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An Exploration of the Perceptions of Institutional Advancement Leaders on Their Role in the Survival of Private HBCUs: A Qualitative Study

About the Author(s)

Dr. Comfort Okpala is a professor of leadership studies in the Department of Leadership Studies and Adult Education, College of Education at North Carolina A & T State University for over 14 years. She served as the Chair for the department for more than five years. She also served as the Assistant Dean for Assessment in the College of Education for two years. Her research agenda is grounded in leadership studies, STEM leadership, global leadership issues, policy, finance, social justice, resource equity, and African Studies. Dr. Okpala has a variety of publications in refereed journals and her published articles have received over one thousand citations by national and international scholars and researchers according to Google Scholar.

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Keywords

Institutional advancement research, Private HBCUs fundraising research, survival of private HBCUs



AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT LEADERS ON THEIR ROLE IN THE SURVIVAL OF PRIVATE HBCUs: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of institutional advancement leaders on their role in the survival of private HBCUs. The study's primary goals focused on how advancement leaders perceived their leadership roles in generating funds to sustain private historically Black colleges and universities in the southeastern region of the United States. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select seven experienced and successful advancement leaders for the study. Through in-depth phenomenological interviews and analyses, four themes emerged. The study's findings show that the participants strongly perceived that their leadership role in fundraising is critical in the survival of private HBCUs. The results from the study have a policy, leadership, and practical implications.

Keywords: Institutional advancement research, Private HBCUs fundraising research, the survival of private HBCUs

Introduction

The most pressing challenge for private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is fundraising as these institutions are deeply dependent upon the support of other nonprofit organizations such as Black churches (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). These institutions can no longer enjoy financial security from previously funding organizations upon which they were founded. Because of declining enrollment and low fundraising outcomes, there is immense pressure on advancement leaders to increase funds raised to meet general operating expenses. Researchers emphasized that fundraising and the ability to raise private funds effectively is becoming a primary concern for institutions, whether public or private (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Beltez & Suggs, 2012; Fisher, 1985; Worth & Asp, 1994). Gasman and Commodore (2014) stated that an advancement leader's role is critical and will be ever-evolving to meet colleges' and universities' changing needs.

A significant part of the role of an advancement leader is building relationships with various internal and external constituencies, also to having the skill-set and comfort level to

generate funds through their friends, alumni, donors, and corporations (Fisher, 1985). Glass and Jackson (1998) suggested that fundraising leaders do not have to be technically sound to be successful but must understand best practices and be well informed on the latest trends in the business. The advancement leaders' leadership abilities are critical to institutions' mission and sustainability, especially small private HBCUs. Advancement leaders must be motivated and possess a strong confidence level to attract funding followers (Glass & Jackson, 1998). According to Tindall (2008), the role of the advancement leaders at public and private HBCUs can impact the institution in positive and negative ways. The negative impact may lead to the severe financial instability that may impact the survival of those institutions. Research on institutional advancement leaders' perceptions of their role in private HBCUs' survival is limited or nonexistent. Thereby, this study is significant in bridging the research gap in the area.

Currently, there are 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), according to the U.S Department of Education (2019). These institutions comprise only 3% of the nation's higher learning (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Brooks & Starks, 2011; Jackson & Nunn, 2003). However, they confer more than one-third of the 4-year degrees awarded to African Americans, and HBCU graduates account for the following African-American degree attainment proportions: 75% of PhDs, 46% of business executives, 50% of engineers, 80% of federal judges, 50% of doctors, and 50% of attorneys (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Brooks & Starks, 2011). HBCUs are instrumental in addressing access, in that through comparably lower tuition costs relative to their Traditionally White Institution (TWI) counterparts, HBCUs provide a key source of access to higher education for lower socioeconomic classes (Betsey, 2008; Gasman & Commodore, 2014).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of institutional advancement leaders on their role in the survival of private HBCUs. The research question that guided the study's focus is: What are the perceptions of institutional advancement leaders on their role in the survival of private HBCUs?

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research was best suited for this study. Qualitative research is defined as an exploratory means for understanding and investigating the meaning that people or groups ascribe to human experience, social phenomenon, and societal or human issues (Creswell, 2014; Petty, Thomson & Stew, 2012). This method allowed the researchers to engage with institutional advancement leaders in a process that explored their lived experiences with fundraising at private HBCUs. This approach yielded a more in-depth, holistic picture and informed understanding of the phenomenon of fundraising.

This study was deeply-rooted in a social constructivist worldview. A social constructivist approach seeks to understand better a socialized world where knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with others (Creswell, 2014; David & Sutton, 2011; Wahyuni, 2012). Researchers emphasized that questions in this form of interpretive inquiry are broad to allow participants to construct the meaning of the phenomenon experienced and arrive at a better understanding of the social world from the perspectives of studied participants (Creswell, 2014; Wahyuni, 2012). Social constructivism is an interpretive framework that seeks to understand the

world and develop meanings that correspond to lived experiences. This framework underpins qualitative research and is useful in a phenomenological research study utilized in this study (Creswell, 2014; Petty, Thomas, & Stew, 2012).

Role of the Researchers

Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative researchers must become keenly aware of the lens and personal perceptions they bring to the research study. He also stated that good qualitative research incorporates, infuses, clarifies, and discloses any perceived biases the researcher may bring to the research study. The researchers are African American women leaders in higher education with numerous leadership experiences at private HBCUs and public ones. The researchers enacted bracketing, described as a methodological tool of phenomenological inquiry that demands removing oneself entirely from the equation by putting aside prior understandings, associations, and knowledge regarding the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Through the systematic Epoche process, the researchers further "invalidated, inhibited, and disqualified all commitments regarding previous knowledge and experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

Participants and Data Collection

In qualitative research studies, the researchers were the primary instruments in the data collection process due to their ability to interact with participants (Creswell, 2014; Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). Permission and approval were obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researchers strictly adhered to all protocols and guiding procedures and ensured that no risk or harm was posed to study participants. Seven (7) institutional advancement leaders were purposefully selected for the study. The following inclusionary criteria were utilized within this study:

1. Advancement leaders (VP, Director, Associate VP)
2. Participants must have worked at a private HBCU in the Southeastern region of the United States
3. Must have a minimum of 5 years of experience in fundraising and leadership in Fundraising.

The participants included four females and three males. Each participant completed an informed consent document before the interview. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Data were collected through 60-minute in-depth, semi-structured open-ended individual interviews conducted in three phases with each participant via phone (Seidman, 2013). All interviews were digitally recorded, with the participants' permission, and then transcribed (Creswell, 2013, Seidman, 2013). The three-phase technique for phenomenological interviewing was adapted from the model ascribed by Seidman (2013); an interview guide was created to establish the protocol for each interview. Phase one of the interview (life history) focused on participants' history, background, and past experiences related to fundraising (Seidman, 2013). The second phase of the interview (lived experience) focused on their lived experiences as institutional advancement leaders. Finally, the third phase of the in-depth interview (reflection on the meaning) focused on the participants' understanding of their roles related to their institutions (Seidman, 2013). The author also stated that the three-phase interview structure could be altered as the researcher sees fit.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process started with the transcription of all interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Then, the author's modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used in this phenomenological study with the following steps:

1. Each quote was critically vetted to see if it could be labeled if it illuminated elements that were necessary to understand the experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007),
2. Only statements that met the above-listed requirement were deemed salient, and redundant or unnecessary ones were removed through the delimiting/phenomenological reduction process. The significant statements constituted the actual invariant constituents of the experience through horizontalization. (Moustakas, 1994),
3. The significant statements (invariant constituents) were next organized through clustering and thematizing them into themes through grouping units of meaning together. (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994),
4. A composite summary was then written to comprise the "textual description" to describe "what" has been experienced by the participants in the phenomenon and the structural description to describe the structural description or "how" the phenomenon was experienced, along with the context and conditions that impacted how the participants experienced it. (Moustakas, 1994),
5. Finally, textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon were synthesized and combined to produce the textual-structural description. This serves as the universal description that expresses the essence of the experience of the phenomenon. (Dowling, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Results

Participant Profiles

Seven (7) self-identified African American advancement leaders across the United States' southeastern region were interviewed. Some of the participants had over 20 years of fundraising experience. Their roles and titles vary from director of development, vice president of development to vice president of advancement. The participants came from varied social backgrounds, and all graduated from a mix of private and public HBCUs except for three. There were four females and three males, and their ages ranged from 30 years to 59 years old. A summary table of the participants' cumulative demographic details is provided in Table 1.

Emerging Themes

There were several themes and subthemes that emerged from the participants' responses. Four major themes with various subthemes emerged from the study. The participants collectively perceived their roles as the soul building, relationship building, maintaining the legacy, and cultivation process.

Theme1: Soul Building. The participants collectively and overwhelmingly viewed their role as building and maintaining private HBCUs' souls based on their fundraising skills, as most schools depend on those funds for their survival. As Harry eloquently explained it:

My role as the VP for Advancement is deep. I see myself and the work that I do as the soul of leadership here. Our students depend on my ability to raise funds to continue their education; The University depends in some ways on my ability for their survival. So, this notion of the soul is scary because I realize that so much is hanging on me. It is a scary feeling that we must take seriously. This job is not an easy one, and you must be tough to

be successful at it. So, at the end of the day, I consider myself a soul builder (Harry, 2018)

Theme 2: Relationship building. The second theme that emerged from the study was relationship building. The participants viewed their role through the lens of political frames where they utilize their political savvy to build relationships among the stakeholders. One participant who served as the Associate Vice President of Development stated that she had been in relationship building for many years because she believed that one must be a relationship builder for one to be successful. She went on to state that:

I have been doing this job for many years at different private schools, and I must say that you must have a certificate in relationship building to raise funds to advance the institution in meeting their goals. Knowing our history, it is critical to know and understand givers and donors' mindset and work your magic to motivate them to give. You need to understand that people will not give if they do not trust you, and trust comes with a strong relationship (Gwen, 2018).

Theme 3: Maintaining a legacy. This is an emotional theme for the participants who perceived their roles in terms of their ability to maintain the legacy of HBCUs in terms of their mission. All the participants emphasized the importance and viability of HBCUs and the connection between their roles and the survival of their institutions. As Cynthia eloquently stated:

I challenge folks to read our history and how this school started, and they will understand the need to give. I see my role as building the gap on a legacy. We need to push the legacy agenda far and wide so that folks would get it. We are in the legacy business, and folks hired to do this job must understand the legacy of HBCU before they can sell it to others. In this position, my role is to continue maintaining the HBCUs' legacy through fundraising (Cynthia, 2018).

Theme 4: Cultivation process. The last theme that emerged from the study was the cultivation process. The study participants viewed their roles through the lens of harnessing students, alumni, donors, and community groups into the giving process. The roles are to cultivate talents that will, in turn, be trained to become a future active donor. As Max emphasized:

When I walk around the campus and see our students engaged in the learning process, I view my role as the cultivator of future donors. I see people that will give back to the university to continue their mission. We must cultivate students and train them from the get-go about giving. Students need to be cultivated to give small as students and give bigger as alumni with employment in various organizations. It is a process, and I am at the center of that process (Max, 2018).

Discussion, Recommendation, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of institutional advancement leaders at private HBCUs on their role in the survival of those institutions. Seven participants with various fundraising experiences were interviewed. The results showed that the participants viewed their roles as soul building, relationship building, legacy maintenance, and cultivating process related to the survival of their institutions. It is important to note that all the participants in this study viewed their role as critical in private HBCUs' survival. Private HBCUs have struggled with financial stability for many years, according to Cody-Mitchell, (2001). The author stated that dwindling student enrollment, revenue growth, and spending patterns have all been factors that have contributed to their poor financial health.

In comparison to their public counterparts, private HBCUs often experience Comparedl distress because they do not receive the same state-supported funding as their counterparts (Beamer, 2011; Conwell, 2013; Peruso, 2012). This often leads to a greater reliance on tuition and fees, causing them to be prone to tuition dependency (Campbell, 2017). It is estimated that about 90% of private HBCUs' operating revenues are generated from tuition and fees (Chabotar, 1999; Conrad & Gassman, 2015).

Gassman and Bowman (2011) concluded that private HBCUs are also at a competitive disadvantage against better-funded institutions or have larger endowments. Campbell (2017) stated that the history of financial disparity had left private HBCUs financially disadvantaged, threatening their mission of serving low-income students who often do not have the means of obtaining a college degree. The participants from this study were all aware of the legacy and mission of HBCU, and they agreed that their role is imperative to the survival of their institutions.

Research is limited to the perceptions of institutional advancement leaders on the role of advancing private HBCUs' mission or the survival of them. So, this study is significant in bridging the literature gap on the subject. The researcher hopes that this study's results may modestly add to our dissuasion of the survival of private HBCUs. There are some limitations to the study as it is limited to only private institutions with only seven participants.

HBCUs are relevant in today's economy, and funding and financial health are critical to private HBCUs' survival. Fundraising is critical for private HBCUs' survival, and attention should be given to the perceptions of those entrusted with the business of raising funds at those colleges and universities. Based on this study's findings, it is recommended that further research be conducted with all the private HBCUs in the United States. The researchers also recommend increasing the number of participants in future studies.

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Table 1: *Description of Participants' Profile*

Participants	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Fundraising	Years of Experience in role	Title
Alex	50-59	Male	African American	20+	5	Director of Development
Janice	30-39	Female	African American	15	10	Vice President
Cynthia	50-59	Female	African American	23	8	Vice President
Max	40-49	Male	African American	19	8	Director of Development
Gwen	50-59	Female	African American	20+	12+	Associate VP
Harry	70+	Male	African American	30+	23	VP of Advancement
Tonya	30-39	Female	African American	18	5	Vice President

Note. Names are pseudonyms.