

**Senior Leaders and Teaching Environments at  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominately White Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

Various scholars have entered the conversation on the educational effectiveness of HBCUs in comparison to PWIs. There is, however, an absence of research that examines the potential relationship between teaching practices and how faculty feel senior leaders (e.g., deans, provosts, presidents) contribute to fostering an environment that enhances their classroom effectiveness. This study uses data from the 2012 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) to examine the differences between faculty perceptions of senior leaders on HBCU and PWI campuses. The results add to our understanding of how much senior leaders support both faculty teaching practices and teaching-related resources.

The institutional focus and pedagogical techniques of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), despite these institutions accounting for such a small percentage of the total U.S. higher education landscape, have been contentious subjects since the beginning of Black college teachings in the 1830s (Jackson, 2002). Interestingly, the research literature on HBCUs suggests that these institutions should be seen as possible models (rather than flashpoints) for producing student success because they consistently produce higher student engagement and outcomes than their Predominately White Institution (PWI) counterparts, particularly for African American students (Allen, 1992; Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Salinas Holmes, 2007). While the research has been consistent, it is also incomplete, particularly in understanding how these institutions produce this success. What faculty do to promote student success and what institutional leaders do to support both students and faculty are largely unknown.

A recent study explores the first of these avenues, faculty practices. When comparing faculty at HBCUs to those at PWIs, Shaw, Cole, Harris, and Nelson Laird (2012) found that active classroom practices, such as interactions across difference, are more likely to occur on HBCU campuses. This is, in part, due to the greater faculty diversity at HBCUs compared to PWIs, but, even after controlling for race/ethnicity and other factors, HBCU faculty still reported higher amounts of active classroom practices than their PWI colleagues. This finding supports previous research focusing on the experiences of Black students at HBCUs and PWIs. For example, Nelson Laird et al. (2007) found that higher levels of student-faculty interaction and active and collaborative learning experiences were reported by students on HBCU campuses compared to PWIs. Similarly, Hurtado et. al. (2011) found that, among students aspiring to become scientists, the frequency of Black students' interactions with faculty is higher at HBCUs,

with HBCU faculty being perceived as more approachable than those on other campuses. These increased interactions and collaborative learning experiences are likely part of the reason that scholars (e.g., Allen, 1992) find that Black students enrolled at HBCUs have greater educational and developmental gains during their undergraduate experience than their peers at PWIs. Despite the abundance of scholarship on differences among students at HBCUs and PWIs, as well as the Shaw et. al. (2012) study of faculty practices on these campuses, very little is known about how the learning environments on these two types of campuses are fostered and supported by senior leaders (e.g., deans, provosts, presidents).

### **Senior Leaders' Impact on Faculty Practices**

Senior leaders of college campuses have frequently been the subject of research, with entire issues of academic journals and books being dedicated to the impact of these leaders, especially those in the position of president (e.g., Birnbaum, Bensimon, & Neumann, 1989; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Kauffman, 1982; Levine, 1998; Nelson, 2000). It is clear that this focus on senior leaders is likely to continue, both in research and practice, with today's ever-increasing emphasis on assessment and accountability in higher education, but "all too rarely, though, is systematic consideration given to the impacts of campus leadership on faculty and student behavior" (Scott, 1982, p. 231).

Among the earliest scholars to examine the impact of administrative style on faculty, Astin and Scherrei (1980) noted that a common complaint from senior leaders is that faculty tend to resist new ideas that administrators introduce to campus. "Given that most faculty are already extremely busy with their multiple responsibilities, they are also likely to view administrative proposals for change with suspicion unless these proposals are accompanied by concrete suggestions for appropriate trade-offs in faculty time" (Astin & Scherrei, 1980, p. 139).

Nevertheless, when designing this study, there were no publications found that examined how faculty members view senior leaders' encouragement of new ways of teaching on their campus.

Using research on innovative leadership as a theoretical framework, we find it appropriate to study how senior leaders affect faculty teaching practice. MacMillan (1987) examined how business leaders foster an environment that encourages employees to be innovative in their work. Senior leaders must display a visible commitment to innovation and insist that everyone within an organization pursue new business developments (MacMillan, 1987). Additionally, for a culture of innovation to exist, the work environment has to have processes that encourage innovation, a diverse group of knowledge bases and views among the individuals within this environment, and physical resources to support innovation (Hyland & Beckett, 2005). With this framework, survey items were developed to estimate faculty perceptions of senior leadership for innovation in teaching (items described below). This study, then, is designed to explore how faculty perceive senior leaders' support for new ways of teaching and innovation in the classroom within the context of our knowledge about the differences in teaching practices at HBCUs and PWIs.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore differences in faculty views of senior leaders on HBCU and PWI campuses, placing emphasis on fostering an environment of innovative teaching. We have focused on how faculty members view senior leaders in regards to supporting new ways of teaching and providing resources to support innovation in teaching. The following question guided this research:

How do faculty perceptions of senior leaders' support of innovation in teaching vary between HBCU and PWI campuses?

## Methods

### Data Source and Measures

The data used for this study come from the 2012 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). FSSE annually collects data from faculty members at baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities where students have completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Results from FSSE provide institutions with an assessment of faculty attitudes and behaviors related to educational practices known to produce positive educational outcomes for students. In addition, survey results provide insight into how faculty members perceive their institution, divide up their work time, and spend class time. The survey results from this study come from an item set about senior leaders appended to the end of the core survey instrument at 17 institutions.

In this paper, responses from 179 faculty members on four HBCU campuses are presented alongside responses from 1,121 faculty members at 13 PWIs. We relied on measures that gauged faculty perceptions of senior leaders' support for teaching innovation on their campuses (see Table 1). Together, the six items form a reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

Table 1

*Senior Leader Support of Teaching Innovation Scale and Component Items*

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Senior Leader Support of Teaching Innovation (6-items;  $\alpha = 0.93$ )

How much do senior leaders (e.g., deans, provost, president) at your institution do the following:

- a. encourage a diversity of perspectives on effective teaching within academic departments
  - b. encourage experimentation with new ways of teaching
  - c. publicly praise experimentation with new ways of teaching
  - d. provide support for experimentation with new ways of teaching
  - e. show a long-term commitment to activities and programs that allow for experimentation with new ways of teaching
  - f. support the development and/or upgrade of facilities and physical resources that support innovation in teaching
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Note: Responses to each item ranged from 1 = Very little to 4 = Very much. The senior leader support of teaching innovation scale was calculated taking an average of faculty members' responses to the component items.

## Sample

Of the sample of HBCU faculty members, 56% were male and 53% were African American, with 32% White, 8% Asian, 1% Hispanic, and 3% Other; the remaining 4% indicated a preference not to identify race/ethnicity. There was 70% of the faculty with a doctorate. Among the academic ranks represented at HBCUs, 18% were professors, 23% associate professors, 25% assistant professors, 27% were full-time lecturers/instructors, and the remaining 7% were part-time lecturers/instructors. In addition, slightly less than three-quarters of the HBCU faculty (73%) were from the soft science fields.

Among the PWI faculty members in the sample, 55% were male and 79% were White, with 3% African American, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 2% Other, and 9% indicated a preference not to identify race/ethnicity. A doctorate had been earned by 78% of the faculty. Various academic ranks were represented at PWIs: 28% professors, 26% associate professors, 27% assistant professors, and 17% full time instructors/lecturers, with the remaining 2% part-time lecturers/instructors. The majority of PWI faculty (72%) were from soft science fields. See Table 2 for highlight comparisons of HBCU and PWI faculty demographics.

Table 2  
*Faculty Characteristics at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)*

Faculty Characteristics		PWIs (%)	HBCUs (%)
Race or ethnicity	African American/Black	3	53
	Asian	5	8
	Hispanic	3	1
	Caucasian/White	79	32
	Other	2	3
	Preferred Not to Respond	9	4
Academic Rank	Professor	28	18
	Associate Professor	26	23

	Assistant Professor	27	25
	Full-time Instructor	17	27
	Part-time Instructor	2	7
Academic Discipline	Hard Sciences	28	27
	Soft Sciences	72	73

## Analysis

First, frequencies were used to understand how faculty responses to individual items differed at HBCUs and PWIs. Next, mean scores were calculated to compare faculty perceptions of senior leader support for teaching innovation on HBCU and PWI campuses. Effect sizes (standardized mean differences) were calculated both with and without controls to determine the magnitude of the HBCU/PWI differences. Effect sizes without controls were standardized mean differences with pooled standard deviations. These effect sizes represent the raw difference between the two contexts. The effect size with controls represents how much of the raw difference is left unexplained after adjusting for differences in faculty and course characteristics. The effect size with controls determines whether differences remain even after adjusting for differences in the racial make-up of the faculty and other characteristics. Control variables included gender, race, U.S. citizenship status, level of education, rank and employment status, course load, course level, course size, course status as general education requirement, and disciplinary area.

## Results

From descriptive analysis, we found that the HBCU faculty members in this study found senior leaders to be more encouraging of new ways of teaching than their colleagues at the PWIs (Table 3). For instance, 56% of the HBCU faculty members found senior leaders to do “very much” or “quite a bit” of encouraging diverse perspectives on effective teaching within academic departments compared to 44% of the PWI faculty members. At the HBCUs, 60% of faculty

members feel senior leaders encourage them “very much” or “quite a bit” to experimentation with new ways of teaching while 47% of faculty at PWIs share the same perspective.

As for publicly praising experimentation with new ways of teaching, 46% of HBCU faculty compared to 38% of PWI faculty members report that their senior leaders do this “very much” or “quite a bit.” The only area where faculty at both types of institutions agreed was with regard to their senior leaders supporting the development and/or upgrade of facilities and physical resources that support innovation in teaching. For this, 40% and 45% of faculty found this to happen “very much” or “quite a bit” among senior leaders at HBCUs and PWIs, respectively.

Table 3  
*Frequencies of Faculty Perceptions of Senior Leader Support of Teaching Innovation by Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)*

How much do senior leaders (e.g., deans, provost, president) at your institution do the following:		PWIs (%)	HBCUs (%)
Encourage a diversity of perspectives on effective teaching within academic departments	Very little	19	13
	Some	37	31
	Quite a bit	26	28
	Very much	18	28
Encourage experimentation with new ways of teaching	Very little	15	10
	Some	38	30
	Quite a bit	30	35
	Very much	18	25
Publicly praise experimentation with new ways of teaching	Very little	26	22
	Some	37	31
	Quite a bit	25	25
	Very much	13	22
Provide support for experimentation with new ways of teaching	Very little	21	22
	Some	40	35
	Quite a bit	25	24
	Very much	14	20

Show a long-term commitment to activities and programs that allow for experimentation with new ways of teaching	Very little	22	19
	Some	38	36
	Quite a bit	26	23
	Very much	14	22
Support the development and/or upgrade of facilities and physical resources that support innovation in teaching	Very little	18	25
	Some	37	35
	Quite a bit	28	20
	Very much	16	20

Table 4 shows HBCU/PWI mean comparisons for faculty members' perceptions of senior leaders. The HBCU/PWI difference was non-trivial (effect size = 0.18,  $p \leq 0.05$ ) but, when controls were present, the effect size was negative and nearly the same magnitude although not statistically significant (effect size with controls = -0.12,  $p > 0.05$ ). Our results show that African American faculty and assistant professors, two groups over-represented at the HBCUs, tend to score significantly higher than their colleagues. Combined, these results suggest that the more positive view of senior leadership at HBCUs may be attributable to differences in faculty demographics.

Table 4

*HBCU/PWI Mean Comparisons for Faculty Members' Perceptions of Senior Leaders*

Scale	PWI		HBCU		Mean Diff.	Effect Size <sup>a</sup>	Effect Size with Controls <sup>b</sup>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Senior Leaders	2.38	0.84	2.52	0.89	0.14	0.18*	-0.12

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$

<sup>a</sup> The effect size is the mean difference divided by the pooled standard deviation.

<sup>b</sup> Effect size with controls is the unstandardized regression coefficient for the institutional type variable (HBCU versus PWI) from analyses where all non-dichotomous variables were standardized. Controls included faculty characteristics (gender, race, citizenship, level of education, employment status, and academic rank) and course characteristics (number of courses taught, course level, course size, general education requirement, and disciplinary area).

## **Discussion & Implications**

Findings from this study suggest three things: (a) HBCU faculty find senior leaders to be more supportive of innovation within the classroom, (b) the majority of faculty at both HBCUs and PWIs feel senior leaders do not place much emphasis on improving teaching facilities or other physical resources that support innovation in teaching, and (c) the active classroom practices that HBCU faculty are more likely to use than PWI faculty is influenced by teaching-supportive environment fostered by senior leaders.

These findings are in line with previous research regarding the benefits received by HBCU students, as well as emerging research about the teaching practices of HBCU faculty. As study in this area progresses, scholars should consider other aspects of how senior leaders are viewed by specific faculty characteristics, such as race, gender, tenure status, and academic rank, among others. For example, we know that research has found that negative environments within academic disciplines or institution types can harmfully impact the likelihood of retention and productivity of women faculty (Pittman, 2010). That the HBCU/PWI effect is not significantly different than zero after controls were introduced, suggests that faculty characteristics play a role in perceptions of senior leaders. Additional research is needed to determine whether actual differences exist between the leadership for teaching innovation at these two types of institutions. Such work should include talking with senior leaders on these campuses to complement our understanding of how these individuals help foster productive learning environments. This work challenges researchers and practitioners to consider the complex factors that enhance the classroom experiences for learners across the spectrum of higher education.

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