

Black Women's Clubs & Sororities' Role in Increasing Access to Education for Marginalized Populations and Their Role in Community Engagement & Social Activism

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Abstract

"Education of marginalized communities in America is an area which has been glossed over in history. Commonly referred to with only notable dates or names included, there is a wealth of knowledge in the history of education of these communities that often goes unnoticed by the masses. By analyzing the philosophies brought to the forefront by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to the mission of higher education, this essay highlights the purpose and intersection of education and social activism in the United States. This paper examines the history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the experience of Black women who pursued an education in America between the mid-1800s and mid-1900s and finally the role of social and service extracurricular involvement in the activism and education of these women. This paper seeks to bring to light the immense contributions of Black women organizers, clubs, and sororities and their longstanding impact on today's educational landscape.

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Keywords

Black women's clubs & sororities, social activism, community engagement

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Within higher education settings, extracurricular activities and community engagement opportunities have long been a critical part of the college experience through the unique chance provided to build community and learn outside of the classroom. One area of community engagement and student involvement is Black women's clubs and sororities' role in increasing access to education for marginalized populations. Community engagement and social activism are driving forces in creating a more equitable America and it is critical to explore Black women's unique role in these historical as well as present-day movements and initiatives. Through an examination of Black women's clubs and sororities using the historical lens of their rise to prominence at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, we seek to identify the role these organizations have played in increasing access to education and creating a legacy of community engagement and social justice within marginalized communities and beyond to create a more socially-just society.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities, known as HBCUs, were defined by the Higher Education Act of 1964 as, "institutions of higher learning established before 1964, whose principal mission was then, as is now the education of Black Americans" (Albritton, 2012, para.2). Throughout the history of these institutions, this mission has been influential in the strengthening the values and purpose of higher education in the United States. HBCUs have been influential in "the commitment of social uplift and community empowerment" (Albritton, 2012, para. 2). This focus has been crucial, specifically, because of the historical, systemic oppression of Black Americans in every aspect of life, especially in education. The history of HBCUs can be traced to America after the Civil War. There were few options for newly freed Black men and women to seek an education in the years following the Civil War. HBCUs were able to step into this role of educating the community, many of whom hadn't even received an elementary education (Albritton, 2012). At the beginning of the Civil War, "90% of all African Americans were illiterate" (Albritton, 2012, para. 4). This statistic pointed to the strong need for institutions who would educate and support this population after the war ended. Beyond simply allowing for social mobility, HBCUs acted as a catalyst for liberation and revolution. These institutions supported Black Americans through this transition and provided an environment where they could develop activism strategies and fight for equality as well as positive social change.

While there have been many leaders in the history of supporting HBCUs, two voices stand out. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois were both visionary leaders in the world of education. While they both supported education for Black Americans, their differing philosophies were notable and are still compared today. Booker T. Washington founded the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute now known as Tuskegee University (PBS, 1998). Washington "preached a philosophy of self-help, racial solidarity and accommodation" (PBS, 1998, para.3). This philosophy led Washington to suggest that Black Americans needed to accept discrimination and work quietly to improve themselves. He encouraged education surrounding industrial, farming, and sciences in HBCUs. He felt that taking this route would lead to a natural progression away from oppression and that one-day whites would respect the work that they have accomplished.

W.E.B. Du Bois fundamentally contradicted Washington's strategy. Instead, he advocated for political action and civil rights. The founder of the NAACP, Du Bois spoke of developing the "Talented Tenth", a small group of educated Blacks who would lead the rest of the community to tangible social change (PBS, 1998). "He advocated for the higher education of Black men and women who would use their passion, expertise, and knowledge to uplift Black communities", upholding education as a tool for collective and civic purposes (Wendling, 2018, p.292). Du Bois felt that liberal arts education, which took a holistic approach, would be an effective way to accomplish this. "He emphasized social and political action for the good of larger society as a necessary obligation of the Black college graduate", solidifying the relationship between the classroom and the surrounding community (Wendling, 2018, p.292). Compared to Washington's ideology, which focused on teaching the community tactile skills, Du Bois suggested that education should give Black students a voice with which they could work to liberate themselves. The conflict between the two leader's ideologies continue to shape the way that leaders in higher education view their role in civil rights and in both local and national policy reform.

Beyond formal classroom education, HBCUs have given students access to student organizations and extracurricular activities that promote academic excellence and community engagement. One of these opportunities came in the form of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Incorporated (NPHC). These organizations, commonly known as the Divine 9, consist of nine, predominantly Black, Greek-letter organizations (National Pan-Hellenic Council, n.d.). With the first NPHC organization, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., founded in 1906 (National Pan-Hellenic Council, n.d.), the mission of these organizations was solidified, “to foster brotherhood and sisterhood in the pursuit to bring about social change through the development of social programs that would create positive change for Blacks around the country” (National Pan-Hellenic Council, n.d., p.1.). NPHC was officially founded as a cohesive council on May 10th, 1930 at Howard University (National Pan-Hellenic Council, n.d.). Most of the individual organizations were formed at HBCUs, but some were founded at Predominantly White Institutions. NPHC organizations do engage in the social aspects of Greek organizations, but they are primarily a form of “community awareness” (National Pan-Hellenic Council, n.d., p.1.). For men and women who joined these organizations, they found value in the opportunity to grow as a community, gain leadership skills, and develop social activism.

One area of focus that is critical to study to understand the intersection of community organization membership and positive social change is that of Black women’s clubs and sororities’ role in increasing access to education for marginalized populations. Community engagement and social activism are driving forces in creating a more equitable America and we wanted to explore women’s’ unique role in these movements and initiatives. The National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC), founded in 1896, encouraged social activism and empowered Black women to rally around critical social justice issues such as education reform and healthcare access. Two Greek organizations that created partnerships and sustained community engagement and social activism over time are Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.. Alpha Kappa Alpha was founded in 1908 at Howard University in Washington D.C. with a core mission of increasing access to the medical profession for Black Americans and helping to make education more affordable through loan programs and scholarships (Parks & Hernandez, 2016). Delta Sigma Theta was founded in 1913 also at Howard University with primary focuses on education, employment, housing, and race and intercultural relations (Parks & Hernandez, 2016).

Black women’s role in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), although not equal to that of white women in the 1880s, served as a catalyst for Black and white women, sparking them to fight for social issues in a joint capacity. “Sarah Woodson Early, Lucy Thurman, and Frances Harper became leaders within the WCTU, including running its department dedicated to ‘Work Among the Colored People’” (Frances Willard House Museum and Archives, n.d., para. 3). The women’s suffrage movement in the early 1900s became another focal point for Black women. “Women became convinced that the vote would protect them as workers, allow them to improve education for their children and themselves, and challenge black men’s disenfranchisement” (Goodier & Pastorello, 2017, para.5). Although faced with racism and discrimination from white women, Black women played a significant role in the women’s suffrage movement and in lobbying and organizing around this social and political cause. Ida B. Wells and Coralie Franklin Cook, among many others, fought for social causes such as anti-lynching, social services, and migrant relief. Following Reconstruction and into the Jim Crow era, Black women’s clubs gained energy and momentum.

The first NPHC sororities and Black women’s clubs held a significant and pivotal role for these women leaders, especially in philanthropic efforts. For example, Alpha Kappa Alpha focused on creating revolving loan programs as well as increasing healthcare services and quality medical personnel and aid to children (Hutcheson et al, 2011). Additionally, Delta Sigma Theta advocated strongly for increased access to higher education and vocational education in the 1940s through supporting scholarships and financing higher education efforts as a vehicle to “addressing the ills of racism” (Hutcheson et al, 2011, p.142). Black women’s involvement in these organizations and movements highlight the beginnings of social justice education and social reform, as well as the critical role of Black women in this history.

Maintaining a mission of social justice is central to higher education largely due to the efforts of these brave women.

Another core pillar is that of service learning and civic and community engagement as high impact practices. “The 20th century Black college, Du Bois (1946) reasoned, should be closely tied to its surrounding community and play an integral role in both the White and Black communities of which it is a part”, centering civic and community engagement as the highest priority for these institutions (Wendling, 2018, p.291). This historical context also sought out to explore the differences between the history of HBCUs liberation engagement and historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs)’s civic and community engagement efforts and initiatives within the higher education landscape. It is clear that, “the practice of merging social activism with academic endeavors has persisted because Black academia realized, then and now, that Black liberation required both an academically- and politically engaged community” (Smith, 2017, p.13).

Ultimately, the core ethos of African American women’s clubs and sororities are their cultural and social capital, advocating as a collective front for racial equality (Hutcheson et al., 2011). Dating back to the 1850s, “HBCUs, like Wilberforce University, provided shelter and protection for escaped slaves at the same time they were providing skills training and a liberal arts education” (Smith, 2017, p.13). Described as the “desired outcome is the co-creation of knowledge to address systemic problems that oppress people within the democracy” (Smith, 2017, p.1), liberation engagement is the foundation for HBCUs and African American women-run clubs, organizations, and institutions. “Fraternity for Service” and the notion of a direct, inherent responsibility to society and the uplifting of the Black race, are the key takeaways from this historical overview (Hutcheson et al., 2011).

Black women leaders during this period led the charge for neighborhood improvements and lobbied for higher quality education for their children and communities. The work of NPHC organizations such as the social justice work and activism of organizations like Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. has reverberating effects up until today, leaving a remarkable legacy. Educated, middle class Black women leaders and members of Black women’s clubs and sororities played and continue to play a pivotal role in laying the foundation for what we know as community engagement today. We fully recognize, honor, and uplift the contributions and strategies implemented by these leaders in their activism and advocacy for a more socially just society through dismantling systems of oppression and increasing access to education.

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