why race and gender must always be interlinked, and material related to these matters will also be examined (May, 2015).

Minority Broadband Access Policy

The Connecting Minority Communities Act was brought before the U.S. Senate with the intent to organize the Minority Broadband Initiative (MBI), which had been established by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). MBI was a new office that was tasked with carrying out the legislation of a grant-funded pilot program at HBCUs, TCUs, and HSIs to expand broadband and digital access to these institutions and the communities where they are located (U.S. Senate Commerce, 2020). The goal of this joint initiative was to bring economic development to neighborhoods where these minority serving institutions (MSIs) reside to close the digital divide that has existed in minority communities. It is anticipated that entrepreneurship will contribute greatly to economic improvements in these places and spaces when digital media is affordable and accessible for all people, regardless of their race and class (U.S. Senate Commerce, 2020). Because of their commitment to communities, and particularly because of their faith and education, women entrepreneurs can potentially contribute greatly to this process. The Connected Communities Pilot program would be created to provide grants to MSIs by funding broadband internet services, equipment and staff compensation (U.S. Senate Commerce,
Deployment and installation of equipment will be required, such as Wi-Fi hotspots, connected devices, routers and modems. Staff will also be needed, and would consist of information technology personnel, distance learning faculty, small business entrepreneurs and non-profit professionals.

U.S. Senator Tim Scott, a Republican from South Carolina, introduced both the Connecting Minority Communities Act and Governors Broadband Development Fund in the U.S. Senate in 2020. These bills came out of the U.S. Senate committee on commerce, science and transportation, with U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, Republican of Mississippi, co-sponsoring the Connecting Minority Communities Act (U.S. Senate Commerce, 2020). U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican of South Carolina, and U.S. Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat from Virginia, co-sponsored the Governors Broadband Development Fund.

The Governors Broadband Development Fund prioritized communities that lacked broadband access, so that advanced technologies and internet service could be deployed with urgency (U.S. Senate Commerce, 2020). State governors and their administrations would receive at least $75 million of a $10 billion Broadband Development Fund budget that they would allocate to communities. The legislation stated the bill would expand broadband access and digital opportunities to increase connectivity to underserved communities to close a gap. According to Charles (2020), the accuracy of the maps and data were questioned, with concerns that digital deserts in minority communities had been underreported. State governments could use these funds for infrastructure improvements, to reduce or eliminate costs for broadband services, to make community center enhancements, or for other relevant applications (U.S. Senate Commerce).

Distance Learning: HBCU Administrator and Student Voices

The Federal Communications Commission hosted a HBCU presidents’ roundtable on May 4, 2020, during the time when the COVID-19 pandemic was requiring that classes and coursework be transitioned to online distance learning (Charles, 2020). Budget constraints added pressure on many of these institutions which were already experiencing technology infrastructure shortfalls. A lack of high-speed internet access among students, staff and faculty illuminated these issues. Historically Black institutions asked for additional funding beyond the $1 billion that had been allocated from the CARES Act in response to COVID-19 (Charles, 2020). They argued that more funding was necessary to close the gap for broadband connectivity that impacted students, the institutional budget and enrollment. These deficits illustrated where alumni and entrepreneurs could contribute towards scholarships and endowments to attract and retain students who could have appropriate access to technology devices and broadband internet for distance learning.

Participants on the HBCU presidents’ roundtable included government officials and leaders from Alabama State University, Clark Atlanta University, Howard University, Kentucky State University, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Norfolk State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University and Morgan State University (Charles, 2020). The panelists addressed issues about increased expenses and decreased revenue due to limited access to digital technology, outdated equipment and older facilities. Innovative ideas that were discussed included purchasing laptops for students so they would be able to complete their online coursework and providing mobile hotspots. According to Alabama State University president, Quinton Ross, 25 percent of the residents in Alabama lack broadband internet access, and that number is double for Blacks (Charles, 2020). Pew Research found that in the U.S., 34 percent of African Americans do not have broadband access in their homes, and 42 percent of them do not own a computer (Charles, 2020). The socioeconomic status of many HBCUs
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students places them in need of Pell Grants, scholarships or loans to finance their college education. The existing fiber optic technology at HBCUs could not handle the increased traffic volume which resulted from the increase in virtual and distance learning during the COVID-19 crisis (Charles, 2020). Systems at many schools began to crash, and in response, institutions had to make upgrades. Decreases in student enrollments as a result of the health crisis could mean dire circumstances for many of these HBCUs.

The Minority Broadband Initiative investigated digital economy issues through discussions with HBCU presidents, chancellors and students on the topic of how institutional broadband infrastructure could extend to neighboring communities with vulnerable populations (NTIA, 2020, June). Leaders from these colleges and universities specified where immediate and long-term recovery would be needed most urgently. This list of priorities could then be used to guide allocation of federal funds to improve broadband access, digital literacy training and close engagement with government at all levels. Participants from HBCUs thought that expanding government relationships would inform decision makers about the needs of these institutions (NTIA, 2020, June). White House HBCU Competitiveness Scholars, who represented 33 HBCUs, emphasized the negative impacts the COVID-19 health pandemic had on HBCUs when campuses closed with minimal warning, resulting in online virtual learning in the place of traditional in-class settings.

In July 2020, the White House Initiative on HBCUs held a Broadband USA webinar with 72 Competitiveness Scholars. The participants discussed the challenges they encountered with distance learning at their HBCUs (NTIA, 2020, July). The issues they identified as barriers to their learning were: (a) difficulty navigating multiple platforms, (b) obtaining broadband connections, and (c) accessing sufficient technology devices. Internet connectivity was identified as an immediate need, as was improving instructor knowledge about navigating online tools. These students were concerned that their GPAs would decrease, and that they would have challenges securing employment (NTIA, 2020, June). Such vulnerabilities suggest that these issues had been longstanding and embedded in technology systems that were outdated, which excluded or left behind HBCUs and the marginalized communities within which many of these institutions are located.

HBCUs responded to this crisis with innovative ideas. For example, South Carolina State University discussed how they partnered with Clemson University. They formed this alliance because the predominantly White institution (PWI) managed statewide direct fiber networks for national and international research (NTIA, 2020, July). Jackson State University received a National Science Foundation (NSF) Campus Cyberinfrastructure (CC) grant to build a cloud-based enterprise system and non-research commodity networking (NTIA, 2020, July). This pattern of alliances points to potential funding sources through research that HBCU faculty and alumni, particularly women, should explore in order to improve the position of these institutions in the digital media and technological infrastructure spaces.

Black Alumni Social Networking for Economic Gains

Graduates of HBCUs attributed their digital media entrepreneurial abilities to their academic, mentoring, peer, faculty, staff and administration connections (NTIA, 2020, July). HBCUs embraced social media as a tool for student recruitment and communication with stakeholders, including alumni, to remain viable institutions with strong enrollments and contributors. According to Williams (2015), during the 2000s, HBCU graduates had utilized new marketing media more than they used traditional print. For example, they were able to draw from their college experiences, networks and social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, to build their economic prowess. Entrepreneurs are no longer limited to paid
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advertisements, but instead can also use hashtags, tweets, shares, blogs and other types of free internet publicity to promote their services and products (Williams, 2015).

Lee and Kaleem (2009) discussed the crisis caused by student enrollment declines at historically Black institutions that have resulted in more racially diverse campuses. HBCUs, such as Alabama State University, Bennett College, Paine College and Elizabeth City State University, have seen a decrease in their endowments (Lee & Kaleem, 2009). Three HBCUs have closed since 2000, although the most prestigious of such institutions continue to flourish, and still have numerous high-profile alumni who can attract donors and philanthropists. For example, Howard University, Spelman College, Hampton University and Morehouse College student enrollments and endowments have grown (Lee & Kaleem, 2009). Bennett College is one of two HBCUs reserved exclusively for women, although their financial status is quite different from that of the only other women’s HBCU. Bennett College was in jeopardy of losing accreditation because of their debt. Donors contributed over $9.5 million after the situation was made public to maintain the standing of the women’s college with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission of Colleges (SACSCOC) (Lee & Kaleem, 2009). Although their fundraising efforts generated a $461,000 surplus, SACSCOC nevertheless removed their accreditation. After suing the accreditation body, they won a temporary reprieve (Lee & Kaleem, 2009).

Gregory (2020) described the unique position of HBCUs as change agents for affordable broadband access. HBCUs have been leaders in Black and Brown communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. These higher education institutions serve primarily rural or urban localities. It has been suggested that HBCU partnerships can be used to improve access in precisely those geographic areas most in need of upgraded Internet services (Gregory, 2020). HBCU alumni could use digital media to advocate for awareness of digital media disparities and aim to find long-term solutions. In addition to giving, alumni in conjunction with faculty could influence digital media broadband access by discussing these issues in their networks. Intellectual and community engagement have been recommended as tactics to create better connectivity for HBCUs, their communities, and for the people these institutions serve (Gregory, 2020).

Charitable Black Women Entrepreneurs

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) funded the creation of a Benedict College women’s business office, which is the second of its kind at an HBCU. Gumbs (2020) described the launch of this new center that supports women entrepreneurs in starting, expanding, reopening or recovering from COVID-19, saying that it aims “to help women across the state of South Carolina succeed in business.” Jovita Carranza, SBA Administrator tweeted “Entrepreneurship uplifts communities! I appreciate Cheryl Salley’s work at @BenedictEDU’s new #WBC and so look forward to meeting some of the Columbia women impacted by their efforts when I return” (Gumbs, 2020). Bathsheba A. Benedict, a Black woman, founded the college in 1870, and it is currently led by a Black woman president, Roslyn Artis (Gumbs, 2020). This investment by the women’s business center at this HBCU will elevate the institution, alumnae, students, the community and the state.

The 2019 Guidant Financial State of Small Business Survey reported that the number of Black-owned businesses had risen substantially during the previous five years. Black entrepreneurs have attributed their decision to work for themselves to a positive self-concept and a desire for fulfillment (Guidant Financial, 2019). Despite cash flow and capital challenges, these business owners preferred to remain committed to the entities they created. With a rise in Black-owned businesses, HBCUs have an opportu-
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Historically, development offices could pursue alliances with Black entrepreneurs, especially with Black women, who represent the highest percentage of HBCU graduates, to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships and garner future philanthropic gifts.

Lockett et al. (2019) reported that 17 HBCU students were selected to attend the Center for Minority Serving Institutions (CMSI) ten-week virtual fellow program with The Whether, a mentorship-based social networking organization. Students received marketing coaching to hone their entrepreneurial abilities with The Whether’s Clarity Assessment. The study concluded that young people rely heavily upon mentorship, so it is therefore very important for young Black adults to have awareness of and access to opportunities that are available to them. Fellowship participants received a social networking product that connected them with professionals in their industry who had like-minded goals and similar backgrounds (Lockett et al., 2019). Charitable gifts from Black entrepreneurs require commitments of mentoring to develop student’s business acumen and networks. However, these relationships will also be valuable when students have matured and have greater stability in their own professions that will enable them to give back to their communities.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded the launch of the Mary Ellen Pleasant Entrepreneur (MEPE) Fellowship with a $775,000 grant. This grant is intended to teach entrepreneurial principles to the 25 HBCU students who receive it. (Lockett et al., 2019). Pleasant, the memory of whom this fellowship was created to commemorate, was a successful 19th century Black woman entrepreneur who was a financial investor, real estate owner and abolitionist. Though she was enslaved when born, she married John James Pleasant, and together they made good investments and business agreements that increased their net worth beyond $30 million dollars. Committed to the abolitionist movement, she made charitable contributions to civil rights efforts in California, and offered Black workers employment in her businesses. The case of Mary Ellen Pleasant is another prime example of Black women entrepreneurs who demonstrated a commitment to social justice and political activism through their giving.

DISCUSSION

Black women entrepreneurs have a lengthy history of networking to gain support from constituencies of prominent people. They have reputations as consensus builders across classes, genders and races. Booker T. Washington developed the approach of learning practical skills and adopting high moral standards, as well as building strong relationships with national politicians (Giddings, 1984). Career and technical education relevant for today has evolved to include communication technologies and digital media education. Scholars at HBCUs have a valuable role in training these students using new virtual instruction methods, and conducting research to secure funding and resources for the longevity of these spaces for future generations of Blacks.

This case study content analysis investigated discourse about government, HBCU administrators and students, women alumnus and Black women entrepreneurs who supported education, financial giving and community activism. Black women entrepreneurs and alumnae of HBCUs were impactful through networking and collective giving. Racial uplift of all African Americans through education was a high priority for Black women social entrepreneurs. They devoted their finances, time and talents to help those who had a need, even if much of their social life was spent in elite circles. Many Black women were community and educational leaders who used their leadership positions to accomplish multiple agendas.
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(McCluskey & Smith, 2001). Their actions and successes demonstrate that social entrepreneurship can be an enriching approach toward equitably investing in HBCUs (Allen et al., 2007).

Women’s offices at HBCU small business development centers, such as the recent opening at Benedict College, have emphasized the contributions and opportunities of these women entrepreneurs, especially those in digital media professions. Because it transcends the boundaries of any particular industry, information technology is one of the fastest growing career fields. There are definitely places for women and minorities in this expanding field to diversify these roles. Entrepreneurship can help fill this gap and increase job opportunities beyond the locality where a person lives. This is particularly true for those with broadband access and digital media literacy training.

Federal, state and local funding will need to continue to be used, along with private funding from corporations and investors, as well as community charitable giving. Strong leadership from the school administrators and faculty will be necessary to continue to improve the infrastructure of HBCUs to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Allen et al., 2007). Many administrators at HBCUs are alumni of these schools, and they have a vested interest in the continued success of these institutions.

Another theme that emerged from this study was the vital need for financial support of HBCUs to maintain high levels of enrollment, retain existing students, and attract new students. There is substantial evidence that suggests by staying current with technology and digital media trends, this could increase retention and charitable giving. This may be especially true for Black women who constitute the demographic who attends and graduates from HBCUs at the highest rates.

Social entrepreneurs are socially conscious people who have a desire to improve the most challenging global conditions by adopting business strategies to give back to communities in need. This study has examined Black women entrepreneurs who have contributed more than tangible goods or money to charitable causes. These women used their voices as power to uplift, illuminate, instruct, or mentor others. In this study, themes of community outreach and action were apparent. For example, we have seen many examples of hard work to gain opportunities, community activism, faith and the support of others. All of this has very often been centered upon the charitable initiatives of Black women entrepreneurs and alumnae who cheerfully gave to HBCUs. All of this suggests that alumni and entrepreneurs should invest in the education of students at their alma maters or other worthy institutions, particularly in the area of digital media education.

HBCU institutions have advanced Black community initiatives as providers of social capital (Allen, Jewell, Griffin & Wolf, 2007). Online social networking should continue to be cultivated by these institutions in order to promote awareness of the cultural value these historic educational places have and the value donors can offer by contributing to them. It is imperative for alumni to be generous contributors to keep these universities and colleges relevant, particularly as society advances. Curriculums must adapt to virtual teaching methods and online media. Black women as a whole have been prevented from attaining the same levels of economic success that other groups have achieved, but they have successfully matriculated through the academy to earn higher education degrees at the highest level of any other groups in the U.S.

These women understand the need for funding to even the playing field for digital media access and education for all students. Although Black women have had to struggle to succeed, they have nevertheless demonstrated strength in their ability to organize political campaigns, churches, women’s clubs, sororities, non-profit organizations, and businesses. When they come together for a cause, they collectively hold power. The resources available through HBCUs are far less than the endowments of PWIs. However, Black women have historically been community agents for progress. Black women are vital for raising
financial capital that can ensure HBCU students, faculty and administration have the digital technology resources available for instruction and have on-going support to stabilize enrollments and financial standing. It is for these reasons that social entrepreneurs can have a great positive impact when they invest in HBCUs. Such investments can have an empowering effect, and can uplift students who come from underserved populations by expanding their ability to receive an equal and equitable education.

CONCLUSION

Higher education seeks to be an equalizer in bringing people of different colors, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds together. Needless to say, there is still a great deal of work that needs to be done to ensure digital media equality. Greater awareness is needed to illuminate these issues. Future research is needed to identify data about who has broadband internet access. Since the federal government has not taken serious steps to collect more accurate data that is representative of Black and Brown communities, there are great opportunities for researchers to study this phenomenon more fully.

HBCU faculty are teaching 21st century students who rely on innovative media to learn through digital and online instructional tools, such as Blackboard, Zoom and YouTube videos. Students were required to complete distance learning courses at HBCUs in 2020 in response to COVID-19, and this shined a light on the vulnerable situations that many students faced as a result of unreliable Internet or the lack of technology. In a speech delivered at the virtual HBCU Presidents’ Roundtable, FCC Commissioner Starks said this:

*During my time at the Commission I have focused my efforts on addressing internet inequality. And I use this term because we can no longer say that this is simply a digital divide. It has hardened – the same people in the same neighborhoods have been left behind over and over again. (Starks, 2020)*

Starks called on HBCUs to be advocates for investment in their communities by taking a powerful, proactive position in addressing broadband access challenges. Broadband high-speed Internet is now a required utility - not a luxury. Students should have this basic need filled, and socioeconomic status should not be a barrier to learning. Black women social entrepreneurs have always adapted to cultural changes to remain relevant as purveyors of media in society, and that legacy must continue with HBCUs being the change agents.

REFERENCES


ADDITINOAL READING


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Alabama State University:** A public, four-year HBCU located in Montgomery, Alabama. The institution was founded as the Lincoln Normal School in 1867 by nine formerly enslaved men, now known as the Marion Nine. This diverse teaching and research university is committed to service, with a focus on outreach beyond the ivory tower.

**Alumnae:** Two are more female college graduates are known as alumnae. This classifies the sexes separately, particularly when discussing women’s organizations and sororities, rather than male only or a combination of women and men who are called alumni.
Broadband Access: High-speed internet that is an essential utility for communication across technological tools to remain culturally connected in society. These digital services have been costly and inaccessible for the many vulnerable communities.

Charitable Giving: Philanthropists and social entrepreneurs are terms that often describe charitable givers who contribute to community organizations, educational institutions, and nonprofits that serve people who are in need. Kind acts of service improve social conditions in the world through the sharing of surplus resources or wealth with others who are less fortunate.

Development: Colleges in the U.S. fundraise through donor and alumni giving initiatives. Strategies are designed to cultivate charitable programs and campaigns to increase endowments to support the mission of higher education institutions.

Digital Divide: Technology inequities in tangible access to devices and connectivity services. The intersection of multiple oppressions increase the power differentials for the most vulnerable groups to remain on the periphery or excluded from information communication technologies.

Distance Learning: Online instruction that is either synchronous (structured virtual video/teleconferencing and chat rooms) or asynchronous (web-based with discussion boards, recording videos, and documents, emails, and announcements).

FCC: The Federal Communications Commission is a U.S. government agency that regulates radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable across states and nationally to align with communications law and new media innovation.

Internet Connectivity: Wireless broadband services that connect communication products across the globe.

Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs): Higher education that was designed for minorities to be developed for careers, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs).