HBCU Spells Success

Meet the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities

By Martha-Page Althaus

The country’s 106 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) run the educational gamut — ranging from two-year schools to medical universities. And the National HBCU Alumni Associations (NHBCUAA), comprised of alumni leaders and associates, supports every last one of them.

Partnering with federal, state, and local governments, plus a host of other organizations (non-profits, civic groups, churches) NHBCUAA assists and advocates for HBCUs and their alumni.

The organization focuses its support on five areas of expertise: Marketing and fundraising, networking and capacity building, community development, international development, and program development and evaluation. NHBCUAA services range from grant writing and financial planning to organizing community networking events.

A legacy of learning

Since the first HBCU was founded in the mid-1800s, these schools have gained a reputation for fostering groundbreaking research and high-quality graduates.

The list of HBCU alumni claim some of the greatest American minds and achievers. Here’s just a sampling: Booker T. Washington graduated from Hampton University in 1875 and he later founded what is now known as Tuskegee University. In the late 1890s, Washington invited Dr. George Washington Carver to head Tuskegee’s agricultural department, where Carver conducted his famous peanut research. St. Elmo Brady received his undergraduate degree from Fisk University and later became the first African American to obtain a Ph.D. in chemistry. Thurgood Marshall, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice, received his law education at Howard University. Martin Luther King Jr. graduated from Morehouse College. Space Shuttle Challenger astronaut Ronald McNair studied engineering physics at North Carolina A&T State University; today, the school’s College of Engineering is ranked one of the best by U.S. News and World Report. The list goes on.

A bright future

Today, HBCUs across the country are offering more resources than ever to cultivate top-notch graduates.

In Nashville, Fisk University earns top marks for its innovative Master’s-to-PhD Bridge Program, which produced five PhD graduates in 2012 in the physical sciences. The school is also one of the country’s top ten institutions awarding master’s in physics degrees to U.S. citizens of any ethnic background.

Continuing the higher learning trend, last fall, North Carolina Central University introduced a PhD program in integrated biosciences, which reflects the school’s growing research capacity. This ambitious program aims to combat diseases affecting underrepresented populations.

In undergrad news, Georgia’s Savannah State University will launch a new Bachelor of Business Administration degree program in global logistics and international business. The program begins this fall, and is the first of its kind in the state.

Kentucky State University just purchased its first floating science laboratory, the “Kentucky River Thorobred,” which will cruise the river and be used to teach students about the water front and water ecology.

With so much happening, it’s easy to see the importance of a support system such as the National HBCU Alumni Associations.

“These colleges and universities are national treasures,” says Ty Couey, National HBCU Alumni Associations president. “They are well-kept secrets, and they must be maintained and supported.”
Hearts and Sciences

“North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is the crown jewel in the North Carolina system of public higher education,” says Chancellor Debra Saunders-White, who took the helm of the 103-year old liberal arts institution this year. A key factor that attracted her to her new post is NCCU’s expertise in turning students into leaders in their fields, careers, and lives.

Many leaders emerge from the university’s biosciences area. NCCU’s proximity to the Research Triangle has given rise to two centers: Bio-manufacturing Research Institute and Technology Enterprise (BRITE) prepares students for biotechnology jobs with experiential learning; the Biomedical/Biotechnology Research Institute (BBRI) explores the mechanisms of disease and health disparities in minorities.

A first choice for many students is NCCU’s nationally ranked law school, one of a handful among HBCUs and one of only a few between Washington D.C. and Atlanta to offer a part-time curriculum. Recently the school expanded its broadband infrastructure through a unique teleconferencing system that better enables law professors and students to interact with other legal professionals as if they are in the same room. The system also allows NCCU to offer coursework to other North Carolina HBCUs and provide legal services to underserved communities.

This kind of outreach is fundamental to NCCU’s motto: “Truth and Service.” Students must complete 120 hours of community service by graduation. Last year, students performed more than 200,000 hours. “That translates to $3 million for Durham,” Saunders-White observes. Local elementary schools benefit from an America Reads tutoring program, while would-be homeowners will see permanent housing, thanks to NCCU’s partnership with Habitat for Humanity Durham. With the addition of a campus community garden, an advisory board for homeless youth, and starting this fall, a food pantry, the school has garnered a place on the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. Equally important, says Saunders-White, community service “teaches us our humanity.”

That explains why this jewel in the crown shines so brightly.