

There's still a need for HBCUs

Written by Fred Easter

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OK, this time, somebody actually did ask me.

I was asked, "What makes you think that your dad's experience nearly a century ago, or yours, nearly a half century ago, should inform any decision about education today?"

I acknowledged that I was an elder. So let's look at the more recent past. I quote from the Chronicle of Higher Education's coverage of a report on the Educational Effectiveness of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) conducted by The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

According to the study, although HBCU students tend to have lower SAT scores and high school grades than their African-American counterparts at historically white institutions (HWIs), they produce 40 percent of Black science and engineering degrees with only 20 percent of black enrollment. Of the top 21 undergraduate producers of African-American science PhDs, 17 were HBCU's. Of note, many of those students would have been considered underprepared by majority institutions. Given lower funding levels and the underprepared nature of some students, HBCUs are "doing a much better job" than HWIs in educating African-American students.

This article appeared in December 2010. It also pointed out that, "Faculty members' dedication to teaching, student-support networks, encouragement to pursue leadership posts in their fields of study, and the availability of faculty role models help to explain the success of an HBCU education."

I used to argue, back in the last Ice Age, against the importance of SAT scores in assessing the strength and potential of prospective African-American applicants to Carleton College. In my view, the Scholastic Aptitude Test measures socio-economic status rather than scholastic aptitude, e.g. some of the words I had to differentiate between when I took the test were lugubrious, acumen and perspicacious.

If you Google lugubrious you'll find it means mournful or sad. In my family, we said "sad" when we meant sad. Out on the project's playground, I would have had to play alone if I ever used the words "lugubrious," "perspicacious" or "acumen." We'd have said "slick," "clever" or "street smart." I've had a fairly successful and happy life without ever using any of those words, except in this context.

Too many of the too readily accepted "measures" of student ability are really measures of how close one measures up to standard, white, upper middle class norms.

Back in the day, in many northern cities demographics were shifting. Residential gerrymandering was breaking down. In high schools in places such as Gary, Ind. and Oakland, college counselors bristled at the fact that black college admissions staff was in their schools throwing money and opportunity at students who they deemed not half as strong as they had been in their day. What they would tell me was, "You're wasting your time. No one here can make it at a college like Carleton."

I see a parallel in "old white money's" reaction to Barack Obama's election. Obstruct his ability

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to get anything done. Punish the country, with tough economic times, for electing him in the first place.

Is it possible that the educational establishment hasn't lost the capacity to educate Black kids. They've just hidden the map.