
Original Article

‘Making Something of Themselves’: Black self-determination, the church and higher education philanthropy

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ABSTRACT Examining Black church support of higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this article highlights the longstanding project of African-American self-determination. Motivated donors, many of who would not in their lifetime see the fruits of their gifts, made faithful investments in the project of racial uplift. Concurrent with this, college-educated Black were given the additional charge of becoming leaders in these efforts. Using the Atlanta University Studies and historical newspaper accounts, this article explores the deep roots of Black leadership in higher-education philanthropy and concludes with recommendations for current historically Black colleges and university (HBCU) development officers.

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As historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) face shifts in their funding sources, sound development strategies are critically important to their fiscal health and to

institutional well-being. With diminishing state and federal funding, and increased competition for corporate support, HBCUs look increasingly for prospective donors in their alumni bodies and surrounding communities. As these important institutions seek to tap into the resources of the Black community, there are a number of lessons to be learned from the deep roots of Black churches and their role in establishing and supporting religiously affiliated Black colleges and universities.

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Blacks founded many colleges and were committed unflinchingly to the linked projects of education and racial uplift. Power to create and control the curriculum has stemmed from the ability to raise funds for institutions that adhere to particular ideologies. Anderson (1988) identified three distinct groups that influenced Black higher education through their fundraising efforts during this period: White missionary groups, typically affiliated with a Christian denomination, who saw their work as having a 'civilizing mission' that aimed to create a class of educated black leaders; Black religious organizations that founded Black private liberal arts colleges, which would in a generation train 30 000 teachers to meet local needs; third, White industrial philanthropists, who supported education for Blacks that maintained the racially organized, hierarchal *status quo* (p. 241).

This article focuses primarily on fundraising efforts at those colleges affiliated with Black church denominations. Most colleges founded and supported financially by Black denominations, including Baptist and

African Methodist Episcopal (AME), prioritized liberal arts education and training future business and professional leaders that would serve their local communities. Examining Black church support of higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this article highlights the longstanding project of African-American self-determination. Motivated donors, many of who would not in their lifetime see the fruits of their gifts, made faithful investments in the project of racial uplift. Concurrent with this, college-educated Blacks were given the additional charge of becoming leaders in these efforts.

Using the Atlanta University Studies and historical newspaper accounts, this article explores the deep roots of Black leadership in higher education philanthropy. In addition, it reveals that philanthropy in the Black community has a longstanding history, as successful fundraising in churches and religiously affiliated organizations came more than two decades before the 1944 founding of the United Negro College Fund, a highly visible, umbrella fundraising and advocacy body (Gasman, 2007). The article concludes with recommendations for current HBCU development officers.

ROOTS OF BLACK PHILANTHROPY

Black philanthropy locates its roots in the late eighteenth century, when the ideals of mutual aid, self-help and social solidarity were essential to the survival and well-being of Black slaves and freed Blacks alike (Davis, 1975; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Carson, 1993). Mutual aid societies, fraternal orders and the Black church



played a significant role in ensuring the safety of and addressing the needs of their communities (Carson, 1993). The earliest documented Black fundraising can be traced as far back as 1775 in Boston (MA, USA), where Prince Hall, a freedman, established a Masonic order with the goal of providing Blacks with mutual aid (Davis, 1975). Hall's Masonic organization reflected a need for Blacks to merge their resources during a time when their legal protection was at best minimal and in many cases non-existent.

Following the Masons, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones founded the Free African Society in 1787 Philadelphia (Hackett, 2000). The Free African Society provided assistance to migrants, economic support and aid during times of illness or severe injury, as well as aid to widows and fatherless families. Much like the Masons, the society raised money by collecting dues and by hosting social functions (Davis, 1975; Carson, 1993). From their early efforts, the seeds for fundraising and giving in the African-American community were established. Moreover, the Black church emerged as a vehicle through which Blacks expressed discontent with racism and displayed social solidarity (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). With the push for collective action, Blacks deemphasized the importance of individual accumulation of financial resources and instead worked toward collective goals (Davis, 1975).

In the nineteenth century, African-American philanthropy saw a shift in focus from basic survival to creating institutional mechanisms that ensured solutions to issues impeding community progress. Education and

religious involvement contributed to freedom and equality, and fundraising efforts began to reflect these values. Churches began educating their children as resistance and education emerged as strategies for gaining self-determination (Franklin, 1992). As the century came to a close, the Conferences for Christian Education in the South became key in changing the landscape of educational philanthropy for African Americans, producing secular donors such as the, Phelps–Stokes Fund, Rosenwald Foundation and the General Education Board (Wolters, 1975). With the shift in donors came a shift in donor motivation; and as a result, the goal of higher education for African Americans shifted from having a religious focus to emphasizing the creation of a labor force.

Because many of the new secular donors supported Southern interests, the receipt of many significant donations was contingent upon the agendas of Southern norms and thus produced conflict in theory with regards to African-American education. The aims of education for Blacks was widely argued (Anderson and Moss, 1992). Many White philanthropists were in support of industrial education, while others supported the liberal arts. The hotly debated aims of education for Blacks sets stage for situating the role of the Black church in higher-education planning and leadership. Using Du Bois contributions from the Atlanta University Studies and accounts from historical newspapers, this article highlights the longstanding project of African-American self-determination in higher education.

THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY STUDIES

From 1896 to 1947, Atlanta University, a historically Black institution, hosted a series of conferences and produced 24 papers, known collectively as the Atlanta University Studies. Du Bois frequently convened the conferences and edited the papers, all of which addressed aspects of Negro life. The papers represent early social scientific inquiry and offer rich commentary on an ever-changing United States during the first half of the twentieth century. They cover multiple issues, from social and economic to religious and political. A number of the papers report on education of Blacks, both directly and indirectly.

The Atlanta University Studies shed light on not only Black social, educational and religious issues, but race relations as well. *De jure* segregation across the South placed legal restrictions on Black–White interactions and was a major step back in race relations, but it could not stop all progressive actions. For example, Du Bois found a close and enduring ally in Atlanta University President Reverend D. Horace Bumstead. Du Bois affectionately referred to Bumstead as the ‘Apostle of Higher Education of the Negro’ (Brown *et al.*, 1998, p. iii). One of Bumstead’s most important contributions was initiating the Atlanta University Studies. After a year of planning, Bumstead convened in 1896 the first Atlanta Conference for the Study of Negro Problems. Bumstead learned from colleagues in Harvard University’s Sociology department about their pioneering work toward understanding Negro life. The first conference served as a venue

for presenting their work and beginning what would become a decades long inquiry into Negro life in the US.

The first conference focused on issues facing Blacks in cities, and their concerns were contrasted with their race in rural areas. Although Blacks in small, isolated towns primarily labored with their hands as unskilled workers, Blacks in the city were exposed to a society fast moving toward industrialization that placed greater emphasis on mastering a skilled trade. Poor Blacks in cities were struggling, but the minority who were college-educated had more opportunity for upward mobility. Graduates of Atlanta University were positioned well to address the problems associated with being Black in a major city. Many histories locate Blacks during this period singly as the recipients of help from whites, but Bumstead, in agreement with many Blacks of his time argued that change must come from within. In his opening remarks from the first conference, Bumstead said, ‘The problems of Negro city life must be settled largely by Negroes themselves. And the body of our alumni are in some respects especially fitted for this task’ (Chase 1903, p. 5). Bumstead named education as the single ‘remedy’ for the issues affecting Negroes (Armstrong, 1919). Without an education, Bumstead believed Blacks could not be expected to change problems such as high mortality and high poverty.

Bumstead chose not to claim all authority in addressing the Negro condition in major cities. He positioned himself as an admirable leader by naming his concern for Blacks’ well-being, convening the



conference and ultimately passing the charge for racial uplift to educated Blacks. In subsequent conferences, W.E.B. Du Bois, a race man, took the reins and led the way.

THE BLACK CHURCH, SELF-DETERMINATION AND FUNDRAISING

In 1898, Du Bois convened the Third Atlanta Conference titled 'Some efforts of American Negroes for their own social betterment' (Du Bois, 1898). This installment in the conference papers provides insight into the ways in which Blacks used the Church as a site for educational projects. The Black Church, and in particular Methodist and Baptist congregations, led fundraising efforts in support of church-sponsored higher education. These efforts often spurred congregations to take ownership and responsibility for the uplift of their own communities and sited education as one of the primary means of achieving social progress for the Black community. In discussing the 'social betterment' of the Black community, papers presented at the conference frequently cited the Black church as playing a key role (Du Bois, 1898).

Du Bois enlisted college graduates from nine southern cities to address Blacks' local work toward economic mobility and social uplift. The primary research question guiding their inquiry was 'What is the Negro doing to help himself after a quarter century of outside aid?' (Du Bois, 1898, p. 4). Du Bois wrote that self-determination was best measured by the ways Blacks came together around a common purpose. The Black Church was the ideal vehicle for measuring the race's commitment to self-determination

because it was considered the only Black institution that had endured the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, persevered through chattel slavery and continued thriving. During this period, the Black Church was the site of not only religious life but also acted as the social voice for entire communities. Recognizing the Church's prominence, Du Bois wrote, 'It is natural therefore that charitable and rescue work among Negroes should first be found in the churches and reach there its greatest development' (Du Bois, 1898, p. 4). He and his colleagues found in their study that their race indeed made significant contributions to higher education.

According to Du Bois, approximately one-third of all charitable work took place in the Negro Church, taking the form of fairs, concerts, benevolent societies and missionary work. Although some of this work was highly organized and thus well-documented in historical records, many congregations responded directly to immediate individual or community needs. Giving took on many forms during this period, from well-advertised and planned events to impromptu collections taken up for ailing church members or their families.

'MAKING SOMETHING OF THEMSELVES'

The story of Arkansas Baptist College illustrates well local church fundraising efforts in support of higher education. At the 1884 Baptist State Convention in Hot Springs, Arkansas, Black Baptists resolved to begin a formal school for local children so that boys and girls of the race would have access to a Christian education

(Midnight, 1902). Students were welcome from any denomination as well as children whose families were not members of a church. The school opened shortly thereafter, and churchgoers decided to grow their school's offering. Members purchased a plot of land for \$5000 despite not owning 'chick or child' and were prepared to sacrifice so that their children would one day have greater opportunity (Midnight, 1902, p. 1). Sadly, the school suffered a tremendous setback in 1893 when the building burned to the ground overnight. A young professor and school leader, Joseph Booker, and his wife lost their personal possessions but renewed their will to succeed. Booker, his wife and the local church congregations were doggedly determined to rebuild an even stronger new college. Raising their own funds for education was a source of deep pride.

Writing under the pseudonym J.O. Midnight, a reporter for the Baltimore *Afro-American* praised churchgoers for their support of Arkansas Baptist College, a place where young women and men of the race were 'making something of themselves' (Midnight, 1902, p. 1). The author took a matter-of-fact tone in writing about the funding for the college's main building. J. Midnight wrote, 'You can't guess who paid for the building' (Midnight, 1902, p. 1). Black church members across the state of Arkansas raised the entire \$20 000 cost. Most donations were small, only the nickels and dimes they could sacrifice, but their commitment was clear. Arkansas Baptist College, like most Black colleges during this period, had a number of divisions that served local needs. The college included a grammar

school and a college preparatory division, along with classical and business education courses of study. Arkansas Baptist College was co-educational from its founding, mirroring many of its peers and it quickly became the state leader in educating Black clergy and teachers, along with a growing class of business leaders.

Fundraising for Arkansas Baptist College fits squarely within what we know about the charge given at the Third Atlanta Conference. Alexander Crummell, President of the American Negro Academy, an organization made up of highly educated Blacks, wrote that that all adults of the race were responsible for contributing to higher-education efforts. Du Bois included a tract from Crummell in the conference report. Crummell wrote, 'You must practice great self-denial. Send them to college, and make them lawyers and doctors' (Du Bois, 1898, p. 37). The nickel and dime fundraising efforts across Black churches in Arkansas demonstrate the ongoing sacrifices adults made for their children's education. The parents would not become the immediate beneficiaries, but they sacrificed for their children, and the race more generally, so that the younger generation would have greater access to educational opportunity.

As early as 1883, major newspapers published by whites were reporting on Black self-determination through educational philanthropy. *The Atlanta Constitution* picked up a story from the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette* that attested to a changing tide (A Southern Awakening, 1883). Former slave owners were beginning to recognize that they should have an



interest in Black education, particularly those of the 'moral and religious classes' (A Southern Awakening, 1883, p. 4). The article reported that Whites who supported Blacks' access to education were once the targets of racist Klan violence, but this threat was lessening to the point that Professor Morgan Calloway at Emory University, a white man, resigned his academic post to lead the all-Black Paine Institute (later Paine College) (A Southern Awakening, 1883). The *Constitution* reported in the same year its disagreement with a *New York Sun* journalist who wrote that whites in South Carolina oppose all education for Blacks. Correspondent Frank Wilkerson of the *Sun* criticized white residents of South Carolina for agreeing with the statement that 'not a dollar' of appropriated state educational funding would go to Blacks (Negro Education in South Carolina, 1883, p. 4). The Atlanta newspaper countered that Wilkerson's statement represented only a minority opinion and unfairly cast a negative light on the state. Rather, wrote the reporter, whites in South Carolina supported Blacks' access to education to the extent of the state's resources. Readers might inquire about the implications behind the broad statement regarding state resources. If resources were limited, Blacks would receive no state-supported public educational funding.

MEASURING GIVING

In addition to its commentary on church leadership, *The Negro Church* provides an important report on Black Church fundraising for Black colleges. Du Bois and his colleagues systematically surveyed church-

operated colleges in the South by denominational leadership. He reported the percentage of a denomination's budget on educational expenditures overall as well as their fundraising for colleges. For example, the AME Church allocated 8 percent of its annual budget for educational expenditures. Founded in 1856, Wilberforce University was the oldest AME institution and had the largest budget, just under \$86 000.

By 1907, Negro Baptists had the largest number of schools of any denomination at 107, having enrolled over 16 000 students. Like AME institutions, Baptists operated variety of academies, schools and colleges and universities. Du Bois praised their educational fundraising at particular moments, noting that North Carolina and South Carolina congregations each raised approximately \$6000 for new buildings at Shaw University (North Carolina) and Benedict College (South Carolina). Florida Baptists raised \$4000 to build a dormitory at the Florida Baptist Academy (Anderson, 1988). Moreover, Black Baptists raised the majority of money on their own, some \$2500, without the aid of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMA) (Anderson, 1988).

Du Bois paid particular attention to Black church fundraising and made clear the extent to which Blacks supported their educational institutions. Perhaps departing from his white counterparts, he captured formal and informal efforts. This point is noteworthy because giving traditionally has been understood as monetary gifts, with gifts of time a newer form of giving. Blacks have been giving their labor in exchange for education for generations. Du Bois argued that

although formal records of money raised were significant, labor also should be counted. Of the industrial training schools in particular, such as Fisk Institute and Spelman Seminary, Du Bois wrote, 'The cash value of students' work ... this must be, of course, a very indefinite figure, but as nearly all the janitor work of these schools is done by students, and also some productive industries are carried on, some account must be made' (Du Bois, 1898, p. 85).

By the fifteenth Atlanta University Conference in 1910, Du Bois and his colleagues had secured funding from the John F. Slater Fund. The conference's report, 'The College-Bred Negro American,' was the result of a survey of Black college graduates who were asked to comment on the meaning of their education. Many comments focused not on their own achievements but on those of the race. Moreover, graduates spoke of dreams for their children. It should be noted that their aspirations indicated an awareness of educational opportunities and a strong desire for their children to have equal access (Du Bois, 1910).

SUMMARY

The Atlanta University conference reports and newspaper accounts offer a glimpse into the scope and impact of Black churches' philanthropic support for higher education for the race in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Church congregations rallied together in support of educational opportunity for future generations, in many cases, tending the survival and well-being of their colleges. Black churches played a major role in founding their own colleges across the South, and church members 'dug deep

in their jeans' to give in support of higher education, even when they had 'chick nor child' (Midnight, 1902, p. 1). Blacks in the South resisted the constraints of *de jure* segregation by finding establishing and supporting colleges and universities that provided educational opportunities while privileging privileged racial uplift. For graduates, congregations inspired an ethos of giving back to their *alma maters* and established their role as leaders in the project of racial uplift.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The Atlanta University Studies and other records highlighting Black Church fundraising efforts underscore the centrality of the community ethos in Black philanthropy. Black churches long have been primary vehicles for communicating cultural values within their communities, serving the dual purposes of promoting racial uplifting and cultivating the value of charitable giving, (Holloman *et al.*, 2003). From this long history, three lessons for today's HBCU development professionals emerge.

Leverage the spirit of social responsibility among young alumni

Taking their cue from the Black church's long philanthropic history, today's HBCU development professionals can work to deepen a sense of social responsibility and commitment to community uplift among the students and their respective institutions. The spirit of racial uplift is alive and well. Many African-American donors acknowledge values instilled in them by the church early when discussing their motivations for giving to their respective colleges



(Holloman *et al.*, 2003). Like the Black church, HBCUs can work to instill a sense of social responsibility and community connection in their students early on. Programs such as senior class fundraising drives for specific institutional causes could be used to show students their ability to collectively be agents of change. College 'Pre-Alumni' groups should actively partner with the alumni associations to form not only a social bond but also a 'bond of giving' to highlight the philanthropic responsibilities of alumni.

Embrace a culture of evidence

A significant early funding source for HBCUs, Black churches have done much in establishing and shaping these institutions. The church's early support of Black colleges laid a foundation, and shaped the attitudes of Black donors with regards to philanthropy. In urging donors to sacrifice for the sake of equality, educational attainment and ultimately racial uplift, the early Black church embraced a commitment to establish colleges that would support the education of Blacks. As many of these churches fulfilled their commitment, Black donors saw tangible, measureable examples of the power of community and philanthropy. By engaging in sound recordkeeping practices and demonstrating the impact of alumni donations, HBCUs demonstrate responsible stewardship and make plain the significant role alumni giving plays in student success and institutional well-being. Including an account of the impact of past giving in current appeals demonstrates in a clear way the impact of gifts.

Develop robust volunteer programs

Including the value of student labor in his financial recordkeeping, Du Bois recognized the significance of physical involvement in the cause of creating institutions of higher education in the Black community. Although the physical labor was much more involved than what we would see today, Du Bois' report underscores the significance of personal connection for Black donors. As HBCUs seek to increase this connection, developing robust, productive alumni volunteer programming would deepen the commitment of alumni donors and allow them to see first-hand the needs of their *alma maters*.

For today's HBCU development professional, the bar of donor acquisition, cultivation and stewardship is set high. The early work and success of the Black church models key themes in effective fundraising. From the early efforts of the Black church, we see that donors were inspired to be activists through their giving to Black colleges. Many early gifts were made in the spirit of racial uplift. For these donors, the sacrifice of giving was well worth the promise of increased educational opportunity for future generations. In addition social responsibility was a recurring thematic appeal to Black donors. Self-determination and community advancement have long been valued and linked to individual success.

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