

HBCU Administrators and COVID-19: Do the decisions they make handling pandemic affect their job satisfaction?

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Introduction

Closures. Mergers. Loss of accreditation. These are the real challenges facing [Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#) (HBCUs). However, these are also some of the same issues they have had to be aware of throughout the past 30 years. Administrators at these institutions have been meeting and writing and discussing possible solutions, as a group, to be able to move HBCUs forward toward a more certain future. Due to the nature of most HBCUs, philanthropic dollars are not matching tuition or even federal student aid dollars. As recently as 2018, the Trump administration education officials were carefully pushing HBCUs that are on the financial edge to consider merging or taking other bold cost-cutting steps, knowledgeable higher education administrators say. The topic is said to be at the centerpiece of [several HBCU meetings](#) set to be held this fall in Washington, D.C. (Stuart, 2018). It is important to remember, however, that these topics have been being discussed in previous administrations – from both major political parties.

The new challenge – COVID -19. Scholars, politicians, students, and society is wondering how the pandemic will possibly change the structures and culture of academia in the future. The pandemic has made HBCUs, already dealing with smaller endowments and threats to federal and state support, to deeply consider moving beyond their original mission and establish more of a business model. The decision to make any short-term and long-term changes will include more than in-person or hybrid choices; housing and meal plans or the ever-important digital divide.

The missions of the HBCUs are the key to how the administrators view the current challenges. These institutions should not be confused with institutions that have majority African-American enrollments, but were not founded specifically to serve African-Americans. The term historically Black college or university was first used in the [Higher Education Act of 1965](#). Prior to this act, they were generally referred to as Negro colleges (Mutakabbir, 2011). American slaves were forbidden to learn to read. The process of keeping them and their descendants illiterate continued throughout America's history. The common practice of authorizing literacy throughout the American South was accepted and had a purpose (Crawford, 2014).

[The nation's HBCUs are diverse](#). Although we discuss them as a category based on their historical racial makeup, these institutions are in fact quite different from one another. According to the government's definition, black colleges are bound together by the fact that they were established prior to 1964 (the year of the Civil Rights Act) with the express purpose of educating African Americans (Gasman et al., 2007). While the education of Black Americans was one of the primary missions of HBCUs, other roles of importance include serving as economic and social anchors to the surrounding communities. Currently many HBCU's have begun to develop initiatives and institutes in health disparities research, bio-medicine health disparities and biomanufacturing (Livingston, Porter, Bell-Hughes, & Brandon, 2018). This can be a very important position during the COVID -19 pandemic.

Despite the accomplishments of HBCUs they are the subjects of considerable criticism within the higher education community. Presidents of historically Black colleges and universities are often accused of being

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autocratic and the mission of these institutions is said to compromise academic quality (Minor, 2004).

Chancellors and presidents are charged to ensure the financial viability of their institutions. To be effective, this means they need a strong cabinet and a strong relationship and partnership in shared governance – including faculty and staff.

HBCUs have not only served as the exclusive avenue of access to higher education for African Americans with its promotion of a participatory ethos and an open-door admissions policy for all races and cultures, but they have also provided avenues of student leadership potential and social development. Many industries operating in the public interest look to Black college graduates to further support a diverse workforce.

HBCU administrators will need to address and plan for the future, while still dealing with the challenges of today, in response to the pandemic. Could challenges, such as COVID-19 lead to more upheaval? How does the satisfaction administrators have in their roles affect how they respond to the pandemic and does the organizational structure affect their decisions and overall job satisfaction? What do they consider the biggest challenges their institutions are facing? How will they work with their IT staffs? How will they handle shared governance and choose their COVID-19 response team?

Literature Review

Educational leadership within a college or university's units makes them strong and, at times, vulnerable for failure if the leaders are not able to work within the unit's mission statement and culture, yet be innovative enough to look forward for opportunities for institutional success. HBCUs are facing challenges to their continued existence on several fronts (Crawford, 2012). The current and most pressing challenge is COVID-19. Administrators, facing a truly unknown variable, have had to make major decisions, in the short-term, which may affect the long-term future of their institutions.

HBCUs do not have the same sense of comfort in being able to procure or the expectation of receiving financial assistance from the federal or state government at a level that would sustain them through the pandemic. [This has been part of a historical pattern.](#)

In 2014, four traditionally White institutions (TWIs) received more revenue from grants and contracts than all four-year historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) combined. In total, 89 four-year HBCUs

collectively received \$1.2 billion for grants and contracts from the federal, state and local governments, as well as private foundations. By comparison, John Hopkins University received \$1.6 billion alone. (Toldson, 2016)

With this realization, HBCUs facing the COVID-19 uncertainties will need to maximize all the resources at hand, now, to begin looking forward to the reopening of these institutions. One of the decisions to try to alleviate some of the financial burden and to help students stay on track for graduation was to add more summer courses. Schools like Winston-Salem State University and Virginia State University have seen an increase in summer enrollment and Virginia State University's administrators made [incoming freshmen courses more affordable and lowered tuition rates and fees for in-state students.](#) Virginia State University's President, Dr. Makola Abdullah, said the school understands the challenges COVID-19 has had on students. "While there may be budget challenges for universities nationwide, we have decided that VSU will not pass that down to our students" (vsu.edu). The site goes on to say that upward of 90 percent of VSU students receive financial aid and 70 percent are Pell Grant eligible. First enacted in 1965, Pell Grants are provided through the Higher Education Act (HEA). HEA is a major federal law that authorizes core higher education programs such as Pell Grants, college work/study, loan programs, aid to HBCUs, [TRIO programs](#), and dozens of other activities from graduate education to regulations for campus security. Financial aid programs under HEA alone provide about \$47 billion in aid and serve 8 million students (Dervarics, 1997).

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) began in the Wuhan region of China in December 2019. By February 2020, cases of COVID-19 had been detected on every continent. Governments are advising citizens to be prepared for an outbreak in their community. Today, we are globally experiencing closures in schools and universities, postponements or even cancellations of conferences and other organized events, and social distancing (Vlachopoulos, 2020). The rush by all schools to make everyone safe and moving all or the majority of learning to the Internet was expected, due to the severity of the pandemic. This decision would have a cascading effect on the entire learning and fiscal policies within the higher educational system.

At this point, no one—not government officials, public health authorities or health care professionals—can forecast how long this global pandemic and its countermeasures will last. By all accounts, COVID-19

is pervasively wreaking havoc on a social and institutional level. At my private HBCU, its impact has been substantial and far reaching—it has been very disruptive to our students, faculty and staff—in ways that are markedly different from more familiar natural disasters. All of us have found that there is no playbook for COVID-19. (Smothers, 2020, p. 28)

Current research has demonstrated that technology itself doesn't guarantee an effective-or pleasant- learning experience. The digital divide remains a significant concern in the United States, with ethnicity, race, income level, and education all contributing to inequalities with the use of computers and access to the internet. This can only be achieved through systematic training initiatives that clearly set out the teaching and learning that institutions expect of their educators and students, respectively (Vlachopoulos, 2020). Institutions large and small, ranging from The Ohio State University, with nearly 70,000 students, to Antioch University's Seattle campus, with fewer than 700, are replacing in-person classes with an online learning format. They are holding meetings with software that otherwise would have just required a table and chairs, restricting travel and nixing study abroad programs (Iupui, Tempel, & Iupui, 2020).

"What every college and university is facing is an immediate cash flow crisis," says Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education. "We're dealing with something completely unprecedented in modern history. There is just so much ambiguity how this will continue to evolve" (Cohen & Clendenning, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This research looked at institutional theory to examine how each of these administrators and institutions have navigated the challenges of the COVID -19 pandemic. "It is well known that the institutional theory can be applied to analyze phenomena in the social, policy, or economic realms. Since the scope of the institutional theory is vast, and its contents and streams are various" (Scott, 1987). Understanding the culture of not just the industries and other stakeholders involved is easier when you look at institutions of higher learning as just that, institutions. During the construction of public systems of higher education, the basic logic lies in the fact that the functions of all units need to be distinguished in order to increase the efficiency of the system and improve the overall educational system (Ajdarpašić & Qorraj, 2019). Thus, institutional theory traces the emergence of distinctive forms, processes, strategies, outlooks, and competences as they emerge from patterns of

organizational interaction and adaptation. Such patterns must be understood as responses to both internal and external environments (Selznick, 1996). It is with this in mind that this study moves forward by establishing each of the HBCUs as institutions, with a structure and a mission statement that dictates the manner in which the institution functions educationally.

The data in this study shows that educational changes, like those required by the COVID -19 crisis, are often an organizational response to the need to adapt to the ever-changing environmental conditions. For example, the administrators used in this study decided it was important to have a platform for HBCUs to share their thoughts on funding, shared governance and academic rigor qualifications – to be equal to all other institutions in academia. This allows the students at HBCUs to compete equally with students from institutions seen as the elite few in higher education. The answers seem to continually come back to money, and where schools can get the money, as part of a yearly budget-line commitment. The primary institutional barrier is availability of funds, as cost will increase substantially due to utilization and maintenance of technology. Descriptive statistics show that the high cost for program development and maintenance is a significant barrier to widespread adoption of distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Measurements

Perceived Organizational Support

In an effort to measure the organizational commitment of the administrators, Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson and Sowa (1986) developed the perceived organizational support (POS) scale. Eisenberger et al. wanted to measure employee's individual dedication to their employers, and the elements that influence dedication. The administrators at HBCUs exhibited a high range of allegiance to their institutions. The their nine-question measurement is rated on a 7-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). This study modified this to a 1 to 5 scale.

Work-Family Conflict

HBCU administrators were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected their own personal and professional lives and how they felt it would/could affect them in the future. As part of the survey, administrators were asked, "How worried are you about the impact of coronavirus on your institution?" Eighty percent answered "very worried"

on the five-point scale (1 = extremely worried; 5 = not worried at all). The next question asked, "How worried are you about the impact of coronavirus on you personally?" Twenty percent answered "extremely worried", 60% answered "very worried" and 20% answered "not worried at all". (1 = extremely worried; 5 = not worried at all). Next, administrators were asked to select from a list of options, for this question, "What are the three biggest challenges currently facing the University?" Predictably, the responses varied. However, there were some consistent themes - 50% answered "funding for faculty/staff"; 50% answered "Internet connectivity for students"; while 100% answered "preparing and maintaining campus buildings/classrooms". The funding for faculty/staff is a topic that also is relevant in the "role overload" section of the scale.

In reviewing 190 work-family studies, Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley (2005) reported that work-family conflict increases stress and reduces career satisfaction. With that understanding, Netemeyer, Boyles and McMurrian (1996) developed a short, valid WFC instrument. Netemeyer et al. (1996) defined WFC as, "A form of inter-role conflict in which the general demands of, time devoted to, and strain created by the job interfere with performing family-related responsibilities" (p. 401). The instrument is having statements to be answered using a 5-point Likert-like scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Role Overload

The survey asked, "How confident are you that the university will have the resources to return to full operations in the next (in years)." The options were 1 year; 2-3 years; 4-5 years; more than 5 years; and other/specify; with (1 = 1 year; 5 = other). The answers were in two categories, 40% answered 1 year and 60% answered 2-3 years. These answers were consistent with the open-ended questions asked in the survey.

Differentiating stressor of role overload and role conflict, Bacharach, Bamberger and Conley (1990) remodeled the role overload measurement developed by Beehr, Walsh and Table (1976). Beehr et al. defined role overload as, "having too much work to do in the time available" (p. 42). Bacharach et al. defined role overload as "the professional's perception that he or she is unable to complete assigned tasks effectively due to time limitations (i.e., the conflict between time and organizational demands concerning the quantity of work to be done" (p. 202). The three-statement instrument is answered using a 4-point Likert-like scale (1 = definitely false; 4 = definitely true).

To examine how administrators worked with their cabinet and shared governance, the survey asked an open-ended question regarding how they configured their institutions' COVID-19 response team/members. "How were they chosen and why?" The answers all varied, but the central titles were - provost, vice provost of student affairs, IT staff, risk management director, faculty senate/representative, housing, registrar's office, staff council/representative, student council/representative and campus health directors. Administrators found sharing the decision-making role with many stakeholders allowed the institution to make seamless and meaningful decisions.

Information technology (IT) was a topic with another wide range of answers and comments. The open-ended question asked, "Regarding the University IT team, 'What did they recommend or see as main challenges they have and will face in the upcoming semesters?'" Over 40% of the responses dealt with connectivity.

One administrator seemed to sum this up in their answer by writing about all stakeholders. "Spotty internet connections or lack of access for rural areas; students who lack the proper equipment; managing security risks; inability to deliver in-person labs remotely; software license restrictions; faculty who are unfamiliar with online teaching; and increased strain on IT department."

As could be expected, the topic of overall funding was important to the administrators. The CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund was passed to help schools with funding. Administrators were asked an open-ended question regarding federal funding assistance, "Was the school provided funding from the CARES Act? If so, are you comfortable stating how much was provided?" Again, the answers varied and ranged from \$1.2 million to \$8.5 million. One administrator wrote, "We received \$8.45 million from the CARES Act and we used them - \$3.3 million for the Paycheck Protection Plan; \$2.25 million for Emergency Relief; and \$2.9 million through Title III HBCU Aid."

However, when asked, "Do you feel the federal funding was adequate for your needs?" using a 4-point Likert-like scale (1 = Yes; 2 = No; 3 = Not sure, will need to access later; 4 = Other/specify) 20% answered No, 60% answered Not sure, and 20% answered Other (with the prevailing answer being "we appreciate the funding, however there is a significant need for additional funding").

Job Demands

[Karasek's \(1979\) seven-question job demand-control \(JDC\)](#) measurement was designed to assess the effects of job stress on the physical health of workers. The scale specifically examines job demand (workload in terms of time pressure and role conflict) and job control (administrators' ability to control his or her work activities). Karasek wrote: "psychological strain results not from a single aspect of the work environment, but from the joint effects of the demands of a work situation and the range of decision-making freedom (discretion) available to the work facing those demands" (p. 287). Karasek suggests that high levels of control act as a buffer against job dissatisfaction. The questions are answered on a 5-point Likert-like scale (1 = never; 5 = extremely often).

In examining the motivators and hygiene factors that determine job satisfaction among HBCU presidents and chancellors, this unique study will build upon previous work. The motivators include perceived organizational support (shared governance and their cabinet) and management's commitment to fiscal and academic responsibility (working conditions), work-family conflict (factors in personal life) and job demands (working conditions) will be the hygiene factors.

This study will examine several research questions and hypotheses, including:

RQ1: How will administrators' demographic characteristics correlate with overall job

satisfaction, work-family conflict, role overload, social support, job demands and perceived organizational support?

RQ2: How will administrators rate on the MOAQ's job satisfaction scale?

H1: Herzberg's motivators (perceived organizational support and stakeholder's commitment to getting the institutions fiscally through the pandemic) will be significant predictors of overall job satisfaction among the administrators.

H2: Herzberg's hygienes (role overload, work-family conflict and job demand) will be significant predictors of overall job dissatisfaction (results of decisions) among administrators.

Methodology

The study incorporated, as its primary method, a survey, along with several face to face and electronic video interviews. The questions, in each case were the exact same and asked in the exact order. The

study explored the leadership styles, personal and professional goals during the pandemic and the level of shared governance used in decisions and what possible variables involved in the process for their specific institution.

Fifty schools were randomly selected - there are 89 four-year HBCUs and of this total, 40 are public and 49 are private; there are 14 two-year HBCUs, of which 11 are public and three are private - to be contacted, from a list of the 103, currently still open, colleges identified by the United States Department of Education as Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The list was obtained on the website <http://www.thehundred-seven.org/hbculist.html>. Emails were sent to administrators at each of the 50 schools to request their participation in the survey. The emails also included a consent form and the option for the administrator to be interviewed via electronic video conference or by telephone.

Permission to conduct the study was approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB) and also any individual requested institution's own IRB, as required by their procedure or request. All data for this study was handled with confidentiality and each participant's privacy is protected, unless they specifically agreed to have both their name and institution used as part of any publication.

Results

A third email was sent, as a reminder three weeks later, explaining the study's purpose, to the administrators requesting their participation in the survey. The email also explained that the study was confidential, voluntary and respondents could refuse to answer any question. The email included a SurveyMonkey link. The questionnaire was distributed three times during a five-week period. Of the 50 administrators contacted, there were 8 dead email accounts or there had been a change of administrators listed on the schools' websites. An additional 8 schools were randomly selected to bring the total back to 50. Of that number, 22 administrators or their representatives completed the survey for a response rate of 44% for this study. The response rate is similar and within accepted rates for online surveys. The data for this study is a result of their answers and comments.

The administrators each had about 12 years of professional administrative experience, with an average current role of four years, were more than 85% Black or person of color males and 15% Black or person of color female, 95% were married, and 52.7% had children living at home. School sizes (determined by

student size) was measured by the number students enrolled. Eighty percent of the schools had 0-5000 students, while 18 percent had 5,001-10,000 students and 2 percent had over 10,000 students. Those in the study averaged 52 hours of work a week, both in and outside the institution and were primarily either the chancellors or president (85.7%).

Correlations were conducted to answer RQ1, which asks how demographic characteristics will relate to overall job satisfaction, work-family conflict, role overload, job demands and perceived organizational support. Results indicate that job satisfaction had a small, positive and significant correlation to how the administrators handled the time invested in working during the COVID-19 pandemic, but a small, negative correlation to the institution's size. Work-family conflict had a small, negative and significant association with working with federal funding, and role overload had a moderate, positive and significant correlation with working with shared governance. Additionally, organizational support (their cabinet and working with their boards or regents) had a moderate, significant association score.

RQ2 asked how will administrators rate on the MOAQ overall job satisfaction scale developed by Camman, et al. (1983). The authors did not create a legend that determines high or low levels of job satisfaction based upon raw scores. However, in this study, administrators had a mean score of 17.5 out of a possible 21.

Multiple regression analysis was utilized to examine H1, which states that administrators who report high levels of motivators (perceived organizational support and boards'/regents' commitment to fiscal responsibility) will report high levels of overall job satisfaction. When job satisfaction was the dependent variable, perceived organizational support and management's commitment accounted for about 42% of the variance (adjusted r-square = .369), $F(2,22) = 71.26$, $p < .001$. Organizational support was a positive, significant predictor of job satisfaction [$B = .617$, $t(22) = 11.01$, $p < .001$], but management's commitment to full decisions regarding some funding was not. Therefore, H1 was only partially supported.

H2 states that Herzberg's hygienes (role overload, work-family conflict and job demands) will be significant predictors of overall job dissatisfaction among administrators. In this model, role overload, work-family conflict and job demands accounted for about 8% of the variance (adjusted r-square = .077), $F(3,22) = 7.79$, $p < .001$. Work-family conflict was a negative, significant predictor of job satisfaction [$B = -$

.260, $t(22) = -3.95$, $p < .001$], but role overload and job demands were not significant predictors. H2 was partially supported.

The administrators had an average of 210 faculty, with a low of 120 and a high of 525.

Conclusions

The purpose of this unique study was to examine the challenges faced by HBCU administrators that influence job demands, leadership, decision-making, organizational support and HBCU missions. The results indicate that administrators find great satisfaction in their institution's ability to adjust to the pandemic and the level of shared governance and desire to live to each of their institution's original mission statement. They also all believed increased federal funding is necessary to assist them in operating at the same level as before the pandemic.

Additional research could also include further examinations as to the results of the decisions made by the administrations, as part of a longitudinal study. Interviews with the administrators would certainly assist in developing those answers. A more thorough examination on student and faculty technology/software needs and a general ascertainment of the possible digital divide for all involved stakeholders. Faculty participation in decision making process is positively related to the success of HBCU. Decision making on the curriculum, academic program, instructional methods, degree requirements, and student performance standards comprises a significant portion of faculty traditional roles in higher education.

Regardless of the results, this study does have limitations, particularly with research method. Some consider online surveys to be unpredictable because of the unknown nature of the respondent. While that may be true, the SurveyMonkey link was sent to specific email addresses, which ensures some access restrictions. Also, because the emails were extracted from the institution's websites, another level of restriction was provided. Some institutions did not provide email addressed of their chancellors or presidents - the email went to "office of the president/chancellor". And finally, self-administered surveys have their own problems concerning honesty and accuracy in answers.

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