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The Minority College Option

The terms "minority college" or "minority university" are often associated with institutions with a historical focus on African-American students. But there are colleges and universities with proportionately large student enrollment from other ethnic or racial groups, such as Latinos, Asians, Native Americans or Pacific Islanders.

Government classification includes the following descriptions and commonly used acronyms: Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), Tribal College and University (TCU) and Minority Postsecondary Institution (MPI).

HBCUs are post-secondary schools founded prior to 1964, primarily for the education of African-Americans, though without an exclusionary charter. In 1994, 280,000 students attended 103 HBCUs.

Other colleges and universities currently have a majority of African-American students, but as they were founded after 1964, they are not considered historically black colleges. At the same time, some historically black colleges now have non-black majorities.

"HBCUs encompass a variety of institution types including public and private; single-sex and co-ed; predominately black and predominately white; two-year and four-year colleges, research universities, professional schools, as well as small liberal arts colleges," write Charlene M. Hoffman, Thomas D. Snyder and Bill Sonnenberg in the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) article, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1976-1994*.

The development of HBCUs definitely has a historical context. The first of today's HBCUs started up before the American Civil War.

"The earliest of these colleges was formed during the 1830s (Cheyney University of Pennsylvania) to counter the prevailing practice of limiting or prohibiting the education of blacks, most of whom were still slaves," write Hoffman, Snyder and Sonnenberg.

Arlene Wesley Cash is vice-president for enrollment management at Spelman College in Atlanta. Taking in its first students in 1881, Spelman is America's oldest historically black college for women and one of the most highly regarded.

Cash says, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities came into existence during a time when higher education was not equitably accessible to students of color. Most came into existence soon after the emancipation of slaves when freed slaves were able to take part in the education system as a whole. Many HBCUs started out as normal schools, enrolling students at every stage

of their academic development.... Even during their initial years, these schools were not exclusive to black students, though it was unlikely that other students would have wanted to attend a school where they were in the minority."

Tribal colleges have a unique history of their own. According to the report from the American Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Tribal Colleges: An Introduction*:

"The history of American Indian higher education over the past several hundred years is one of compulsory Western methods of learning, recurring attempts to eradicate tribal culture, and high dropout rates by American Indian students at mainstream institutions. In reaction to this history, American Indian leaders built on the success of the 'self-determination' movement of the 1960s to rethink tribal higher education."

Tribal colleges were therefore created in the last 30 years to better meet the higher education needs of Native Americans. TCUs aim particularly to serve geographically isolated populations with no other means of accessing education beyond high school.

The report continues, "Tribal colleges ... have become increasingly essential to educational opportunity for American Indian students, a status they have achieved in a relatively brief period of time. Tribal colleges are unique institutions that combine personal attention with cultural relevance, in such a way as to encourage American Indians -- especially those living on reservations -- to overcome the barriers in higher education."

Hispanic Serving Institutions are identified by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) as: "A non-profit accredited college, university or system where total Hispanic enrollment constitutes a minimum of 25 percent of the total enrollment."

In the brief, *Choosing Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Closer Look at Latino Students' College Choices*, **Deborah A. Santiago** writes: "Latino student choices create HSIs. The classification of a campus as an HSI shows no evidence of influencing Latino student college choices. However, most HSIs have institutional characteristics that align with Latino student priorities and needs and explain why many students choose HSIs."

The HACU, the only national educational association that represents HSIs and helped them obtain federal funding, argues that, "Our nation's economic and social success rests on the level of skills and knowledge attained by Hispanics, now the nation's largest minority population.... Everyone has a stake in HACU's crucial goals: to promote the development of member colleges and universities; to improve access to and the quality of post-secondary educational opportunities for Hispanic students; and to meet the needs of business, industry and government through the development and sharing of resources, information and expertise."

Why does a student choose a minority school and what are the benefits? Typically it's due to family precedent; celebrating historical or ethnic traditions; a comfortable learning environment; and, living among and learning about other cultures. There are also reasons such as location, cost and accessibility that lead students to select an ethnically identified college or university.

Dr. Mark Allen Grevious is interim chief of the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Chicago's John H. Stroger Hospital of Cook County. He is also a graduate of Morehouse College, a private, all-male, historically black college in Atlanta, some of whose other alumni are Martin Luther King Jr., Samuel L. Jackson and Spike Lee.

Grevious says, "The first and most important reason that I chose to attend [an HBCU] was because that had been the tradition in my family, starting [with] my father, who attended Morgan State University. My mother attended the racially diverse Chicago Teachers' College, now Chicago State University, a primarily black college.

"My older brother Kevin chose to attend Howard University and another older brother, Steven, chose Morehouse College. I was closer in age to my brother Steven, and he is an outstanding leader. He always makes great decisions and so I decided to follow him to Morehouse.

"For me, it turned out to be the most important decision of my life. When I look back over my educational career -- this includes high school -- there was no other time in my life that I was able to learn without any external pressures and having to compete with others of different backgrounds who had more or better access to resources than I had. At Morehouse, I was really able to focus and just learn.

"It was great to go to an institution of higher learning and see that the president, vice-president and all the rest of the leaders were strong, intelligent and African-American. This helped me to feel that I could be successful. There was a dedication of the faculty to empower the minds of young African-American men. There was healthy competition, and as classmates, we wanted each other to succeed. Some of my closest friends are from Morehouse. We stay in close contact even today. I am grounded and confident in who I am despite what attacks may come my way."

Kevin Gales is director of relationship marketing for HSR Business to Business in Chicago. He graduated from Hampton University, an HBCU in Hampton, Virginia.

Gales says, "I chose to attend a historically black college mainly for a couple of reasons: quality of education and the overall experience ... as well as, that was around the time Hampton started being ranked every year in the US News and World Report as a top school."

He points out that the education offered at HBCU schools like Hampton is on par with non-HBCU schools, while perhaps offering a more encouraging environment for African-American students: "For example, Hampton graduated more African-American students who went on to get graduate degrees than any other school in the U.S."

Most minority colleges will accept students regardless of ethnic or racial group. Costs may vary and some costs may be lower.

Arlene Wesley Cash says, "Our doors are open to any student, and in general I think that you will find costs to be lower at HBCUs. Programs offered are usually about the same. We all offer study abroad opportunities, internships, solid career placement programs, special academic

programs appropriate to our specific missions and resources, and seek to enroll students who are academically prepared to succeed.

"HBCUs are not among the 30 or so colleges or universities that can afford to scholarship every student from the interest in their endowments. We offer scholarships as our funds allow, like most colleges and universities. We see an extraordinary number of Gates Scholars choosing to enroll at HBCUs, and these are students who can use their scholarship for full payment at the college of their choice."