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A Participatory Planning Approach to Enhancing a Historically Black University–Community Partnership: The Case of the e-City Initiative

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Abstract

Little is known about the involvement of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in university–community partnerships. This article describes the planning process in a partnership, named the e-City Initiative, between Jackson State University and its surrounding community. The article highlights the role of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning faculty in facilitating greater participation and decision-making of e-City inhabitants in the planning process. It provides the voice of residents, business owners and other stakeholders living, learning and working in e-City neighborhoods. The article concludes with observations about HBCU university–community partnerships involved in revitalization that engender citizen participation and social justice, and offers suggestions for increasing HBCU public scholarship in the planning and service learning literatures.

Introduction

Many university–community partnerships galvanize the resources found in institutions of higher education in the form of faculty, students and external relationships to improve physical, social and environmental conditions in urban black and poor communities that often surround campuses. The literature discusses the involvement of major research universities that undertake many roles in the urban revitalization process, including housing, community organizing and economic development (Bok, 1982; Hackney, 1994; Gilderbloom & Mullins, 1995; Walshok, 1995). In several instances, academic urban planning programs help initiate and remain in the forefront of community revitalization activities (Rubin, 1998). Less prominent in the peer-review literature are cases of university–community partnerships involving urban planning programs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), leaving unanswered the question of how they contribute to a greater understanding of neighborhood revitalization and empowerment.

HBCUs are defined here as institutions of higher learning in the United States that were established beginning in 1837 and before 1964 to provide an education for free black men and women, Africans previously bound by chattel slavery, and their descendents (Brown & Davis, 2001; Ashley & Williams, 2004). Founded by different entities such as the federal government through the Freedman's Bureau and the Morrill Act, religious organizations, philanthropists and blacks themselves, HBCUs almost never had a

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policy of exclusion.[1] Moreover, the vast majority of HBCUs focus more on undergraduate teaching and public research that provides a direct resource to citizens in surrounding jurisdictions rather than graduate education where most urban planning programs reside (Mayes, 1992). Of the 105 HBCUs, four have graduate-level planning programs and only two of these units are accredited by the Planning Accreditation Board (2007).

This article describes a university–community partnership known as the e-City Initiative undertaken by Jackson State University, where the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) played a prominent role during the planning process. The e-City Initiative, with funding from the Fannie Mae Foundation, provided resources to examine an area in the City of Jackson, Mississippi, surrounding Jackson State University, which typifies the conditions in many urban neighborhoods in the United States. Commencing in 2002, the e-City Initiative initially sought to demonstrate the use of technology in strategic planning to advance and assist in the development of economies and neighborhoods over a 10-year period in an area of West Jackson encompassing 5.3 square miles. The planning process covered a two-year period, entailing convening and organizing, data collection and analysis, and the presentation of alternatives for accelerating the revitalization process over the remaining years of the initiative. Greater community involvement emerged, altering the conception of technology as a tool for neighborhood revitalization and bringing into focus a different vision for university involvement in realizing e-City Initiative goals.

This article begins with an observation drawn from the planning literature that, while HBCUs infused a social mission into teaching, research and service, much of that effort went unnoticed by most academic journals and failed to contribute to our understanding of neighborhood revitalization. This gap in the literature undermines in important ways our understanding of neighborhood revitalization. In particular, it fosters ignorance about the importance of HBCUs as vehicles for advancing social justice and serving as social bridges in university–community partnerships. Subsequently, the paper provides an overview of the beginnings of the e-City Initiative and offers details about activities undertaken to increase citizen input in the planning process. It concludes by offering some observations from this HBCU university–community partnership and providing recommendations intended to foster greater acceptance of HBCU public scholarship within the planning and service learning literature.

Armed with information and knowledge from the public scholarship of sincere and committed faculty, HBCUs could be appropriately positioned to undertake comprehensive approaches to revitalization. As institutions of higher education with social missions, HBCUs call for a commitment to the expansion of human and intellectual capacities that advances social justice. An appropriate way of fulfilling this quest is through public scholarship contributing to university–community partnerships that engage a critical mass of faculty in participatory action research and service learning.

The Existing Literature and Absence of HBCUs

The interest of institutions of higher education community partnerships derives from several sources: the self-interest in the physical, social and intellectual enhancement of the experiences of students, faculty and academic personnel in ways that foster security and confidence; the provision of amenities that build university patronage and pride; and the commitment to social justice (Rosen, 1980; Nyden *et al.*, 1997; Stoecker, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). For many, the inducement for engaging in university–community partnerships may encompass not solely one of these but all of them. Moreover, participating in a partnership because of a commitment to social justice—defined here as working with community-based entities in understanding problems and deriving solutions for improving conditions for individuals in society often ignored, isolated, and oppressed—appears to be a natural fit with the historic social mission of the HBCU.

Rooted in the quest for equality, virtually every HBCU pursued a mission of social justice by involving students in assisting the community and instructing an underserved predominately black population to solve societal

problems while challenging the *status quo* (Edwards, 1970; Willie, 1973; Hedgepeth *et al*., 1978). Primarily focused on undergraduate education, HBCUs sought to accomplish this feat through teaching and service, often combining both with periods of reflection resulting in experiential/service learning—a more enriched learning experience teaching civic responsibility and strengthening communities (Elyer & Giles, 1999; National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2005). The heavy emphasis on teaching and service, however, presents a severe trade off. Many faculties become so overworked with teaching and service responsibilities that virtually no time remains for fostering relationships with disciplinary colleagues. This can create isolation, intellectual staleness, and an inability to seek funding opportunities for research (Bacon, 1974; Branson, 1984). For HBCU faculty members engaged in scholarship, much of it follows a historic tradition of being public—responding to problems and opportunities in their respective communities through such forms as direct service, technical assistance and the dissemination of reports (Mayes, 1992). Unfortunately, rarely does public scholarship undertaken by HBCU academicians get published in peer review outlets. As a consequence, HBCU public scholarship fails to deepen understanding and advance knowledge about neighborhood revitalization through university–community partnerships. It is important to note that the majority of HBCUs involved in university–community partnerships are not major research institutions.[2]

The research undertaken in university–community partnerships may provide greater clarity about values and complexities involved in community development (Reardon, 1997). The sincerity of the researcher plays a significant role in diminishing community skepticism, and capitalizes on existing relationships between university and community while establishing new relations and building trust (Reardon, 1999; Axel-Lute, 2000). According to Ferguson and Stoutland (1999), trust provides the foundation for partnerships that seek to solve community problems that are too difficult for any one entity to resolve alone by increasing expectations of enhanced competency, dependability, collegiality, respect and fairness. Within this context of formulating trust, community-based entities hope partnerships with universities will include these attributes and also give way to community empowerment by leveraging more resources; increasing access to external networks, individuals, data and information for decision-making; and greater legitimacy of actions that will help turn around their neighborhoods (Nye & Schramm, 1999; Wiewel *et al.*, 2000; Fullbright-Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Ferman & Hill, 2004).

Some institutions of higher education make university–community partnerships an important objective towards fulfilling their missions, a decision that should initiate and ensure greater faculty involvement with community. According to Rubin (2000), the involvement of a diverse faculty pool with expertise in various disciplines, concentrating on different issues, could be a tremendous asset for understanding university–community partnerships. For planning scholars, involvement in university–community partnerships seeks to increase participation and realize processes of empowerment where mutual learning makes way for information, decision-making, and recommended actions leading to redistributive gains (Friedman, 1992; Reardon, 1997; Rocha, 1997). This has been the case at Jackson State University, and it has had implications for both the university and community in realizing the goals of the e-City Initiative.

How the e-City Initiative Began

In 2000, Ronald Mason, Jr. became the ninth president of Jackson State University. The state's Institution of Higher Learning board designated the university as Mississippi's urban university that would serve an academically, socially, economically, ethnically and geographically diverse student body (Jackson State University, 2000). However, recognized for his experience in higher education administration and community development, President Mason sought to change the mission of the university to include partners in neighborhood revitalization that would prove beneficial to the physical transformation of the campus and give the appearance of a safe and modern environment for existing constituencies and prospective

students while increasing pride among alumni, donors and friends. This idea of utilizing university–community alliances for neighborhood change resulting in positive gains for the campus was framed by his experience. Prior to arriving at Jackson State University, Mason served as the Executive Director for the Tulane-Xavier National Center for the Urban Community in New Orleans, Louisiana, and held the perspective that the move of academic institutions towards university–community partnerships was a matter of self-preservation and necessitated a greater emphasis on service/experiential learning in revitalization activities (Maurrassee, 2001). Given this notion of a direct relationship between the marketability of institutions of higher learning and the improved conditions of neighborhoods in which they are located, expectations were high that the leadership of President Mason would be an influential force for community development activities in the West Jackson community surrounding Jackson State University.

President Mason learned of the University–Community Partnership Initiative launched by the Fannie Mae Foundation that encouraged institutions of higher education to take a more active role in rebuilding their communities by forming alliances with public, private, non-profit and community-based organizations, and also that required integration of technical assistance, research and assessment (Carr, 1999). In 2001, believing this to be an opportunity to form greater vertical and horizontal linkages as well as leveraging financial resources of benefit to the university and surrounding community, President Mason requested the DURP prepare a proposal to the Fannie Mae Foundation for initiating a university–community partnership at Jackson State University. While it was a relatively new academic unit, the involvement of the DURP was desirable for three reasons. First, given the interdisciplinary nature of planning, the DURP faculty and students maintained a unique set of technical and research competencies that did not exist among the other graduate programs on campus. Second, as trained facilitators and negotiators, the DURP could promote an inclusive process of relationship building between the university and community that might diminish town and gown conflicts while enhancing trust and developing a common agenda. Third, in addition to William M. Harris, scholar of black community development and founding Chair of the DURP, other members of the planning faculty had been intricately engaged in university community partnerships before coming to Jackson State University.

The DURP faculty believed a university–community partnership could provide the means for greater citizen participation and equity in decision-making about community improvement by allowing the voice of community stakeholders and residents with very few options to resonate through a planning process. Agreeing upon the release time and departmental support for applied research, the DURP faculty decided it would dedicate significant time and energy to proposal preparation and, if awarded the grant, would lead the planning process. The Vice President of Economic Development and Local Governmental Affairs for the University, a former Hinds County administrator, would maintain partnership oversight and administration of the grant. Subsequently, the Fannie Mae Foundation (2007) awarded Jackson State University a $100,000 grant to fund planning and assessment, including team-building (residents, business owners, non-profit organizations and schools) and resource identification necessary for the implementation of the e-City Initiative. The goal of the e-City Initiative was to demonstrate the use of technology in the comprehensive development of neighborhoods surrounding the campus.

Following the award from the Fannie Mae Foundation, President Mason achieved his desire for a modified mission statement for the university that included e-City and the adoption of experiential learning as an operating principle (Jackson State University, 2003). The university would now view itself as tied to e-City development, which would occur by enhancing linkages with entities at the national and state levels and in the community surrounding the campus. Yet virtually all partners, including the university, were perceived as more influential than the citizenry living and working in e-City. As a consequence, the DURP placed significant value on promoting the involvement of, and an equal voice for, the e-City resident stakeholders

as distinct from the other, more dominant partners in the initiative's planning process.

Getting Started: Methods and Process for Informing and Engaging e-City Stakeholders

The initial boundaries of e-City were defined by the Vice President of Economic Development and Local Governmental Affairs to include over 130 stakeholders, who were then assigned to 10 different taskforce committees to ensure their involvement. The five-square-mile area included a large number of stakeholders and community assets, over 25 different neighborhoods and a whole host of concerns related to demographics and education, land uses and housing, and services provided by the city and community.

Figure 1 depicts some of the assets and institutional partners, including four public schools, a major mall, two technology centers—one of which is an off-campus facility—and Jackson State University. Given the high degree of social capital that the Vice President of Local Economic Development and Government Affairs brought to the initiative, the DURP incorporated these into a more action-orientated and structured approach. The planning process for the e-City Initiative included a charrette and surveys devised for both households and businesses. Initially the DURP faculty held monthly meetings with each taskforce committee in an attempt to actively engage members in data collection and in information sharing, and to gain their local knowledge and sentiments. After a series of meetings, committees agreed on the need for a profile of e-City.

The e-City Profile

Early in 2003, the DURP faculty and students completed a profile that provided stakeholders with a single document capturing the characteristics of e-City and a means of comparing their neighborhoods with the city and county for the very first time (DeBerry & Lowe, 2003). Table 1 highlights the demographic characteristics of e-City compared with the City of Jackson and Hinds County.

Almost 23,000 people lived in e-City, approximately 12% of the population of Jackson and about 9% of all Hinds County residents. The black majority in e-City reflects the population characteristics in the City of Jackson and Hinds County. Blacks in e-City make up the largest cohort in all three locales. Within e-City, whites constituted the minority population at 13%, but their numbers increased in the city and county (28% and 37%, respectively). The population for other racial cohorts remained very small in e-City, Jackson and Hinds County.

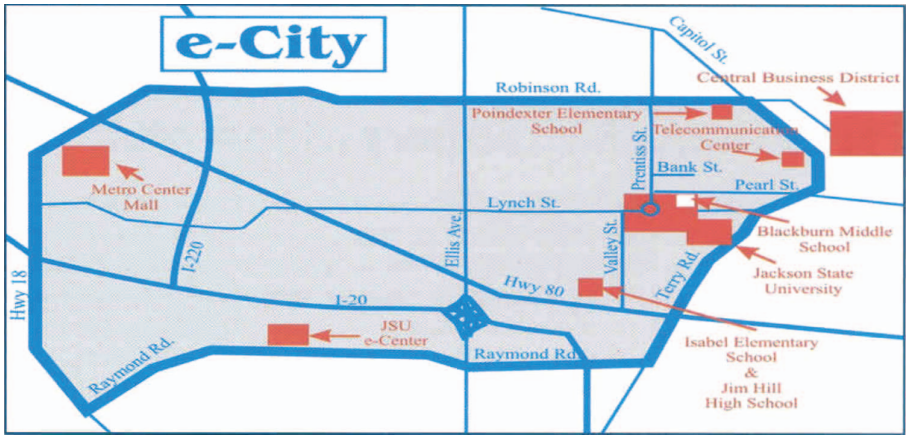

FIGURE 1. Map of e-City. *Source*: Jackson State University e-City Initiative, 2003.

TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics for e-City, Jackson, and Hinds County

	Total persons	Black (%)	White (%)	Other (%)	Median household income ($)	Per-capita income ($)	Households below poverty (%)
e-City	22, 626	86	13	1	18, 129	11, 412	35
Jackson	184, 256	71	28	1	30, 414	17, 116	24
Hinds	250, 900	61	37	2	33, 991	17, 785	20

Source: US Bureau of Census, 2000.

While the median household income in Jackson was only 11% lower than in Hinds County, the median income in e-City was 47% less than the county. Similarly, the median household in e-City earned 40% less income than the median household in the City of Jackson. An even more stark contrast existed in regard to per-capita income. Per-capita income was essentially the same for both Jackson and Hinds County. However, per-capita income in e-City amounts to about two-thirds of the per-capita income in both the city and the county. In addition, more than one-third of all e-City households live in poverty, a significantly higher proportion than in either Jackson or Hinds County.

Stakeholder Involvement and Building Trust

Involving a diversity of community stakeholders in the planning processes was an important component of the e-City Initiative. Most were unfamiliar with the DURP since it was a relatively new academic unit on campus. However, with the completion of the profile, stakeholders acknowledged the commitment and expertise of the DURP and began placing greater credence in the ability of its faculty to successfully facilitate e-City planning. Under the guidance of the DURP faculty members, stakeholders recognized the enormity of the task and the virtual impossibility of realizing significant impact on such a large and diverse area in a decade. In June 2003, the Planning Committee agreed to designate a smaller 3.2 square mile area, known as the e-City Target Area, as the focal point for a 10-year implementation plan (see Figure 2). The e-City Target Area encompassed the areas most in need and contained all of the community stakeholders supporting the partnership, including businesses, community-based organizations, public schools and Jackson State University.

The stakeholders called for the use of technology in a way that moved beyond basic notions of computerization or mechanization. Reflecting on the intense level of need in the community, they changed the definition to one that would advance the use and knowledge of tools such as education and employment in ways that would improve the quality of life in the e-City target area (Lowe, 2004). Another broad purpose also guided the approach to planning: as the only research-intensive university in Jackson, the planning process should foster involvement of a larger number of citizens working with various Jackson State University faculty members in service-learning activities.

Community Charrette

The first step in planning greater community involvement was to hold a charrette. The purpose of the charrette was to help community members, especially those not actively participating in a taskforce committee or other initiative efforts, in becoming more aware of the partnership and involved in making positive changes in e-City neighborhoods by capturing their visions through the planning process. Approximately 40 people attended the charrette. Although youths were under-represented, other neighborhood residents, business owners, university administrators, faculty, students, collaborative board members, community-based organizations and city officials were well represented in fairly equal distributions of women and men. Subsequently, dialogue concerning preservation and new development

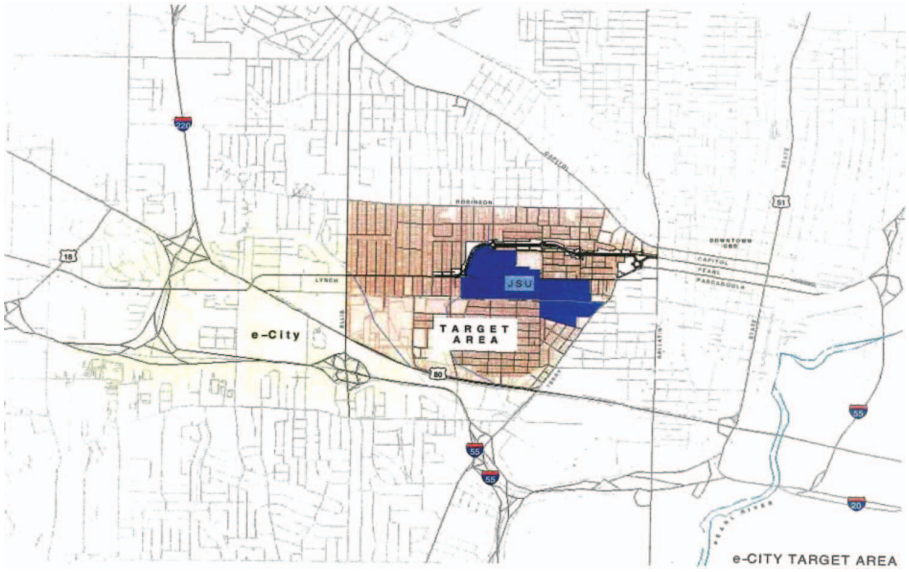

FIGURE 2. Map of e-City target area. *Source*: Jackson State University e-City Initiative, 2004.

leaned heavily towards improvements in infrastructure and the built environment. Attendees identified the need for sidewalks, curbing and better street lighting. In addition to these capital improvement and infrastructure needs, participants expressed the need for neighborhood parks complete with amenities such as playgrounds, outdoor grills and functional restrooms. Charrette attendees wanted a diversified housing stock. A real concern was also expressed that, as new housing construction occurs, priorities be set that create resources for renovations to the existing housing stock, in an effort to stem the potential for gentrification and displacement.

Neighborhood residents expressed great concern about possible changes within the built environment facilitated by Jackson State University. Several mentioned feelings of resentment when Jackson State University erected a wrought-iron fence separating its main campus from the community. Others spoke of their belief that Jackson State University planned to take land occupied by low-income households and small business owners. Attendees clearly stated the need to end the town-and-gown relationship for one with greater university–community collaboration in decision-making.

Attendees also thought it should be a top priority for Jackson State University-led business and economic development to facilitate the employment of current e-City residents. They felt that Jackson State University should organize local businesses, particularly micro-businesses, as a means for encouraging workforce and business development. It was believed that this would enhance the ability of black-owned businesses to better meet the needs of current neighborhood residents, satisfy pent-up demand at Jackson State University, and elicit support from companies within the Greater Jackson region. In turn, as sales and profits increased, businesses should be encouraged to 'give back' or reinvest in the neighborhood.

Household and Business Surveys

Stakeholders desired more community involvement in the decision-making process. In accordance with the recommendation of the DURP faculty members, the mechanism chosen to facilitate an increased level of citizen participation in decision-making was to conduct surveys for a sample of households and businesses located in the e-City Target Area.

Questions for the surveys were derived from taskforce committee meetings, focus groups, and surveys previously administered in other US communities. By late winter 2003, a telephone survey was administered to heads of households while businesses received a mail survey.

A total of 343 households responded to the survey for a response rate of 67%. Fifty-three businesses completed surveys, which resulted in a response rate of 16%. It is important to place both of these response rates in context, as they appear to be quite low. While there is no agreed-upon standard for a minimum acceptable response rate, Salant and Dillman (1994) suggest that 70% for a population-specific telephone survey be the threshold. Fowler (1993) indicates that response rates for such surveys of central city populations will typically be lower. Response rates by businesses to mail surveys are notoriously low, and those within the 10–30% range are considered good (White, Jr. & Luo, 2005).

Survey participants concurred with many of the priorities expressed at the charrette. The survey captured responses about maintaining and improving the quality of existing housing, safety and environment, and health and wellness. Many residents desire housing rehabilitation assistance and want greater access to more readily available parks and social/exercise centers. When asked about what types of dwellings they would be interested in seeing in their neighborhood, ratings were highest for single-family detached housing, senior apartments, and single-family attached homes. About one-half of the renters participating in this survey specified an interest in homeownership. This sentiment corresponds with the priorities set by charrette attendees for diversification of the housing stock and homeownership support.

From the business survey, it was found that most businesses were small or micro enterprises established over a long period of time in the e-City Target Area. Well over 60% of respondents have maintained their businesses in the same location for over a decade, and approximately 70% employ less than five full-time employees. Surveyed business owners expressed the need for additional financing and enhancement of their capacities in advertising, marketing, and technology. In fact, the level of profitability and sales experienced by business located in the e-City target area may be contingent upon different approaches to advertising and marketing. The most traditional and common form of advertising among businesses responding to the survey was word of mouth. Only about 20% indicated radio as their primary vehicle for advertising, and more than two-thirds reported not having a website. Just as with the charrette attendees, it was felt that improvement in these areas could lead to greater employment opportunities for both e-City residents and other goals pertaining to business and economic development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The e-City Initiative elucidates some important observations about HBCU involvement in university–community partnerships that seek to engage in neighborhood revitalization. HBCUs bring to partnerships a rich history of commitment to tackling problems facing black and poor communities. As the e-City Initiative suggests, university–community partnerships may serve as vehicles for continuing that legacy of social mission typical of the HBCU experience by engaging students and faculty with community members and other partners in service learning activities.

The e-City Initiative suggests that progress can be made towards breaking down physical and symbolic barriers between town and gown. Throughout the planning process, the DURP reflected willingness present in HBCUs to sustain social bridges and engage faculty, students, community and national experts in community planning. The initial decision regarding the technology-based focus of the e-City Initiative occurred without representative input from residents of the area. This potential barrier to the partnership was overcome as individuals understood the intense level of community need as contrasted with the few options available to address these needs. Community members maintained a guarded trust towards the HBCU, which is located in a neighborhood where many students, faculty and administrators live or have close personal ties. Pre-existing relationships serve as a basis for trust and help make way for partnership formation with relative ease.

For some, changes in the physical landscape—new roads, contemporary housing and fresh businesses facades—serve as evidence of a

revitalized community. But this type of development continues to harm those most in need, typically the black and the poor living in distressed and oppressed neighborhoods that become the very areas cleared in the name of revitalization, and primarily benefit the middle and upper classes. Consequently, this case might prove instructive to other HBCUs partnering with stakeholders in neighborhoods surrounding their campus.

The exceptional role of faculty who took part in the e-City Initiative was not recognized in the university's normal tenure and promotion structure. This suggests that HBCUs reconsider their procedures to acknowledge community work. They also need to provide more autonomy to departments in determining exactly how community involvement should take place. Such changes may pose a challenge for the top-down authoritative structure of some HBCUs. However, placing the responsibility at the department level can help maintain social justice as an integral part of its vision and mission. Organizations promoting university–community partnerships, participatory action research and service learning, including the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and Campus Compact, could help catalyze this structural change by requiring a research component and release time from teaching and service as a condition for support to HBCUs (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2005). This would help in the dissemination of the experiences of HCBUs in peer-reviewed journals and among planning practitioners.

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Notes

1. For example, Hampton University, founded to provide a normal education to blacks, established a formal education program for Native Americans in 1878 (Lindsey, 1995); and, according to Logan (1969), four white women were the first students to attend Howard University, which was planned to educate a sizable portion of black men and women as well as white men and women.
2. At the time this research was undertaken, Howard University was the only HBCU classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as Doctoral/Research University—Extensive (the highest category).

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