Navigating through the Pandemic at a Historically Black College University: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 virus is one of the most polarizing pandemics that have occurred. The pandemic systematically changed service delivery in all academic arenas. Though all colleges have been affected by closures and the uncertainty of economic survival, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have greatly suffered. HBCUs have had to content with the continued history of oppression and institutional racism which have ignited protests that left colleges underfunded and unprepared to handle the sudden shock of the. This concern has created a pleather of issues with the service delivery of academic programs coupled with the looming apprehensions of college students and faculty members. These challenges include are not limited to admission, field practicum/placements, synchronous learning, and technical issues relating to the new academic format.

1.Introduction

The severity of COVID-19 had been underestimated until the National Health Commission classified it as a B type infectious disease officially and took action to fight against this disease on 20 January 2020. Though all colleges have been hurt by closures and face uncertainties in the fall, the impact is particularly acute for historically black colleges and universities. The same history of oppression and institutional racism that ignited protests against police violence across the USA has left most black schools underfunded, often operating on shoestring budgets and unprepared to absorb sudden shock. The impact on the nation was far-reaching. However, the impact on the Historical Black College and Universities has been equally problematic. These concerns, coupled with the significant concerns with admission, field placements/practicum challenges, university resources (economic/lack thereof), student/faculty adjustment to a fully remote/virtual learning environment, as well as emotional and personal concerns with this pandemic.

1.2 Impact of COVID related to Admission of Students

Institutions of higher education are charged with the task of educating members of society. A quid pro quo exists as colleges impart knowledge, and students pay tuition for those institutions to continue their tasks. Many colleges and universities employ individuals to recruit new students because new students bring in additional revenue. The number of new students entering the institution impacts several areas; the number of classes needed, the number of

faculty needed, the number of dorms needed, etc. Just as admissions affects different areas within higher education, environmental factors affect new admissions, most notably the availability of financial aid, unemployment, natural disasters, catastrophes, etc**.**

At the start of the spring semester, the MSW Admissions Committee established plans to admit 50 new MSW students, a decrease of almost 50 percent compared to the 95 accepted for fall 2019. In addition to reducing the number of new students for fall 2020, the Admissions Committee accepted the Admissions Director's proposal to modify the admissions process via the requirement of a face to face interview and a writing sample. The new requirements were implemented in an effort to enhance student success. The new process was expected to better prepare future MSWs for the graduate social work program's rigorous requirements. As applications were received, assessed, and deemed appropriate for admission, interviews were scheduled and a writing sample question was developed for implementation.

Scheduled recruitment activities included attendance at two social work conferences: a national conference in Washington, D. C. and a regional conference in Virginia. In addition, there were several open houses and two career fairs planned. Initial recruitment activities such as the weekly information sessions continued despite a news story of a small cluster of 27 pneumonia cases reported by the Wuhan City Health Committee. We were into the flu season, and the Wuhan health issue was not viewed globally as a cause for concern initially**.** The disease was later viewed as a novel Coronavirus but still not reported as a global concern and certainly nothing that would be expected to impact recruitment activities for the School of Social Work. The first two months of MSW interviews progressed as expected. However, during the week of February 17th, the first student cases of COVID-19 were reported, and the Coronavirus emerged as a global concern. By spring break, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, and the University of Southern California announced the move to a full online instruction beginning March 23rd. Concerns about the Coronavirus erupted, turning the admissions process askew. The two social work conferences were scheduled for March and June, and the open houses and career fairs were scheduled for March and April. Every activity was canceled.

By early March, the Governor of Virginia decided that everyone needed to observe social distancing and required many state employees to work from home, if possible. Faculty were then required to attend and complete a synchronous and asynchronous online instructor certification training at the university as campus-based classes were transitioned to remote learning courses. The School of Social Work had previously operated from a face to face pedagogy rather than a digital online platform. In order to revamp admissions for fall 2020, the MSW Admissions Committee implemented in-person interviews and writing samples with digital and virtual variations. The swift change from an on-campus methodology to a primarily digital one required a quick adaptation to what would be called "the new normal": social distancing, face masks, and remote online instruction.

Face to face interviews for the MSW program transitioned to a virtual interview format with an online writing sample. Indeed, the technology already existed for virtual meetings, and interviews via Zoom, Skype, and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, but there were connectivity issues. As an HBCU, we did not have the pecuniary flexibility to transition to a fully online format with relative ease. The remote asynchronous delivery format required a laptop or desktop, sufficient Wi-Fi, and bandwidth for both the students and faculty. The University worked tirelessly over spring break to reconstruct course curriculums for the new pedagogy. The School of Social Work discovered that, like other institutions of higher education, some of "our student population was socially disadvantaged because they lacked access to technology and the Internet" (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Glowatz, et al., 2020).

The first few virtual interviews were plagued by frequent video and audio disruptions. Applicants and interviewers frequently experienced the inability to connect via the Collaborate Ultra link as there appeared to be an issue with bandwidth. What initially appeared to be a viable alternative to face to face interviews frequently resulted in disappointment and erratic visual and sound quality. While the technology and online platforms existed, the technological infrastructure was insufficient. We discovered that some faculty and students did not have the technological support necessary in their homes. Several members of the Admissions Committee expressed concerns that some prospective students might be negatively impacted by these technology issues.

As time progressed, it appeared that the larger colleges and universities were handling the transition from on-campus to an online platform quite well compared to many HBCUs. The presidents of these universities and colleges purported how seamless the move from on-campus to online instruction had been. This was certainly not the case

for our school. The COVID-19 virus had exacerbated the financial and digital divide between HBCUs and other institutions of higher education. As institutions of higher education, HBCUs were already disadvantaged prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 simply highlighted the structural inadequacies. How does an HBCU maintain a competitive edge with so few dollars?

At the conclusion of the admissions process for summer and fall 2020, a total of 50 students had been accepted, including 48 new and two deferrals from 2019. Of the 48 newly accepted, 7 (14%) declined the offer and chose to attend other universities. An additional 4 (.08%) applicants declined to accept our offer due to COVID-19 concerns and uncertainty about on-campus, or online classes. Two of the newly accepted applicants requested deferrals to spring or fall 2021 with expectations of a return to face to face instruction. Three additional applicants were scheduled for virtual interviews but failed to present for two or more scheduled appointments. While millennials are technologically savvy, not all were pleased with the movement to online instruction as indicated by global responses to this newly mandated platform (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Glowatz, et al.; Toquero, 2020).

One challenge the Admissions Committee failed to consider was the technology available in each applicant's home as well as their living conditions. Two applicants presented for their MSW virtual interviews in their cars, and a third sat on their front porch, using their cell phone rather than a laptop or tablet. In a rush to reconceptualize instructional pedagogy, many universities were remiss in understanding that training faculty and the development of the online curriculum was only part of the solution. Every student may not be technologically equipped to benefit from a full online curriculum and may not have the home environment conducive to student success. In such cases where students are insufficiently resourced, new admissions would be expected to decline.

Coordinating admissions for a graduate program requires planning and deliberate actions to recruit new students. The traditional recruitment paths of career and college fairs, open houses, and information sessions were impacted by school closures, social distancing, and travel restrictions due to COVID-19. Colleges and universities depend on new students for additional revenue and many colleges are projecting declines in enrollment and revenue should the pandemic continue to manifest for a prolonged period. The number of new students accepted informs the number of classes and faculty needed to provide instructional content. The School of Social Work must now add the requirement of social distancing to this formula should the university return to face to face classroom instruction. For social work programs, there is the added caveat of field placement for MSW students. The field practicum is the signature pedagogy for social work, as students must practice what they learn in class. Field is a CSWE requirement, accompanied by a specific number of practicum hours. Many social service agencies have shuttered their doors or adjusted their service delivery model and may be unable to provide this field experience in fall 2020.

While HBCUs enroll roughly 10 percent of Black students, COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting the Black community, and these dynamics may influence HBCU student enrollment. Due to current and ongoing health disparities and conditions of daily living, Blacks in America are contracting SARS-Cov2 at higher rates and are more likely to die from the disease (Yancy, 2020). Thus, social distancing concerns about contracting the disease may impact student plans for enrollment. The School of Social Work's enrollment for fall 2020 has declined as students with concerns for their health made decisions to wait. Faculty were also impacted as the decline in enrollment ultimately impacted the number of classes and faculty needed. Colleges and universities in Virginia are confronted with a mixture of course delivery options for fall classes, while on-campus, hybrid, remote synchronous, and online classes are the primary options. At this point in time, it is difficult to determine what novel strategies will be most effective to recruit new students.

1.3 Field Education Transitions during the COVID 19

The global spread of COVID-19 continues to present significant challenges for social work field education. Overnight, many policies were implemented due to COVID 19. Social distancing has changed the face of field education, requiring students, field seminar liaisons, and field supervisors to find solutions for direct service and supervision with little guidance on how to do this and continue to meet field requirements effectively. Field Practicum traditionally offered in face-to-face settings have changed to virtual platforms involving the students and the agencies. Learning plans have changed to incorporate remote activities for supervisors to evaluate and students to demonstrate a satisfactory level of practice (Gibson & Carroll, 2020). At our local university regarding practicum placements, we have over 100 students to place, and at least six to ten agencies are not accepting students due to COVID-19 aftermath. This has been quite daunting for the students, which has led to increased uncertainty.

However, the mission of the social work profession has not changed. Social Worker field education continues to embrace the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Now, more than ever, it is time to go back to the foundation of the profession, which is enhancing human well-being and helping to meet the basic needs of all people.

The signature pedagogy of social work education is always evolving. Field education, where it is often said the rubber meets the road, has seen recent trends in its delivery, practice, and focus. With the increased online educational programs, how students acquire, practice, and improve their interactive skills looks different from that of the traditional classroom setting. With the onset of COVID-19, the online process was accelerated for many brick and mortar universities.

CSWE offered resources and guidance to help address these challenges from syllabi and slide decks to accreditation updates and field guidance. With this change, social work education for each social work student, teacher, and the program is unique, and so have been their responses to this pandemic.

To meet these rising challenges amid the COVID virus, the field education office included:

- Revised the syllabus to include a remote technology platform
- Provided remote field placements
- Provided remote seminars classes
- Provided remote supervision
- Provided nationally available webinars, training, podcasts, and continuing education units
- Supported field advisors, supervision, internship retention, and limitations of resources in smaller agencies
- Used of technology as a field instructor, student, and field liaisons
- Supervisors flexibility to work from home
- Students orientated of on-line learning to adhere to all confidentiality guidelines
- Expanded access to a social work education to vulnerable populations who experience barriers in coming to social work school, including financial barriers resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expanded regulatory and remove some structural barriers to employer-based placements
- Flexibility in timing of placement and placement hours
- Remembered limitations of resources such as technology
- Regular field consultation and availability
- University's availability to field instructors on a rapid response basis

Field Education had to make a vigorous and vital transition in operating in order to survive this global pandemic. These transitions required patience, persistence, and endurance from all parties involved to provide a continuous learning environment for the students.

2. Synchronous/Asynchronous Learning

Online teaching is not a new mode of delivery for any university. However, HBCUs typically are not noted as having a robust roster of online course offerings due to limited financial resources. However, more and more students are feeling very comfortable with the online learning format with a large majority of students within our school of social work expressing a preference for additional remote classes.

Once this pandemic has receded or is over, higher education as we have known it will probably not be the same as it was prior to the pandemic. The longer-term impact on Historically Black Colleges and Universities is likely to bring forward opportunities, the most apparent being a shift to online education. Most research on online college coursework has concluded that benefits outweigh its limitations. One of the benefits reported by Bettinger and Loeb (2017) in their review of online education was online courses provides students with the freedom to take classes anywhere and anytime which is redefining higher education.

Concerns with Technology of Synchronous Learning

Online teaching is not a new mode of delivery for any university. However, HBCUs are noted for not having many online learning opportunities. This could be due to multiple factors. These factors include infrastructure, student need for more synchronous learning, and training, which equates to more financial responsibilities. Many faculty members needed the training to use online learning platforms as the only delivery mode or add-on to face-to-face

teaching. However, there were concerns that some faculty who are not technologically inclined. This was a significant paradigm shift for many faculty members. This transition to online mode has raised questions for the faculty about their capability to deal with the existing technology. Furthermore, concerns with the lack of accessing computers and other technology equipment required for virtual learning. This needed equipment is now in high demand for millions of teleworking, colleges, and public school environments. Thus, working at home for some proved an extremely difficult task for the faculty as well as broad band concerns noted with teaching. A survey completed at my local university yielded that students prefer synchronous versus asynchronous learning. The local university included that over forty-five percent of students preferred face-to-face class meetings over the online structure.

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3. Challenges and Opportunities in the Aftermath of the Pandemic

Homeless Students

One of the concerns that have been underreported at HBCU Universities is the homeless student population. This population is underreported in the literature of various journals. This population, separate from the current pandemic, was a significant concern. Coupled with the mid-semester immediate closing of the university and lack of an immediate place to stay, the university served as a shelter in place. Amid the COVID crisis, at least 75 students did not have a secure home, or there were safety issues in returning to a stable dwelling. There were various measures taken due to the pandemic to assist these students remaining on campus. The students were provided counseling services via the University's counseling center, cafeteria, security, and custodial services were also provided.

Mental Health Concerns

The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted the lives of many students and increased anxiety and depression for many. The students were given an opportunity in each class to ventilate their frustration and concerns during this period. Many students grieved the loss of participating in the culminating event called graduation. The uncertainty was deafening. The rate at which the virus was spreading was increasing by 20-30 percent depending on locality. Many of the students, as well as my colleagues, were beginning to know people personally who became infected with the virus. Some of these individuals did not survive the complications of this virus. It has also caused a tremendous level of stress among the university fraternity, inclusive of students. This stress has led to unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of students.

As a Program Director, various concerns surrounded the fear of the unknown. The students had an uncertainty of the school opening, personal struggles with social isolation, and concerns with not graduating on a stage. Many students noted that they were robbed at graduation by the virus. Many noted a feeling of incompleteness. Personally, I struggled with maintaining positivity because the virus was affecting the nation. The students' concerns mirrored many of the colleagues' concerns, which was simply as previously stated fear of the unknown and uncertainty. The university was in planning stages, but this was a fluid type of conversation due to the Governor's recommendations related to the flattening of the virus in our area.

Many of the phone calls and virtual conferences include students experiencing raw emotion. Students were struggling with balancing schoolwork, childcare/caregiving responsibilities, field, and personal duties. The irony is that many of my colleagues were also having the same balancing concerns. Further, many of our student's jobs were identified as essential employment. This also meant possible exposure to COVID-19 due to the uncertainty and lack of information concerning the virus as well as lack of availability of personal protective equipment. Further, leading to more fear of the unknown.

4. Support Services from the HBCU Universities

Universities should establish a task force to plan and deal with the crisis that is driven by COVID-19. The task force should include members from different areas within the university, such as academics, human resources, facility management, health units, student affairs, enrollment services, and other relevant members. The task force should frequently meet with various subcommittees formed for the outbreak and make informed decisions as the situation evolves. It is the right time for faculty, students, and administrators to learn from this critical situation and to overcome these challenges. Online learning could be a more significant opportunity as a result of this crisis. Rebranding for HBCUs is needed as it relates to this pandemic. Students are young and energetic, and they are capable of learning through the online platform.

Faculty can motivate the younger minds and draw them into active participation. University authorities should encourage students and faculty to stay connected through the online or any social media platform and move forward together during this challenging and stressful time. Students should be provided with course instruction and other services in an online format to support academic continuity. The training program should be organized as quickly as possible for the faculty members to tackle the online learning platform.

5. What Happens Next?

Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Glowatz, et al. (2020) identified many considerations for colleges and universities still grappling with appropriate COVID 19 responses. These concerns include:
1. Lack of "home office" infrastructure (Do academics have sufficient recording and internet bandwidth available?)
2. Student infrastructure (How can students access online and virtual content from remote locations?)
3. General- Does the faculty have the general skillsets needed to professionally design and online virtual education?

The data appears clear; academics must scale up their skills to be prepared for emerging technologies that support learning amidst unanticipated catastrophes. Institutions providing the traditional on-campus format must include more online content and instruction in current course offerings to enhance student and faculty comfort levels with varying platforms. Research should be conducted to determine the impact of COVID-19 on student enrollment, learning, student success, retention, and graduation. Of urgent concern is the need to adequately fund HBCUs with regard to emerging technologies, training, and evolving pedagogies.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color from the high rates of COVID cases and deaths to financial insecurity and other losses. The COVID-19 crisis combined with the "Black Lives Matter Movement" following the police murder of George Floyd has exposed the glaring inequalities among the "haves, and the have nots." The old adage "Where there is a crisis, there is an opportunity" is certainly at play here. Major companies such as Target, Netflix, recognizing inadequate funding and resources for minority communities, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities are now stepping up to provide financial support. On the government side, there remains much work to be done to help financially impoverished minority communities of color and Historically Black Colleges and Universities during this pandemic.

6. What happened as result of the pandemic: Collaboration with Colleagues

As stated in the previous sections of this article, the pandemic was quite an ordeal for the entire nation. However, as social workers we know that through crises there are important underlying pearls of wisdom that are learned. During this time, many of my colleagues have added to the knowledge based of social work as they have had high publication productivity. Colleagues have met twice weekly or more for academic projects to enhance the student's experience as well as support the university in their goals. The pandemic may have caused life to become more systematic, but it also has caused more of collegial cohesion and support via a virtual space.

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