

The History of HBCUs in America



By [Dave Tomar](#) and [Dr. James Barham](#)

Published: Jan 20, 2022

Updated: Mar 14, 2024

Find Your Degree in 60 Seconds

Take Our Quiz → See Your Matches → Connect With Schools

I WANT MY

Bachelor's



IN

Business & Management



FOCUSING ON

Select a subject



FIND YOUR PROGRAM

ADVERTISEMENT

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are schools that were established between 1865 and 1964 with the goal of advancing educational opportunities for Black students. HBCUs remain a critical source of education, community, and opportunity for Black students as well as a diverse cross-section of Latino, Asian, and White students. The very best HBCUs serve as a place for belonging, empowerment, and pride in Black American culture.

In This Article:

1. [What Is a Historically Black College and University?](#)
2. [Antebellum HBCUs](#)
3. [HBCUs During the Civil War](#)
4. [HBCUs During the Jim Crow Era](#)

5. HBCUs and The March to Freedom

6. The HBCU Era

7. The New Struggle for HBCUs

8. The Present Day

9. Ask A Question

HBCUs emerged at a time when most Southern colleges refused to admit Black students and many Northern colleges enforced rigid racially-driven admission quotas. The HBCUs established during this period emerged to address the educational, professional and economic interests for Black Americans. HBCUs remain a critical source of education, community, and opportunity for Black students as well as a diverse cross-section of Latino, Asian, and White students. The very best HBCUs serve as a place for belonging, empowerment, and pride in Black American culture.

When [Richard Humphreys](#) arrived in Philadelphia from the British Virgin Islands in 1764, he was still in his teens. But even then, the young Quaker was disturbed by the conditions facing African Americans in his new city. Like most adherents to Quaker principles, Humphrey's was vocal in his opposition to slavery and donated freely to abolitionist causes. He was increasingly convinced that education was at least one key to improving lives for Black Americans.

Then, in 1829, Humphreys read of race riots consuming Cincinnati, Ohio. The 79-year-old man responded to the news by altering the details of his will, writing in a bequeathment for the establishment of a school "to instruct the descendants of the African Race in school learning, in the various branches of the mechanic Arts, trades and Agriculture, in order to prepare and fit and qualify them to act as teachers..."

Humphreys passed away just three years later, but his philanthropic legacy would be enormous. In 1837, one tenth of his estate, totaling \$10,000, was dedicated to the founding of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia. It was the very first institution of higher learning accessible to African Americans.

In 1904, the school was relocated to a farm owned by George Cheyney some 40 miles outside of Philadelphia. Within a decade, it had taken the name, and it began granting degrees. Today, [Cheyney](#) stands as [the oldest African American institute of higher learning](#) still in operation. More importantly, it was the first in a long and proud line of institutions recognizing the connection between education and equality.

The [The National Center for Education Statistics](#) categorizes 101 institutions of higher learning as HBCUs across 19 states, Washington D.C. and the U.S. Virgin Islands, with the majority of HCBUs concentrated in the South. Just as Richard Humphreys envisioned as he made those last-minute edits to his will, these institutions of higher learning have played a critical role in helping Black Americans dismantle the obstacles for freedom, equality, social mobility, and collective advancement.

In honor of Black History Month, we take a look at the [history, impact, and present day role of HBCUs](#) and the [the most influential Black scholars](#).

If you'd like to jump directly to a ranking of the top Historically Black Colleges, check out our look at both the [Best HBCUs](#) and the [Best Online HBCUs](#).

Otherwise, read on for a look at the origin and history of this important educational tradition...

What Is a Historically Black College and University?

[According to the U.S. Department of Education](#), The Higher Education Act of 1965 first defined HBCUs as “any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.”

Though HBCUs are open to students of all races, the designation can be traced to the long stretch of American history in which Black students were largely denied access to mainstream colleges and universities. HBCUs arose by necessity and were, for many years and in many regional contexts, the only avenue that Black Americans had for a higher education as well as undergraduate and graduate degrees. In this way, HBCUs are both a relic from the eras of slavery and segregation and a strategy for counteracting their lasting effects.

Antebellum HBCUs

Though the vast majority of schools receiving the HBCU designation were forged in the flames of postwar America, the mold was set in the years leading up to the Civil War. While Cheyney University earns credit for being the first institution of higher learning to serve the declared interest of advancing opportunities for Black Americans, it would not have the power to grant accredited degrees until the start of the 20th Century.

Therefore, [Lincoln University of Pennsylvania](#), also located in Pennsylvania, owns the distinction of being the first HBCU to issue degrees to its graduates. Lincoln was founded near the town of Oxford, PA in 1854 as Ashmun Institute. It took its current name a decade later to honor America's recently-assassinated president.

Because it was the only institution in the United States granting degrees to Black graduates, Lincoln attracted excellence from throughout the United States. In particular, during the decades of segregation, many of the best and brightest young minds in the South fled Jim Crow laws and found opportunity at Lincoln. Remarkably, in fact, from 1854 to 1954, 20% of all Black physicians and 10% of all Black attorneys had earned their degrees at Lincoln.

Among the university's best known graduates are late Supreme Court Justice [Thurgood Marshall](#), former president of Nigeria, [Nnamdi Azikiwe](#), and legendary poet, [Langston Hughes](#). In 1972, Lincoln became affiliated directly with the state of Pennsylvania and thus transformed into a public institution.

As such, the oldest surviving private HBCU is [Wilberforce University](#) in Wilberforce, Ohio. Founded in 1856, Wilberforce also stands apart as the very first institution of higher learning in America to be owned and operated by African Americans. The school's founding was the result of a collaboration between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church with the mission of providing classical education and teacher training for young Black students. Its original board was composed of both Black and white members.

Many of the first students to attend Wilberforce journeyed there from the South. In particular, Wilberforce became a chosen destination for mixed-race children, those produced by relationships between wealthy white plantation owners and their Black slaves. Indeed, educational opportunities in the South were largely closed off to students of mixed racial backgrounds.

HBCUs During the Civil War

Wilberforce is also a prime example of the hardship that HBCUs often endured and the resilience needed for survival. With the outbreak of violence and the intensification of the Civil War, the college faced financial difficulty, closing its doors in 1862. The following year, led the AME to purchase the university, repair its debt, and reopen its doors. Bishop Payne thus became the first African American college president in the United States.

His tenure was marked by the same tumult that gripped a nation divided by war. In 1865, an act of arson reduced Wilberforce to ashes. However, an array of prominent Americans, alongside a supportive Congress, stepped forward to fund the school's rebuilding. Over the coming decades, Wilberforce became a center of Black academic and intellectual life in Ohio and its surrounding states, attracting prominent scholars to its faculty, the esteemed being the most notable among them.

In the same year that Wilberforce suffered its arson attack, the very first HBCU opened its doors in the Southern states. [Shaw University](#) (founded as Raleigh Institute in 1865) is the oldest remaining HBCU below the Mason-Dixon Line. In many ways, the founding of Shaw University would be a catalyzing event for the proliferation of higher education opportunities for Southern Black Americans.

In fact, Shaw is sometimes referred to as the mother of African American colleges in the state of North Carolina. This is because alumni from the Raleigh Institution would go on to found and preside over [North Carolina Central University](#), [Elizabeth City State University](#), [Fayetteville State University](#), and [Livingstone College](#). Clearly, Shaw's students came to believe in the power of educational opportunities to advance the fortunes of Black Americans.

Shaw was the first to open its doors but a wave of new schools soon emerged in the postwar South with the mission of providing opportunities for freed slaves. Many of the most highly regarded HBCUs opened their doors in 1867 and 1868, including leading institutions like [Howard University](#), [Hampton University](#), and [Morehouse College](#)

HBCUs During the Jim Crow Era

The end of Civil War hostilities and the onset of reconstruction marked the first wave of HBCU openings. However, this wave also came at a time when Southern States were rapidly advancing segregationist agendas. Even as the Confederate states returned reluctantly to the Union, they responded to abolition by introducing Jim Crow laws. These laws were aimed explicitly at keeping recently freed Black Southerners segregated from white institutions, places of higher learning amongst them.

As a result, Black students were prevented from attending any of the Southern institutions founded in the wake of the 1862 Morrill Act providing for land grant colleges in every state. To combat this aspect of segregation, Congress passed the Second Morrill Act of 1890 (also known as the Agricultural College Act of 1890), requiring states to establish land grant colleges for Black Americans in contexts where such students were otherwise excluded from existing land grant colleges.

This gesture demonstrates a core irony of HBCUs, which persists to this day. Namely, such schools were established to combat the effects of segregation. But of course, in the form described here above, they also helped to institutionalize educational segregation in ways we are still grappling with today. Nonetheless, this 1890 legislation would set off another wave of HBCU openings, ultimately creating a whole new set of opportunities for Black Americans seeking education and graduate degrees.

For the ensuing decades, as segregation laws became entrenched in the Southern states, HBCUs emerged as the only outlet for higher education and the acquisition of degrees among Black Southerners. The most prominent among these schools admitted students of all races which meant that in addition to serving as educational and intellectual sanctuaries for Black life in America, HBCUs provided a rarified context in which Black and white southerners could collaborate, share ideas, and even foment the Civil Rights movement.

[Back to Top ^](#)

HBCUs and The March to Freedom

Increasingly, HBCUs naturally became a center for political mobilization and civic activism. Across a century of Jim Crow, HBCUs provided an atmosphere in which Black southerners were safe to discuss their collective plight openly, to

forge solutions, and to mass their efforts into a meaningful path forward. It was thus that they attracted some of the boldest and most ambitious future Civil Rights leaders to their rosters. [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), for instance, earned admission to Morehouse College by passing an admissions exam while still in his junior year of high school. He graduated in 1948 before moving on to the integrated [Crozer Theological Seminary](#) in Pennsylvania.

In the ensuing years, a number of landmark court decisions would have a direct impact on the orientation of and activism within America's HBCUs. Particularly, in 1950, [Sweatt v. Painter](#) became the first Supreme Court case to successfully challenge the notion of "separate but equal," which had upheld the legality of segregation since the 1896 case, [Plessy v. Ferguson](#). In the 1950 case, a Black man named [Heman Marion Sweatt](#) challenged the Texas state constitution, which denied him access to the School of Law on the basis of his race. [The Supreme Court](#) found that there were substantive differences in the quality of education available to white students and Black students.

This would set the stage for the 1954 decision in [Brown vs. the Board of Education](#), in which it was resolved that "separate is inherently unequal." [The decision](#) would be a critical turning point in American history, marking the true beginning of the Civil Rights era. Figures like [Rosa Parks](#) and Dr. King helped to create a blueprint for activism with the Montgomery bus boycott and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Inspired by their example, students at America's HBCUs began to organize and engage.

By the late 1950s, HBCUs became a critical part of the movement toward total desegregation in the South. In 1959, two students from [Florida A&M University](#)—Patricia and Priscilla Stevens—organized a bus boycott in Tallahassee that effectively led to bus integration in a matter of weeks. Forming a chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) on their campus, they launched a lunch counter sit-in campaign that ultimately led to fuller integration in Tallahassee. It was among the first major campus sit-in campaigns and a model for the wave that followed thereafter.

In 1960, four students from the [North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College](#) staged a sit-in at a nearby Woolworth's store. The peaceful demonstration against segregation in southern retail and eating establishments had a ripple effect. Within days, four Nashville HBCUs had joined the protest. Students from [Tennessee State](#), [Fisk University](#), [Meharry Medical College](#), and [Baptist Seminary](#) were staging their own sit-ins.

1960 also saw [the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\) at Shaw University](#). Originally formed as a way to help students organize sit-in movements across the South, the SNCC would ultimately come to play a major role in the broader Civil Rights Movement, joining Dr. King, future U.S. Representative [John Lewis](#) (D-GA), CORE and other movement leaders for the epochal 1963 March on Washington.

The S.N.C.C. also engaged in [voter registration drives](#) aimed at empowering Southern Black voters. These activities helped bring about the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, striking down as illegal any measures aimed at discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Naturally, this event was not a magic potion that suddenly cured the South of racial inequality. This was merely the beginning of a sweeping set of federal reforms designed to dismantle Jim Crow. During this era, H.B.C.U.s became an increasingly important outlet for Black students to make their demands. For instance, unfair restrictions on the S.N.C.C.'s Black voter registration drive helped to motivate the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965.

The violent clashes that pitted police officers against peaceful protesters cast a glaring light on the struggle of southern Blacks, ultimately leading to dispatch the Alabama National Guard, FBI and Federal Marshals to provide protection for the demonstrators as they marched on the Alabama state capital and demanded equal voting rights.

These events would precipitate the passage of the Voting Rights Act later in the same year. Organization at the campus level would be absolutely critical to this achievement. 1965 would see another piece of legislation of tremendous relevance to the experience of Black students. [The Higher Education Act of 1965](#) would increase the amount of federal resources dedicated to colleges and universities while enhancing student access to financial assistance.

In addition, it would create a new designation to describe schools reserved for Black students during the era of segregation. As a means of denoting an end to segregation and a new era in the lifespan of such schools, the federal government created the Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCU) category.

Over the next decade, H.B.C.U.s would continue to serve as [hotbeds for political action](#) as students demanded, beyond just desegregation, real equality. A series of sit-ins at administrative offices between 1967 and 1968—most notably at Cheyney University, Howard University, [Bowie State](#), and [Tuskegee](#)—called attention to the unequal resources and less relevant curriculum accessible to students at H.B.C.U.s. These protests helped the newly-designated schools modernize their approach to education in the post-Jim Crow era.

[Back to Top ^](#)

The HBCU Era

The advancement of Civil Rights opened the doors of white colleges to Black students throughout the United States. The result was a drop in enrollment at HBCUs and a general shift in the educational landscape. In response, HBCUs would court increasingly diverse student bodies. To the point, a [study](#) by the [University of Pennsylvania](#) Graduate School of Education reports that while Black students comprised nearly 100% of America's HBCU student body in 1950, the number was closer to 80% by 1980. In the last 30 years, an infusion of Latino and Asian students, as well as a steady enrollment of roughly 10-13% white students, has helped to create a distinctly multicultural experience on many HBCU campuses.

1980 also marked an important step forward as President [President Jimmy Carter](#) signed an executive order calling for the distribution of greater federal funds to HBCUs. This created the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (WHIHBCU), an entity that operates in support of HBCUs through the U.S. Department of Education.

Beyond their cultural features, HBCUs have played a critical role in the economic and professional ascendancy of Black Americans, often creating opportunities that still remain otherwise obstructed by institutional racism. This may explain why, [as of 2011](#), HBCUs enrolled 11% of Black students in the U.S. while representing less than 3% of colleges or universities in the nation. Indeed, HBCUs still play an outsized role in helping to advance Black students in their educational and professional goals.

For instance, though [Xavier University of Louisiana](#) only enrolls 3,000 students annually, it leads the nation in Black graduates who eventually complete medical school. The [school credits](#) an atmosphere free from institutional inequality, culturally biased curriculum, and racial hostility for the success of its students.

[Spelman College](#), which holds the distinction of being the oldest, private liberal arts HBCU for women, is frequently ranked among the nation's top liberal arts colleges and is among the top 50 four-year colleges for producing both Fulbright and Truman Scholars. It is also the single largest collegiate producer of African American women holding science, engineering, and mathematics doctoral degrees.

Spelman's excellence and its output of accomplished graduates (in spite of the fact that it only enrolls just over 2000 students annually) underscores the value that HBCUs still have in helping Black students vault the hurdles of institutional racism.

HBCUs also form a meaningful economic bloc of the higher education sector. According to the [Education Data System](#) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “In 2001, the combined initial spending associated with the nation’s 101 HBCUs totaled \$6.6 billion. Public HBCUs accounted for 62 percent of the total amount. The total economic impact of the nation’s HBCUs was \$10.2 billion with 35 percent due to the multiplier effect. This amount would rank the collective economic impact of the nation’s HBCUs 232nd on the *Forbes* Fortune 500 list of the United States’ largest companies (*Fortune Magazine*, 2006). Additionally, the total employment impact of the 101 HBCUs included 180,142 total (initial and induced) full- and part-time jobs in 2001.”

[Back to Top ^](#)

The New Struggle for HBCUs

And yet, in spite of both the cultural and economic tenacity of HBCUs, the last decade has been a period of struggle for HBCUs. In a sense, HBCUs have struggled for survival since their very founding. That many of these schools emerged in the midst of a Civil War itself fought on the grounds of diverging racial principles is magnified by the embattled path that many HBCUs have taken to arrive at the present day.

Even as HBCUs emerged to help Black Americans transcend the vestiges of slavery and advance in society, these institutions have remained at the mercy of structural racism. Massive federal funding and works initiatives like the New Deal and the GI Bill channeled substantially greater resources to predominantly white institutions even as these same institutions restricted or limited access for people of color. As an article in the [American Prospect](#) explains, “The historic outright refusal of many white colleges to admit Black students, coupled with constraints on the growth of HBCUs and far narrower access to federal subsidies for college education for Blacks—all products of public policy—resulted in a significant unmet Black demand for higher education. The drastically restricted capacity of African Americans to build wealth interacted with the financial deprivation of the very institutions that had the greatest commitment to providing Blacks with higher education. That pattern persists.”

These patterns are only compounded by years of fluctuation in enrollment and graduation rates. [Between 1976 and 2001](#), total enrollment in HBCUs grew from 180,059, but during this same period of time, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded to America’s Black students declined from 35% to 21.5%. Of course, much of this was due to the numerous opportunities that were opening for Black students in fully integrated schools. Still, with the number of

Black students attending HBCUs dropping from 90% in 1960 to just 11% in 2015, many of these historical colleges have faced painful economic hardships.

Indeed, in recent years, HBCUs have suffered a fate similar to that of many other small colleges but often with greater intensity. The public universities among them have seen declining fiscal support at the state level and the private schools have struggled to maintain competitive enrollment numbers. The [Huffington Post](#) reports that, in 2013, decreases in federal grant funding to HBCUs and changes in the Parent PLUS Loan Program have cost Black colleges more than \$300 million in the last two years, one of the worst stretches in history for public HBCU support.

The consequences were fatal or near-fatal for many of these historic institutions. [In the subsequent three years](#) Saint Paul's College, Knoxville College and Barber Scotia College all permanently or temporarily closed their doors.

Many other highly regarded HBCUs remain behind the financial 8-Ball. For instance, in 2015, [South Carolina State University](#) faced a temporary shutdown as state legislatures attempted to shutter the cash-strapped institution. Though outspoken students, alumni, and public advocates fought to have South Carolina's only public HBCU reinstated, it re-opened its doors with widespread reductions to faculty and staff, reduced opportunities for student scholarships, and the threat of building closures.

Also facing financial pressure, Wilberforce introduced a rejuvenation plan aimed at heading off disaccreditation. Some of the proposed measures included enrollment drives, emergency fundraisers, and calls for increased donations from alumni.

While these challenges are certainly not unique to HBCUs alone, there is something distinct about the threat of closure. Whereas the general market for institutions of higher education is fairly saturated with competition, this is not so for HBCUs. Inherently, because schools that receive this designation are historic in nature, and do have historic ties to Black communities in America, ties that can't be simply replicated on other campuses, each one that closes leaves a vacuum.

Should South Carolina State University ultimately close, for instance, there will be no public HBCU to take its place in the state of South Carolina. Students seeking out this educational experience will be forced to look elsewhere. The elimination of any one HBCU could mean the closing off of opportunity to any number of would-be attendees.

The idea of a post-racial America has been sharply challenged by a heightening of racial tensions in recent years—in city streets, on the internet, and on the college campus. This suggests that, even absent the forces of legal segregation, [HBCUs](#) still have an important cultural, educational, and economic role to play.

As the [Education News Flash](#) characterizes it, [HBCUs](#) are forever on the front lines of both the Black struggle and Black excellence. The Digest notes that “[HBCUs](#), by their nature, live at the margins of both realities. They operate on the verges of financial crisis and cultural breakthrough every single day; empowering students and faculty to do and to give more in spite of society’s push for them to disappear into a post-racial oblivion. And to their credit, students and faculty deliver in spite of the emerging social norms which make their commitment and productivity seem anonymous, racially-tinged and socially irrelevant.”

[Back to Top ^](#)

The Present Day

At their best, [HBCUs](#) serve as an environment that nurtures empowerment, belonging, and a sense of self-determination that Black Americans have often battled to attain in society at large. This was particularly true in the century between the abolition of slavery and the passage of the Civil Rights Act outlawing segregation in all its forms.

In his best-selling book, [Between the World and Me](#), Ta-Nehisi Coates observes that his own alma mater, Howard University—one of the oldest of the Black universities—was ‘The Mecca’ for African Americans. “On the outside Black people controlled nothing, least of all the fate of their bodies, which could be commandeered by police.’ But ‘here at The Mecca, we are without fear, we are the dark spectrum on parade.’ For countless others, the safety and affirmation of Black universities has been a haven.”

Hear from a student who attends North Carolina A&T State University, in our [interview with Sydney Wade](#).

Today, [HBCUs](#) continue to serve as a forum for confrontation of the social, cultural and economic issues most impacting Black Americans today. These institutions offer a heightened opportunity to investigate some of the most pressing racial issues in public life. Read on for a closer look at some of these issues, including the teaching of [Critical Race Theory](#), the [Civil Rights Movement](#), [Affirmative Action](#), [Police Brutality](#), [Reparations](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), and [Extremism](#).

See all kinds of tips, tricks and hacks for surviving your college experience with a look at our [Blog](#).

See our [Resources Guide](#) for much more on studying, starting your job search, and more.

Find Your Degree in 60 Seconds

Take Our Quiz → See Your Matches → Connect With Schools

I WANT MY

Bachelor's



IN

Business & Management



FOCUSING ON

Select a subject



FIND YOUR PROGRAM

ADVERTISEMENT



Do you have a question about this topic? [Ask it here](#)

Related Articles to The History of HBCUs in America



History Colleges and Universities



HBCU Online Master's Programs



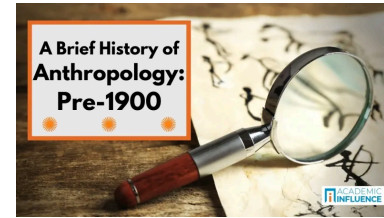
History



Early Admission Compounding Inequality



Most Influential HBCUs



Anthropology Pre-1900



Reparations Controversy



What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in History?



History Research Universities



Top 10 Most Popular PhD Degrees in America in 2023



Best Online HBCU Doctoral Programs 2025



Best Online HBCUs