The Fusion of Curricular and Co-Curricular Affairs at Spelman College: An Administrative Case Study

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Abstract

This historical administrative case study suggests that distinctive HBCUs maintain healthy and necessary holistic campus environments for future black leaders. The key strategies for building successful leadership skills are delineated in the following areas: (a) pedagogical philosophy, (b) the counter-narrative nature of the curriculum, (c) the successful integration of student and academic affairs programs and practices, and (d) specific administrative recommendations and/or strategies for building and maintaining such vibrant environments. The study is centered on the long-standing partnership between academic curricular programs and student affairs co-curricular activities at Spelman College, located in Atlanta, Georgia (one of two remaining historically black liberal arts colleges for women in the United States), and may be regarded as a potential template for other institutions that serve a pre-denominate African American student body.

Conceptual Framework: Examining Distinctive Colleges in the United States

In 1964, higher education expert Burton Clark forwarded a framework for understanding and recognizing distinctive colleges in the United States. In his book, The Distinctive College, Clark (1992) outlined five factors that make an institution both distinctive and legendary: (a) faculty stability and excellence, (b) distinctive curriculum, (c) loyal alumni, (d) a student subculture that builds an internal/external reputation, and (e) an ideology or stories about the institution that are repeated and, thus, constitute an enduring and endearing narrative that becomes a legendary saga in higher education. In examining these criteria, the authors conclude that Spelman College has reached legendary status as described by Clark.

Many people believe that Spelman College became legendary in the eighties as a result of Bill Cosby’s hit series, A Different World, where the campus and the characters were cut and pasted—from the Spelman campus. But, those who knew the history of higher education understood that the college’s history is deep and richly unique. Briefly, Spelman was founded by two white female missionary workers from New England in 1881 (Sophia Packard and Harriett Giles) and supported early on by philanthropist and America’s first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., who considered Spelman to be one of his best investments. Strengthened by the
Atlanta University Center whose institutions consisted of Atlanta University, Clark College, Morris Brown, and Morehouse College, Spelman grew to a mature liberal arts institution in the early 20th century that attracted some of the most talented black female students and faculty during that era.

In framing Spelman according to Clark’s (1992) five point paradigm, we find that the college is distinctive and even legendary for the following five categorical reasons: First, the institution has attracted first-rate faculty members whose degrees and experience are wide, varied, and deep. Also, the retention rate is quite high with seven professors currently serving over thirty five years of service. The former chair of the Music Department, Dr. Joyce Johnson, the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. in piano performance from Northwestern University in the late nineteen fifties, has taught at the college for over fifty years, and there are three faculty members that are past the age of seventy and continue to teach full-time. Second, the curriculum is built upon a foundational course titled “African Diaspora and the World.” This first year required course centers on the African Diaspora instead of Western Civilization. Spelman is the only college in the country that has such a first year foundational course requirement. Also, the Women’s Resource Center, founded under the direction of feminist scholar Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, was also the first in the country to offer courses that centered on the lives of black women.

Third, the alumnae of the college are affectionately known by two distinguishing terms: “True Blue” Spelman women—(light blue being one of the colors of the institution) and Spelman sisterhood. The characteristics of loyal alumnae who consider themselves as “sistas” are well-known among black alumni across the country. Fourth, the student sub-culture is centered on service, professionalism, and academic excellence. Spelman alumnae are known for “doing it all” whether on the job, at home, or in community service. Finally, the saga or story of the institution is repeated every year during Founder’s Week where students hear the re-telling of the school’s genesis every one of their four years in attendance. This story has become a well-versed saga by the time each one graduates.

Taken as a whole, Spelman College, by almost any objective measure, can be considered a distinctive college, and her history can be a useful case study for student affairs personnel who are looking for avenues to integrate effectively their academic and student affairs offices, programs, and practices.

**HBCU History and Culture: A Case Study for Effective Integration of Academic and Student Affairs**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States were founded in the nineteenth century when black educators adopted the proverb “making a way out of no way.” Indeed, these seemingly peculiar institutions provided formal education to thousands of black students who had no viable educational alternative. Beyond that function, however, academicians are just learning the extent to which these institutions embodied a series of enduring beliefs in black leaders that exist to this day and whose distinctive culture “marked” its graduates for life (Drewery & Doermann, 2001; Gallien & Peterson, 2004; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

As noted by Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003),
These schools were counter hegemonic communities inasmuch as they were organized in opposition to the dominant ideology of white supremacy and Black intellectual inferiority. They were designed to forge the collective identity of African Americans as a literate and achieving people. Central to the formation of a counter hegemonic community is the continual articulation and passing on of a counter narrative (p. 91).

It is this counter-narrative, the continuing sagas of distinctive HBCUs, that provides graduates with an unmistakable identity and, as other scholars have noted, offers them the types of environments that produce black leadership. HBCUs have graduated a disproportionate number of black leaders in U.S. society (Gray, 1998). Their alumni fill not only the halls of Congress but also the groves of academe, especially serving their alma maters in equally disproportionate numbers as valuable faculty members and oral historians of the HBCU legacy.

As Walker (1996) elaborates in her ground-breaking study, *Their Highest Potential*, this segregated academic culture was an extension of students’ preparatory school experiences. Black teachers imbued their students with effective characteristics that complemented their highest academic expectations. As many black scholars have chronicled (Howell & Tuitt, 2003; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Watkins, 2001; Watkins, Lewis & Chou, 2001), there was a holistic environment evident in the strong partnership between schools, church, and community. This powerful triangulation enforced communal value bases that centered on collective responsibility, high academic and personal standards, care and concern, and a lift-as-we-climb attitude towards an entire race of people.

**Pedagogical Philosophy**

It was during the 20th century that HBCUs began to produce leaders who would make significant contributions in a myriad of vocations and professions, (e.g., W.E.B. DuBois, M.L. King, Jr., Marian Wright Edelman, Julian Bond, etc.), and it is equally important to note the distinct and dominant pedagogical philosophy of many of the professors at segregated black schools in the South. Consistent with the philosophy of collective and communal responsibility, black professors viewed their students as extensions of themselves. This played itself out in the classroom with the well-worn maxim, “If they did not learn it, you did not teach it.” This pedagogical principle stood in sharp contrast to dominant majority pedagogies at white colleges and universities where competition, meritocracy, and grading on the curve existed in vast numbers of classrooms. For black teachers and professors, these teaching principles were both counter-intuitive and counter-productive to a race of people who were systematically denied a formal education. Therefore, professors at HBCUs labored to insure that their students mastered their lessons. Expectations and standards were tough, and grades were notoriously low at these institutions. However, there was a strong collective sense that they could compete with the best in their chosen fields of endeavor (DuBois, 1973).

During this time, learning about racism from seasoned professionals was an important aspect of the educational and social counter-narrative. Black students frequently heard professors say, “You must be twice as good as your white counterparts once you enter graduate or professional school or the work place.” While teaching at a historically distinctive HBCU, this researcher regularly invited professors who had graduated from undergraduate HBCUs and who later matriculated to prestigious majority graduate schools into classrooms so that contemporary students could hear the stories of their graduate school experiences. A considered and profound
silence was typical of these classes as professors shared some of their more horrific experiences. Many students could not fathom the narratives of racism, prejudice, and outright discrimination and exploitation that these pioneers endured (not to mention the difficulties they encountered in the admissions process). These professors were grateful to their predecessors who prepared them for those experiences by creating a “no-nonsense” academic environment. What students did not know was the amount of personal and professional sacrifice these professors had made to return to an HBCU environment, and many would not have it any other way. They were raised to believe that “we lift as we climb.” Edelman (1999) summarized the experience well:

As an all black woman’s college it gave me the latitude and safe space—one not defined by male or White folks’ expectations, habits of competition, or by the need to preen and prove myself to anyone beyond myself and God. . . . [It] provided the incubation I needed after leaving home to stand on my feet confidently with anyone anywhere (p. 26).

Walker (2001) delineates the following five general principles that permeated the pedagogical practices of black teachers in segregated institutions: (a) they developed relationships within the broader black community, (b) they held high expectations of themselves and their students, (c) they cared about the personal well-being of their students, (d) they contextualized their lessons to the present day realities of the black community, and (e) they solicited collective support from all potential contributors to their education. It is the latter category, the collective support that students received in these communities, that needs to be amplified.

The “Hidden Curriculum” at HBCUs

As most people realize, the history of African American peoples and their contribution to the genesis of the United States is still being culled, researched, compiled, and written in this New Millennium via the contributions of contemporary academicians like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Evelyn Higginbotham, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and a host of others at both HBCUs and majority institutions. Most holders of a bachelor degree from any United States educational institution know little of the critical contributions made by black Americans since their forced arrival to these continent centuries ago. And, if they retain any kernel of knowledge, it is usually related to what they were taught in February of each year (or Black History Month). Because of the dearth of good African American history texts, students were exposed to black history from a pathological viewpoint, or, from slavery to the assassination of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. and the ensuing riots in Watts, Detroit, and other U.S. cities.

Even with the paucity of a logos-centered knowledge base of black history in the segregated era, HBCU graduates learned the oral histories of their people via their professors. Also, they were reading Dubois, Frazier, Woodson, and Cooper before their white counterparts even knew such writers and seminal thinkers existed. Therefore, they graduated armed with the knowledge that their people had made significant differences in American society far beyond the strictures of slavery (Appiah & Gates, 1999; Gates & Higginbotham, 2004; Guy-Sheftall & Cole, 1995).

A Contemporary Example of Effective Integration of Academic and Student Affairs

Emblematic of this implied HBCU historic fusion between the curriculum and the co-curricular contexts of black students was an incident that occurred in the early spring of 2004 at Spelman College.
After co-eds at Spelman College forced rapper Nelly to cancel his April 2004 bone marrow drive on the school’s campus due to the negative portrayal of women in his music video for the song “Tip Drill,” students at Spelman were regularly discussing the problematic nature of some hip-hop videos, lyrics, and the accompanying pernicious images of black women (Farrell, 2004). Such student activity was not new at Spelman, which is known as the unofficial capital of hip-hop music in the South, nor did hip-hop inaugurate these conversations. The college has a history of successful integration and interaction between the Academic Affairs Office and the sponsorship of programs by the Office of Student Affairs that complements and amplifies the curriculum at Spelman. Under the leadership of anthropologist Dr. Johnetta Cole (affectionately known as “Sister President” at both Spelman and Bennett Colleges), the African Diaspora and the World curriculum were unveiled in 1987 and highlighted the continued and conjoined efforts between Academic and Student Affairs Offices. Prior to the curricular shift, these offices had also been strengthened by the efforts of previous President Donald Stewart and his successful living-learning center program and new residential hall designed for such effective integration (Mask-Jackson, 2004).

While the leadership for the protest over Nelly’s video and appearance in Atlanta was inspired by students, it was under the conjoined leadership of Dr. Zenobia Hikes, a scholar of leadership development and former Vice President for Student Affairs at Spelman (presently the Vice President of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech University), and Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a noted cultural critic and Director of the Women’s Studies Center (both Spelman alumnae) who encouraged the continuing academic and social discourse on the misogynist images of black women in hip-hop videos. Indeed, it had become second-nature for faculty members to pick up “booty club” advertisements from the Spelman parking lot, which borders Morehouse College, and bring them into class as “curriculum” for their contemporary lessons in the social sciences. A direct example of such pedagogical fusion occurred in Guy-Sheftall’s class during the “Tip Drill” controversy. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (Farrell, 2004), Sheftall related, “rarely do you have such an obvious case of theory and practice coming together in class’… and [she] welcomed the controversy as a ‘wonderful teaching moment’” (p. A27). Vice President Hikes instilled in students a heightened awareness of the negative images of black women in various types of media as she encouraged students to continue the discourse in and out of class (Farrell, 2004). Hikes (2004) notes,

It is in this vein that Spelman students have joined the ever-growing chorus of those who condemn the manner in which Black women are being exploited within the hip-hop universe. . . . They are adding their voices to the national outcry over the misogynist motifs that are increasingly over-populating the cultural landscape of Black America (p. 7).

Again, this was not new to students at Spelman College. At the same time this controversy was taking place, the Dean of the Chapel, Rev. Lisa Rhodes, had been sponsoring visits by black alumnae who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and had actively protested racist policies and laws in the state capital of Georgia. Chapel events at Spelman have always mirrored the times, and ensuing class discussions were extensions of chapel events.

Spelman’s President, psychologist Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of the 2002 best-selling book Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?, arrived fresh from an environment at Mt. Holyoke College that encouraged integration of academic and social
environments. As underscored by historians Barbara Solomon (1985) and Helen Horowitz (1984), women’s colleges historically nurtured holistic environments since their beginnings in the nineteenth century.

Another example of such integration occurs on a regular basis in the College Archives, led by Spelman alumna, Taronda Spencer, who displays pictures, artifacts, and lectures in classes about the continuing legacy of its graduates. The late Dr. Victoria Durant-Gonzales, a trained anthropologist and community activist, directed the Office of Community Outreach and was seen both in the classroom and on the streets of Atlanta’s West End tending to the needs of community members. In a multicultural education course, Professor Christine King Farris, sister of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would recall key events in the Civil Rights era as both a participant and historical observer. In the new Science Center, named for three black female pioneer alumnae (Albro-Falconer-Manley) in the fields of medicine and science from Spelman College, students are exposed to female scientists who are academic pioneers in their fields. Students on a daily basis hear the stories that emanate from both the hidden curriculum and counter-narrative of black people along with the core knowledge of their disciplines. For many students, this successful partnership between academics and the real world is the raison d’etre for attending a historically black college.

Building and Maintaining a Holistic Campus Environment

Second only to the black church, historically black colleges and universities enjoy a long-standing reputation for shaping successful, multidimensional leaders. Much of this success can be attributed to a holistic campus experience.

With achievement as their primary enterprise, these institutions prepare students for excellence as defined by academic, professional, and personal standards. Institutions that skillfully prepare students for the world community expose students to experiences that contribute to their growth intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. As universities are microcosms of larger societies, so are HBCUs microcosms of the larger black community. Despite the fact that values of today’s students often collide with those of faculty and staff, meaningful dialogue around racism, classism, sexism, racial identity, self-awareness, and the global community takes place between these groups as students seek answers to the nuances of history and popular culture that relate to black people. In preparing students to lead, then, responsible educators and administrators at historically black institutions often direct their focus on black culture, the historical context of African Americans, dilemmas for the black community, and social justice issues. This exposure enables students of African descent to become informed citizens of the black community, the nation, and the world.

Based on the successes of historically black institutions like Spelman College, there are consistent co-curricular patterns that work. Yet, similar narratives can be written about a host of other distinctive black colleges and universities with enduring sagas and holistic environments such as Morehouse, Hampton, Howard, Fisk, and Xavier University. Most notably, institutions that (a) commit to a holistic educational and social environment, (b) collaborate with the academic division, (c) teach the counter-narrative and instill high standards and expectations, (d) instill political awareness of injustice, (e) encourage spirituality, (f) honor alumni, and (g) keep the past alive through publications, activities, and cultural artifacts positively impact the development of their students and etch their places as leaders among higher educational institutions.
The following recommendations for college administrators are based on particular patterns of success at Spelman College that have been extensively researched by the authors’ research and latest book titled: *Instructing and Mentoring the African American College Student: Strategies for Success in Higher Education*.

1. The administration of the institution must be committed to a holistic educational and social environment with an accompanying vision of relating to the surrounding community.

In this present era of academic governance, any meaningful change in institutions of higher education is directed from the administration. Therefore, the President and the cabinet must lead the charge to affect the disaffected. Given the historic proximity of historically black colleges and universities to black neighborhoods, HBCUs are often inextricably woven geographically into the fabric of communities in need of revitalization and support. As a consequence, a social commitment to the environment is integral. Spelman has an ongoing relationship with many communities, but has a special interest in the West End community of Atlanta. This relationship is decades old. The administration has spearheaded collaborative partnerships with community leaders in the Neighborhood Planning Units. Communication through these city-wide units may entail discussions centering on crime and policing, dilapidated and abandoned structures, pending city council legislation, and elementary and secondary education issues. For students, service takes the form of tutorial programs for school children, clean-up initiatives, voter registration drives, and health awareness campaigns. The emphasis on the community, driven by the administration, connects the institution to the community and the student to selfless service (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003).

2. The hiring of professional staff such as directors, assistant and associate directors, deans, and other managers that are committed to a collaborative form of leadership and cooperation with the academic division of the college is critical to the success of a holistic environment.

Student Affairs professionals ascribe to the principle that learning is continuous—taking place inside and outside the classroom. Blending the academic and the co-curricular is one of the elements in the Spelman College Division of Student Affairs five-point charge (vision). The holistic approach has entailed using both traditional approaches and creative departures. Traditional experiences such as required convocations for first-years and sophomores and general assemblies for the College community have provided access to students and additional moments to shape their development. Outside of the classroom, student affairs has employed a host of creative programming such a Featured Faculty lunches, the Secret Supper Club dinners for students and a host faculty member, and evening conversations around popular culture, intimate relationships, the images of women, politics, and other issues of national importance. The holistic partnership between academic affairs and student affairs contributes soundly to student development.

3. The recruitment and retention of faculty, who teach the counter-narrative are teacher-scholars in their disciplines and who instill in students a sense of destiny with accompanying high standards and expectations and willingly collaborate with Student Affairs staff, are critical to maintaining a holistic environment.

In a fall 2004 Convocation at Spelman College, Dr. Jane Smith, Executive Director of the Spelman Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement, spoke to first-years, sophomores, and other members of the College community about teaching “the unknown.” When Marian Wright
Edelman attended Spelman, and Dr. King matriculated to Morehouse, who knew that they would become two legendary leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century? One never knows whom she impacts. Therefore, the unwavering standard must be high. In the tradition of DuBois’s Talented Tenth, Spelman students are encouraged at every turn to make a difference. In the classroom, scholars continue the long-standing tradition of expecting greatness despite any circumstances. In Student Affairs, professional development and leadership training are intentional. Students engage in formal training such as the Women of Excellence Leadership Series and numerous peer educator programs that shape the student body and, essentially, the campus climate. As a result of the partnership inside and outside the classroom, student development is intentional and re-education is ongoing to confront stereotypes and myths that have become fixtures in a post-Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights generation. However, since much of the funding for these programs is dependent upon external granting agencies, the institution must seriously examine raising permanent endowment funds for such important endeavors.

4. Administrators and professors instill a political awareness of injustice and nurture a culture of dissent and protest over societal inequities, discrimination, and racism.

Visitors who enter Spelman’s campus pass a historic marker which reads “Spelman College: Women Who Serve.” The themes of service, civic engagement, integrity, and social justice are embedded in the College’s saga. In this spirit, students are encouraged “to open their eyes to the world, to strip away the veneer of superficiality by not taking everything at face value, to not only look, but to see. . . to not only observe, but to act.” Tracing the College’s history, Spelman students know well the role of the two New England missionary educators, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, who in founding Spelman were committed to the civil rights and education of black women in the South. They know of the Spelman women who protested and marched with Dr. King and were incarcerated during the Civil Rights Movement along with current Spelman students who drew national attention to the negative images of women in hip-hop videos through their protests. Student organizations such as the Student Government Association, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, and the NAACP take active roles in timely issues of national and international note.

Using language that resonates with the hip-hop generation, Vice President Hikes charges prospective and current students to excel personally and to give back broadly stating, “It’s not enough for [Spelman], when you get your B’mers, your Benz’, and your jewels—you must give back.” The campus partnership of faculty, staff, and students forged to address injustice yields an insightful awareness and understanding of the breadth and depth of the many challenges confronting the world.

5. Administrators and professors encourage a spiritual environment that connects students to their past while linking them to the diversity of the future.

Like other historically black institutions, Spelman traces its roots back to a religious foundation where Packard and Giles founded the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church. Today, the spiritual environment remains and is evident in many activities across the campus, especially in chapel. Most students who enroll at Spelman would identify with one of the major religions of the world.
At the center of campus religious services is historic Sisters Chapel. The Chapel is a Greek Revival structure named for two benefactors’ sisters, Laura S. Rockefeller and Lucy Maria Spelman, and has been the site for religious services, lectures, assemblies, and center-wide convocations for nearly 80 years. In addition to its other distinctions, entering students learn that Sisters Chapel is the place where Martin Luther King, Jr.’s body lay in state. Church services are held weekly, and the Chapel is the de facto gathering place in the time of national crisis or other forms of campus-wide announcements.

A new complement to the spiritual environment is the Women in Spiritual Discernment of Ministry (WISDOM) Center. The WISDOM Center is housed in Bessie Strong Hall, most recognizable from the television series A Different World. Renovated with resources from the Lilly Foundation, Bessie Strong serves as administrative space for Sisters Chapel staff and as a residential theme house. WISDOM Center students experience a holistic education that fosters spiritual and ethical development, morally-grounded decision makers, and a new generation of Spelman women who are prepared to serve the church, the community, and the world. As part of its programming, the WISDOM Center explores the diversity of spirituality and formal religions. Evening conversations and programs have focused on meditation, Christianity, Islam, Bahai, and Hindu. This legacy of spirituality on campus sets a tone of expectancy for Spelman students.

6. Administrators sponsor programs that honor alumni who have paved a way and pioneered a future for current students.

Spelman alumnae number approximately 14,000 nationally and internationally. Throughout the year, the alumnae presence is felt by current students and members of the College community. Specifically, as famous speakers gather at Founder’s Day, alumnae association meetings, homecoming, class day, and reunion. As a residential campus, alumnae participate in rituals that are time-honored traditions. Notable among the alumnae programs is reunion. Spelman reunions have a strong following, and sisters return to the campus to reconnect, raise money, socialize, and reminisce with vigor. Among the rituals where alumnae mingle with current students is the walk through the alumnae arch. Just days before graduation, graduating seniors process under the arch following the lead of their predecessors. The arch serves a cultural artifact linking the past to the present. Further, the return of influential alumnae who are corporate executives, social activists, or public servants energizes current students and provides role models who are living legacies.

7. Administrators, faculty, and staff members keep the institutional saga alive in all college activities and publications.

Apart from the rigor of its academic disciplines and the strength of its co-curricular experiences, Spelman achieves a level of success through its traditions. From its ten-day orientation for first-year students through the seniors’ final walk through the arch of the historic oval, Spelman women are surrounded with images that keep the institution alive. Students, alumnae, faculty, and staff are constantly reminded of their sacrifices and accomplishments. Each student becomes a part of that history and assumes some responsibility for the future. The Public Relations Office solidifies this legacy through its alumnae publications, the website, and publicity in electronic and print media. These visual images, success stories, and cultural artifacts serve not only to keep the saga alive but rather demonstrate the unwavering dedication to the institution and its enduring mission.
Conclusion

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have maintained holistic campus environments because many African American constituencies that represent such institutions come from home environments that stress the connectedness between family, neighborhoods, church, and community. When students arrive on these campuses, they both sense and then learn that these environments are deliberately designed for them. This distinctive aspect—the holistic nature—is foundational to the mission of most HBCU’s. They involve and invite the integration of learning, faith, service, and commitment to the future success of their race. Therefore, the traditional boundaries evident in majority institutions between the academic fields and extra-curricular programs are basically non-existent. No such boundaries exist in order to emphasize their individual programs or curriculum since there is little need to keep them restricted from the other. As a result, the HBCU ethos, or counter-narrative, is a unified, cohesive set of principles derived from the experiences of African Americans that exemplify service of their minds, hearts, and souls to their respective communities. And, as Burton Clark framed so well in his book, some of these HBCU’s, like Spelman College, have forged distinctive and even legendary status in higher education.
References


