



# Understanding Black Students' Social Agency at Historically Black Colleges: Data From a National Survey

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This manuscript considers the political attitudes of Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities using a 2015 sample of first-year respondents. In response to this special issue's call to consider issues of student protest at Minority Serving Institutions, our manuscript offers empirical evidence on students' political dispositions at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Indeed, understanding the civic dispositions and political ideologies of Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities is not only a timely topic, but also a necessary one if we are to understand the future political engagement of an increasingly diverse nation (Lefever, 2005; Williamson, 2008).

**Keywords:** HBCU, student protest, first-year, the freshman survey, social agency

## INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have garnered substantial attention during Trump's presidency given the ambivalent relationship between HBCU leaders and the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (C-SPAN, 2018). HBCUs continue to operate under an increasingly hostile environment for students of color in the current presidency; most recently, the forty-fifth president of the United States has gone as far as de-humanizing immigrants by calling them "animals" (Castro Samayoa and Nicolazzo, 2017; Qiu, 2018). In the context of these precarious political moments, scholarship must also attend to the attitudes that students bring to their social consciousness and dispositions toward activism.

This manuscript considers the political attitudes of Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities using a 2015 sample of first-year respondents. Following this special issue's call to consider issues of student protest at Minority Serving Institutions, our manuscript offers empirical evidence on students' political dispositions at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Indeed, understanding the civic dispositions and political ideologies of Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities is not only a timely topic, but also a necessary one if we are to understand the future political engagement of an increasingly diverse nation (Lefever, 2005; Williamson, 2008).

Our descriptive study is guided by the following research question: How do Black<sup>1</sup> first-year students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities compare with Black students at non-HBCUs in their social agency? In the section below, we clarify the data sources that have guided our study and also describe how the questionnaire administered in our national

dataset can be used to construct and operationalize a measurement for social agency. Following our description of results, we offer a discussion on the significance of these data for future avenues of research.

Our study is conceptualized by past scholarship framing Historically Black Colleges and Universities as incubators of social change (Gasman, 2005; Gasman and Tudico, 2008). The robust scholarship on students' experiences at HBCUs has previously discussed how they cultivate distinct forms of social capital (Palmer and Gasman, 2008), racial identities (Rucker and Gendrin, 2003), and student engagement in activism (Rosenthal, 1975; Franklin, 2003). Importantly, the scholarship on students' activism within HBCUs has engaged with the question from historical perspectives. In contrast, recent scholarship on Black students' social activism on college campuses has largely focused on their experiences within predominantly white institutions (Cohen and Synder, 2013; Jones and Reddick, 2017; Leath and Chavous, 2017). Indeed, some of these recent works have traced the contours of change in Black and Brown millennials' activism in response to the political shifts borne from Trump's inflammatory political rhetoric (Logan et al., 2017).

Further, scant attention has been paid to the pre-college dispositions that students bring to these campuses with respect to their attitudes around social issues, including political activism. Thus, even though past scholarship on HBCUs has robustly detailed how these institutions cultivate institutional contexts that can nourish students' sense of racial belonging, awareness, and activism, there is more to explore with respect to the profile of those students who choose to enroll within these institutions. In this context, our study seeks to offer a snapshot further contextualizing students' experiences by exploring how their dispositions may already differ prior to enrolling within an HBCU, with a particular emphasis on their social agency. As we document below, however, we do not believe that the data in this preliminary study are comprehensive of students' heterogeneity within HBCUs. In effect, our intent is to illustrate the future avenues that scholars of HBCUs and practitioners within these institutional contexts may choose to explore within a political moment of increasing racial hostility in this country (Qiu, 2018).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This manuscript uses data from the 2015 Freshman Survey (TFS) administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA). TFS is part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a national longitudinal study of U.S. higher education dating back to its founding in 1966 by Alexander Astin at the American Council on Education. TFS is one of the surveys administered by HERI, specifically targeted for first-year students who respond to the survey prior to the start of their first term in college. TFS data, weighted to reflect the total population of first-time, full-time first-year students, is consistently used as a representative sample of students' attitudes, widely recognized through HERI's publication of annual national norm reports.

The 2015 TFS questionnaire consisted of 51 items documenting students' pre-college characteristics (e.g., sex, age,

year of high school graduation, higher education institution's distance from their primary residence, advance placement courses), attitudes regarding social issues (e.g. level of agreement with statements like “racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America”; “Abortion should be legal.”) and behaviors (e.g., hours per week spent studying, socializing with friends). Of note, the data that we have used for this manuscript does not trace the changes in students' social agency before or after Trump's presidency. This is, in effect, an important consideration for future iterations of this work; rather, our goal in this paper is to demonstrate the potential utility of these data to develop an institutional consciousness on students' dispositions toward social agency and activism.

## Institutional Sampling

Of interest for this manuscript, a total of 311 institutions participated in the survey, with 18 of these institutions categorized as Historically Black Colleges. In total, these institutions accounted for 5.7% of the total institutional sample. Historically, HBCUs have accounted for 3.7% of all institutions who have ever participated in the survey, with multiple HBCUs participating in samples as early as the first TFS, administered in 1966. As we note later, given the modest representation of HBCUs within institutions represented in TFS, the claims we make in this manuscript are not generalizable to HBCUs. Notwithstanding these limitations on generalizability, we also underscore that TFS is the only survey that enables researchers to articulate the potential discussion of political dispositions by its first-year students.

## Constructs

The social agency construct measures the extent to which students value political and social involvement as personal goals. It includes the following six survey items:

- Goal of keeping up to date with political affairs
- Goal of participating in a community action program
- Goal of influencing social values
- Goal of becoming a community leader;
- Goal of helping others who are in difficulty
- Goal of helping to promote racial understanding

Each of the items is measured on a four-point scale which asks students to indicate the importance to them personally of each of the goals. Response options include: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important, and 4 = Essential.

The civic engagement construct measures the extent to which students are motivated and involved in civic, electoral, and political activities. It includes the following eight survey items:

- Demonstrated for a cause (e.g., boycott, rally, protest)
- Performed volunteer work
- Worked on a local, state, or national political campaign
- Helped raise money for a cause or campaign
- Publicly communicated your opinion about a cause (e.g., blog, email, petition)
- Goal of influencing social values
- Goal of keeping up to date with political affairs

The first five items measure the frequency with which students participated in a series of activities. Response options on this three-point scale include: 1 = Not at All, 2 = Occasionally, and 3 = Frequently. The final two items ask students to indicate the importance to them personally of each of the goals. Response options include: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important, and 4 = Essential.

## RESULTS

Our data come from a subset of the 2015 Freshman Survey consisting of Black respondents at Historically Black Colleges ( $n = 6,779$ ) and compares these responses to those of Black respondents from non-HBCUs ( $n = 9,778$ ).

First-time, full-time, African American students at HBCUs reported higher levels of social agency and civic engagement than African American students at non-HBCUs. With 49.6 percent of respondents who attend HBCUs scoring in the highest level of social agency scores compared to 45.7 percent of their non-HBCU peers. The data reveal a similar trend for civic engagement with 33.0 percent of African American students at HBCUs scoring in the highest level on the civic engagement construct as compared with 31.5 percent of their non-HBCU peers. A summary of these findings can be found in **Table 1**.

Among African American students at HBCUs, students at private HBCUs scored higher on the social agency and civic engagement constructs. More than half (56.4 percent) of African American students at private HBCUs, scored in the top of the social agency construct as compared to 45.2 percent of African American students at public HBCUs, an 11.2 percentage point difference. There is a 10.5 percentage point difference in the number of African American students who scored in the highest levels of civic engagement with 39.4 percent of students at private HBCUs scoring in the highest level as compared to 28.9 percent of students at public HBCUs, where a high score consists of at least half a standard deviation above the mean for the total population.

African American students at non-HBCUs report more frequently performing volunteer work (39.2 percent) compared to their peers at HBCUs (34.0 percent). However, African American students at private HBCUs report more frequently performing volunteer work (40.4 percent) than their public HBCU peers (29.8 percent).

A larger portion of African American students at HBCUs report frequently publicly communicating their opinions about a cause—22 percent of African Americans at HBCUs vs. 18.9 percent of African Americans at non-HBCUs. Among African American students at private HBCUs, 27.3 percent report frequently communicating their opinions publicly compared to 18.7 percent at public HBCUs.

Notably, a larger percent of African American students at non-HBCUs reported frequently discussing politics (29.6 percent compared to 25.2 percent of African American students at HBCUs). Among African American students at HBCUs there is a 10.3 percentage point difference between private HBCU students who reported frequently discussing politics (31.5 percent) compared to their peers at public HBCUs (21.2 percent).

There are also differences between the distances from home that students attend college. Overall, a larger percentage of African American students at HBCUs attend college farther from home compared to their non-HBCU peers (32.0 percent attend college at least 101 miles from home as compared to 27.5 of non-HBCU students).

Further, among African American students at HBCUs, students at private HBCUs attend college further from home with 67.1 percent of students at private HBCUs attending school at least 101 miles from home compared with 47.9 students at public HBCUs.

There are also income differences between African American students at HBCUs and non-HBCUs. Twenty-two percent of African American students at HBCUs come from families who make \$75,000 or more as compared with 30.6 percent of their peers at non-HBCUs.

Among students at HBCUs, 29 percent of African American students at private HBCUs came from families who make more than \$75,000 per year as compared to 17.4 percent of their peers at public HBCUs.

The descriptive data suggest a political landscape at Historically Black Colleges that is more politically engaged than its non-HBCU counterparts. For example, 1 in 5 (20.3%) Black HBCU respondents claim there is a very good chance that they will participate in protests or demonstrations compared to 15.6% of their peers at non-HBCUs. Interestingly, the landscape within HBCUs shifts again when disaggregated by institutional control. At public HBCUs, 16.8% of Black respondents affirm this claim, whereas 1 in 4 Black students at private HBCUs (25.7%) believe there is a very good chance they will engage in protests.

We also make note of the variance in political leanings at HBCUs. For Black respondents at private HBCUs, 14.8% claim they are far right or conservative compared to 19.5% of their peers at public HBCUs. However, only 10.4% of Black respondents at non-HBCUs affiliate with far right or conservative ideologies.

## DISCUSSION

Though the findings of this manuscript are limited to the subset of HBCUs participating in this national survey (17.8% of all HBCUs), we underscore the importance of enhancing campus administrators' knowledge of students' political dispositions and attitudes toward protesting. Overall, the data suggest that there are consistent findings with prior research investigating social conservatism at HBCUS (Harper and Gasman, 2008).

As a descriptive study, this manuscript outlined the opportunities for future research to undertake a more robust and critical examination of how Black students within HBCUs have distinct predispositions toward their social agency and engagement. Given that such few studies have considered the contemporary importance of HBCU students' social agency, the preliminary overview that we share in this manuscript is intended to offer suggestions on how other scholars may wish to conceptualize opportunities to better understand Black

**TABLE 1 |** Incoming first-year African American student's background characteristics and pre-college experiences.

	Non-HBCU (N = 9,778)	HBCU All (N = 6,779)	HBCU public (N = 4,155)	HBCU private (N = 2,624)
<b>COLLEGE CHOICE</b>				
Percent of students who applied to more than five colleges	56.0	42.4	36.7	50.1
Percent accepted by first choice	71.2	75.8	74.1	78.4
Percent attending first choice institution	43.5	45.7	41.6	52.2
<b>Background</b>				
First-generation college student	23.0	24.1	28.0	18.0
High school GPA: A- or a above	40.7	25.5	21.9	30.6
High Social Agency Scores	45.7	49.6	45.2	56.4
High Civic Engagement Scores	31.5	33.0	28.9	39.4
<b>PRE-COLLEGE EXPERIENCES</b>				
In the past year, frequently demonstrated for a cause (e.g., boycott, rally, protest)	5.6	6.2	5.1	7.8
In the past year, frequently performed volunteer work	39.2	34.0	29.8	40.4
In the past year, frequently voted in a student election	22.5	24.9	22.2	29.0
In the past year, frequently performed community service as part of a class	21.7	21.7	19.5	25.2
In the past year, frequently discussed politics	29.6	25.2	21.2	31.5
In the past year, frequently worked on a local, state, or national political campaign	2.5	3.3	2.8	4.2
In the past year, frequently publicly communicated my opinion about a cause (e.g., blog, email, petition)	18.9	22.0	18.7	27.3
In the past year, frequently helped raise money for a cause or campaign	14.6	15.9	15.2	17.0
Performed 6 or more hours per week of volunteer work in the past year	16.8	16.6	14.4	20.0

students' political dispositions within HBCUs. Furthermore, given that the survey results from TFS are available to campus officials within each participating institution, we encourage those HBCUs who consider partaking or have previously partaken in this national survey to consider disaggregating their data with an attention to the social agency and civic engagement constructs.

Future research may also wish to explore potential trends emerging from these data across multiple years, particularly for those who are interested in mapping the emerging trends from the shifting social zeitgeist on racial attitudes in the United States. Indeed, we recognize the value of offering insights that document the shifts in the attitudes of students during moments of particular political shifts as the ones experienced in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.

Limitations of this work also suggest that beyond the descriptive nature of different student profiles between HBCUs and non-HBCUs, we should caution against claims that homogenize students' experiences within HBCUs. As others have noted, the multiple experiences of students at HBCUs need to be underscored (Williams, 2018). We suggest, further, that other scholars consider deep-dive case studies exploring student activism within these institutional types. The descriptive data that we have shared in this piece can serve as valuable points of departure detailing the possibilities of how students with

particular dispositions toward social activism may anticipate finding a sense of belonging within HBCUs. Said differently: with the knowledge that students may have specific political dispositions within one's campus, institutional leaders have important data to consider how they cultivate spaces wherein students can further develop their social agency. Specifically, the constructs we have used to describe a landscape of Black students' civic dispositions focus on whether students spend their time invested in political campaigns through volunteering or fundraising, whether they publicly communicate their opinions, and whether they attend rallies and exercise their duties to vote. Institutions that intentionally cultivate opportunities for students to engage across these types of activities can be most effective when they understand the types of predispositions with which they arrive to their campuses. We further note, however, that future studies need to remain attentive to the potential intersection of students' identities. The landscape we describe through the results of this national survey suggest there are difference between students who attend public or private HBCUs or who choose to enroll at other institutions. Thus, rather than suggesting a uniform approach to students' political agency and civic engagement, our findings offer a timely reminder for both researchers and institutional practitioners alike to remain attuned to the needs that students articulate within their own institutional context. Asking questions to better understand students' interests

and dispositions, as evidenced by their responses in this national survey, suggests that we have much to learn from our students.

As a whole, this work also suggests that HBCUs stand to benefit from a collective investment in participating in TFS to better understand their students' dispositions toward collective action and activism. Furthermore, the most recent activism (by scholars, administrators, and students) within HBCUs in the face of an increasingly hostile political environment (Williams, 2018) demonstrates the continued importance of HBCUs as clarion calls to advance more equitable opportunities within higher education. Our data suggest we need more research to understand the political attitudes within student environments at HBCUs.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Note that we use Black and African-American interchangeably for the purposes of this manuscript. For a thorough description on the conceptual distinctions of these terms, see Berlin (2010).

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AC contributed to the conception of Research Question (RQ), introduction, literature review, and findings. HBZ and EBS contributed to the conception of the RQ, data collection, and analysis. MG contributed to the conception of RQ implications and conclusion.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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