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The HBCU advantage: reimagining social capital among students attending black colleges

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Introduction: There is growing interest in exploring the ways Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) mediate student outcomes.

Methods: Situating an HBCU education within the conceptual landscape of social capital, we follow the tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the narratives of ten early and mid-career HBCU alumni of eight 4-year colleges and universities. This framing allows for a nuanced analysis of the ways in which an HBCU education provides its students the opportunity to curate social capital in an environment that affirms racial identity and promotes continued service to the Black community.

Results: Findings support the notion that as purveyors of social capital, HBCUs facilitate the transmission of knowledge through relationships and networks that strengthen community ties and leads to educational and professional gains.

Discussion: These findings inform our understanding of the experiences, policies, and practices that promote community building and the successful career transitions among Black college graduates.

KEYWORDS

HBCU, social capital, postsecondary education, urban students of color, college outcomes

Introduction

Race and racism shape the extent to which Black students are viewed as valuable members of the community and in turn, these views shape opportunities for Black students to cultivate meaningful, authentic relationships with their peers, faculty, and staff of different racial/ethnic backgrounds across educational contexts (Dancy et al., 2018; George-Mwangi et al., 2018; Liou and Rojas, 2020). Recognizing that institutions of postsecondary education historically barred or limited admission for Black Americans, and that Black students continue to be under-represented at Traditionally White Institutions (TWIs), students on these college campuses continue to describe experiences of isolation, marginalization, alienation, and outright violence within classroom spaces, in residential communities, and student organizations (Garibay et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2021; Briscoe, 2022; Hardaway et al., 2022). When Black students are excluded from the social network of college life, they may not be able to capitalize on these networks and opportunities for personal growth, professional achievements, and community impact (Brooms and Davis, 2017; Winkle-Wagner and McCoy, 2018).

Since their establishment, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a significant role in providing access and opportunity for those academically and

socially marginalized in K-12 educational spaces (Albritton, 2012; Johnson and McGowan, 2017). HBCUs have a legacy of serving as a conduit of educational opportunity for urban and rural youth, and through community practices and partnerships, continue to serve as a public resource for members of communities surrounding these campuses situated in urban and rural environments (Brown and Davis, 2001). Scholars have found that HBCUs enhance students' academic skills (Flowers et al., 2015; Morton, 2020), support students' racial identity development (Van Camp et al., 2010; Squire and Mobley, 2015), and promote the expansion of students' educational and professional aspirations (Goings, 2016; Hardy et al., 2019). Moreover, studies exploring the HBCU environment generally characterize these spaces as more supportive for Black students as compared to the environments of TWIs, which may account for some of the observed differences in student outcomes across institutional contexts (Bohr et al., 1995; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002; Winkle-Wagner and McCoy, 2018). Scholarship focused on experiences of Black students attending HBCUs articulate how within these environments, there are opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, and staff in ways that are racially and educationally affirming (Outcalt and Skewes-Cox, 2002; Jett, 2013; Johnson and McGowan, 2017; Williams and Taylor, 2022). Institutional agents at HBCUs formally and informally encourage students to be of service to their cultural communities while in college and upon graduation, is ways that may be less salient than their Black peers who attend TWIs (Drezner, 2010; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Despite these promising outcomes, there is limited scholarship that explicitly explores the nature of the HBCU environment. What happens within the campus environment that mediates these outcomes? Acknowledging HBCUs' legacy of access and engagement among marginalized populations, how does access to these institutions translate to positive outcomes among Black HBCU graduates? Through the use of critical discourse analysis methodology, the purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a better understanding of how HBCUs cultivate and extend social and other forms of capital among Black undergraduate students.

Literature review

Within Black families, student outcomes and college choice decisions are mediated by the salience of race and access to capital. We construct this literature review through an examination of racial socialization, followed by the ways HBCUs build on this process through the extension and amplification of various forms of capital.

Racial socialization

Racial socialization is the process by which Black families and communities convey messages about race and racism to their children throughout their lifetime (White-Johnson, 2015). Scholars have illustrated the ways that the racial identity and intergroup contact shapes views on the importance of education (Freeman, 2005), and decisions about which type of college to attend (Squire and Mobley, 2015). Across many states, schools and school districts struggle to recruit and retain Black teachers and school leaders who practice culturally relevant pedagogical practices that fully engage Black students in the learning process (Madkins, 2011). In the wake of gentrification, displaced Black communities continue to advocate for access to high quality K-12 schools that will ultimately impact their children's access to high quality postsecondary options (Liou and Rojas, 2020; Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2021). These realities are often salient in the minds of Black families as they navigate the educational pipeline.

Race centrality

Race centrality conceptualizes the ways in which Blackness is an essential construct comprising one's identity (Sellers et al., 1998; Van Camp et al., 2009). It also refers to the degree to which an individual is comfortable with outward expressions of racial identity and engaging in activities that center their race (Chavous et al., 2017). Focusing on the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement of Black college students, Sellers et al. (1998) found that Black students with high levels of race centrality tended to have high levels of academic performance. This supports research that affirm Black students can simultaneously identify strongly with being Black and excel in academic setting (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2002; Johnson and McGowan, 2017). Higher levels of race centrality increase the likelihood of race being a factor when selecting a college.

While the process of racial identity development is specific to the individual, often Black children contend with issues of race and being racialized members of society at far earlier ages than their White peers. This includes a reckoning of the ways educational opportunities in the U.S. are structured historically and contemporarily by race and access to wealth (Albritton, 2012). Deciding to apply to and enroll in an HBCU often offers Black students the opportunity to intentionally engage in personal development on the basis of race and embrace their intellectual curiosities. Scholars have found that for some Black students, enrolling in an HBCU is an intentional decision with race and racial identity as an implicit or explicit determinate (Van Camp et al., 2009; Williams J. L. et al., 2021).

Intergroup contact

The importance of intergroup contact also presents as a predictor of the likelihood for Black students to select an HBCU. Relationships among peers, school personnel, and community members take different patterns for Black youth depending on their context. Both the quality and quantity of these interpersonal relationship experiences inform racial identity development among Black youth (Chavous et al., 2017). Patterns of neighborhood segregation shape the racial diversity of K-12 schools, especially in urban areas experiencing residential shifts (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2021). Neighborhoods and school settings are the primary spaces where Black students engage with their peers. Those in pre-college environments that truncate students' ability to interact with other Black students were more likely to select an HBCU for their postsecondary educational opportunities (Van Camp et al., 2010). For example, among Black students raised in predominantly white neighborhoods or attended schools where they were minoritized, the desire to attend college with a critical mass of Black students is a motivating factor for attending an HBCU (Freeman, 1999;

Johnson, 2019). In instances where Black students have not had the opportunity to engage with other Black people during their early childhood development and in their K-12 schooling experience, college can function as the developmental period where they elect to connect with other Black youth and Black educational professionals (Freeman, 2005).

Social mobility

Social class and economic status are highly enmeshed in the context of the family in the U.S. and by extension the same is often true for college students and early career professionals. The opportunities afforded through social networks create pathways to economic stability and wealth. For Black people, a college education can be a tool to increase the depth and breadth of social networks and begin the process of creating economic solvency on an individual level and community level (Brown and Davis, 2001). As opportunities to pursue postsecondary education were restricted by law and in practice, for generations Black families viewed HBCUs as the pathway for social mobility. Hardy et al. (2019) argued that the social mobility index is an important metric when assessing the value-added components of an HBCU education. The social mobility index ranks a postsecondary educational institution's ability to admit, retain, and support students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. HBCUs are committed to educating and supporting Black students who are traditionally underserved in the K-12 continuum and for whom there are limited opportunities for postsecondary education. Even as some HBCUs admit students who are most likely considered underprepared to succeed in collegiate level coursework, this institution type creates structures and programs to support students' academic and personal development (Johnson and Winfield, 2022; Williams et al., 2022). By this measure, HBCUs have received favorable recognition in their capacity to facilitate social mobility for its students and by extension, Black families. Indeed, HBCU alumni enroll in graduate and professional degree programs at higher rates than Black students who attended other institution types. HBCUs constitute 90% of the top ten colleges that produce Black doctoral degree holders and Black medical doctors (Palmer and Gasman, 2008). Further, Brown and Davis (2001) purported that 85% of all Black doctors, 80% of federal judges and 75% of all army officers are HBCU alumni.

HBCUs as a family

The familial network, aka social networks and relationships at HBCUs, functions to facilitate academic success in college, career opportunities as an alumnus, and a long-term commitment to service within the Black community. Research finds that faculty and staff members at HBCUs perform their work duties under an ethos of "family" (Brooks and Allen, 2016; Williams K. L. et al., 2021). In this context, there is a cultural imperative that faculty and staff use when approaching their responsibilities. Studies that explore the familial nature of HBCU environments describe institutional agents who support students on an academic and personal level. Students associated their success with the support, empathy, and intentional accessibility that faculty and staff members displayed to them as human beings and as students (Arroyo and Gasman, 2014; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019; Johnson and Winfield, 2022). Through curricular and co-curricular activities, HBCU students are encouraged to learn more about the diversity of Black culture and to be of service to the Black community (Mobley et al., 2022). In tandem with the ethos of family and the importance of community, students also conceptualize faculty and staff as mentors and role models. These familial-like figures encourage students to reimagine their choices and potential life trajectories. Functioning as a family, the HBCU context serves as habitus, habitus is reconstituted, and social capital reestablished.

Conceptual framework: social capital

Coleman (1988) described the family as the locus for social capital among humans in a society. Social capital is the constellation of values, experiences, knowledge, financial resources, and relationships within a family that allow individuals within that family access, opportunity, and status. At each level within the K-20 educational continuum, access to social capital shapes students' opportunities and experiences (Brooks, 2008; Rogošić and Baranović, 2016). Higher levels of social capital provide a richer network of connections and resources upon which to draw for support and ultimately, social mobility. English and Umbach (2016) posited that a student's beliefs about the world around them will shape the kinds of decisions that they make about their education. One's background including race, gender, and socioeconomic status in particular, function as strong influences on how one's beliefs about the world take shape. Given the structural inequities that constrict the financial resources of Black families and other marginalized communities, the knowledge, experiences, and access to fungible social networks within the family structure become pivotal.

A college education can function as a tool to alter the arc of social reproduction among Black families. A college education can alter the kinds of capital—human, economic, social, etc., —that African Americans possess and/or have direct access to Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002). As an extension of family, the familial environment of HBCUs may provide Black families with the opportunity to access capital in a context that takes into account the specificities of marginalization and oppression that Black people have experienced in the United States. In many ways, HBCUs act as a "social equalizer" for individuals historically excluded from higher education (Brown and Davis, 2001). In examining the processes that universities leverage in order to support the academic and career success of Black alumni, social capital offers a useful lens by which to understand these outcomes.

In the context of this study, social capital is the composition of social networks and relationships that have material benefits, socially and professionally. At HBCUs in particular, social capital materializes as a campus culture akin to family (Palmer and Gasman, 2008; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). This conceptualization of social capital has utility in exploring student outcomes and the individual and community benefits of investing in an HBCU education. It provides a lens to understand the college choice process and perceptions of outcomes as narrated by early and mid-career HBCU alumni in two ways. First, this framing aids our exploration of students' pre-college constellations and how those patterns are predictors of students' selection of an HBCU.

Additionally, this framing allows for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which an HBCU education provides its students the opportunity to curate capital in an environment that affirms racial identity and promotes engagement within the Black community.

Materials and methods

This study is a part of a larger qualitative research project that engaged HBCU alumni in an exploration of their college choices, experiences, and early career outcomes. This study was approved by the institutional review board. This inquiry employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the transition experiences of 10 graduates of HBCUs (Fairclough, 1995; Bhattacharya, 2017). Following a qualitative approach, "meaning is constructed based on people's own understanding of their words, experiences, interactions with events, and circumstances in their lives" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2). After informed consent was given, participants engaged in semi-structured interviews with the lead author and were asked to describe their motivations for choosing to attend an HBCU, their experiences navigating the campus, and the perceptions of their transition to graduate school and careers. These narratives served as the primary source of data. Critical discourse analysis, which focuses on language as reflected in text and images, was utilized as the method of exploring the meaning-making of these experiences through the words and phrases embedded in the narratives of participants. CDA was also a useful lens to unpack how intersecting raced-, gendered-, and classed- identities manifest itself in the experiences of participants as it relates to understanding their experiences with social capital in the HBCU context. The analysis is guided by the following research question: How does access to social capital mediate outcomes among HBCU students?

Data collection

Individuals were eligible for this study if they met the following criteria: (1) at least 18 years old and (2) earned bachelor's degree from an accredited 4-year HBCU. Information about the study was initially shared publicly through social media. HBCU alumni also served as key informants in the recruitment process and were asked to share information about the study with HBCU alumni in their networks. Interested individuals were screened for eligibility and invited to engage in the study. These strategies were repeated bi-annually, beginning in 2014. Once informed consent was obtained, each participant completed a brief demographic questionnaire and subsequently engaged in a semi-structured interview via telephone or video conference technology. Interviews explored faculty-student interactions, perceptions of mentorship, pre/post HBCU professional aspirations, transitions post-degree attainment, early career experiences, and satisfaction with graduate school/career preparation. The dataset includes 115 in-depth interviews conducted with HBCU alumni across 35 institutions.

Participants

From the larger study, specific data was extracted relevant to our examination of the research question. Data for this investigation was selected through purposive sampling strategies (Jones et al., 2014). First, there was an attempt to identify individuals across diverse HBCUs to support transferability across institutional contexts. There were 8 institutions included in the study: Albany State University, Coppin State University, Dillard University, Florida A&M University, Hampton University, North Carolina A&T State University, Oakwood University, and Wilberforce University (**Table 1**). These 4-year universities were established between 1856 and 1930. Four are classified as public and four are classified as private.

Additionally, the intent was to extract from the larger data set, participants with diverse demographic profiles that could be presented as information-rich cases to understand how social capital mediates outcomes among HBCU graduates. This involved purposively identifying participants from the dataset who provided detailed responses to the interview questions that asked them to describe social relationships developed prior to and during college. The stories of this sub-group of participants represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in the study. Specifically, these individuals were intentionally selected to illustrate the similarities and differences in their journey to degree attainment and beyond while enrolled in diverse degree programs over a span of 15 years. This investigation is drawn from data collected from 10 Black alumni (**Table 2**). Three participants identified as women and seven identified as men. Each was raised in an urban city across 9 states. Participants graduated from accredited 4-year HBCUs between the years 2001 and 2015.

Data analysis

Situating an HBCU education within the theoretical landscape of Coleman's definition of social capital, we followed the tenets of CDA to examine meaning-making among HBCU alumni. The process of discourse analysis as an analytical strategy focuses on language in order to investigate ideologies and motivations embedded within the text (Fairclough, 1995). Using Fairclough's (1995) three dimensions of CDA, we began with a comprehensive review of the interview transcripts. The narratives of participants were interrogated for specific examples of the ways social capital manifests itself in the educational trajectories of participants. We made note of the words and phrases used to characterize

TABLE 1 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) demographic information.

Institution	Location	Year of establishment	Control
Albany State University	Albany, GA	1903	Public
Coppin State University	Baltimore, MD	1900	Public
Dillard University	New Orleans, LA	1930	Private
Florida A&M University	Tallahassee, FL	1887	Public
Hampton University	Hampton, VA	1861	Private
North Carolina A&T State University	Greensboro, NC	1891	Public
Oakwood University	Huntsville, AL	1896	Private
Wilberforce University	Wilberforce, OH	1856	Private

TABLE 2 Demographic profile of participants.

Pseudonym	Home state (geography)	Socioeconomic status as undergraduate	Institution, graduation year	Program of study	Occupation
Danielle	Georgia (urban)	Middle Class	Albany State University (2010)	Art	Art Teacher; Doctoral Student (Ed.D.)
King	Maryland (urban)	Lower class/poor	Coppin State University (2015)	Global Studies	Peace Corps Educator
Omari	Louisiana (urban)	Middle class	Dillard University (2005)	Business Administration	Management Consultant
Maria	Indiana (urban)	Working class	Florida A&M University (2003)	Business Administration	Project Manager
Michael	Missouri (urban)	Working class	Florida A&M University (2001)	Business Administration	Strategic Planning and Performance Manager
Valerie	Florida (urban)	Working class	Hampton University (2006)	Psychology	School Psychologist
Damien	Maryland (urban)	Upper class/affluent	North Carolina A&T State University (2005)	Electrical Engineering	Water Resource Control Engineer
Marquis	Virginia (urban)	Working class	North Carolina A&T State University (2009)	Applied Mathematics	Doctoral Student; Astrophysics (Ph.D.)
Jon	Tennessee (urban)	Middle Class	Oakwood University (2015)	Computer Science	Medical Doctor
Hakeem	California (urban)	Working class	Wilberforce University (2006)	Business Management	Flight Attendant

various relationships–whether they be with family members, peers, HBCU institutional agents, or community members. We paid close attention to word choice, phrasing, and emphasis used to describe these relationships.

Following this initial analysis, the second dimension of CDA involved interpretation—or specifically contextualizing the participants' responses to the questions posed during the interview. For this component, we focused on interpreting discourses related to messages about education conveyed by family members, the importance of relationships with members of the campus community—all interpreted within the context of geography (e.g., institutional location), years attended, and major of study. This analysis allowed us to dig deeper into the specific experiences of each participant, and how their experiences, while similar, were nuanced due to the institutional context, their social identities, and academic program of study. Finally, during the third read of narratives, we focused on the socio-historical context of participants' experiences. Extending the previous analysis to map onto specific political or cultural events shaping discourse broadly were referenced in the narratives. This also included attention to comments where participants talked the way they made meaning of external messages about the "value" of an HBCU education.

Trustworthiness

In this study, we addressed three trustworthiness criteria: confirmability, credibility, and transferability. Confirmability was achieved through review of the original audio recording and editing the transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy, creation of operational definitions of each the concepts of interest, and independent analysis of narrative and comparison of coding scheme in order to establish Interrater Reliability using the operationally defined concepts. Credibility was achieved by engaging with peer debriefers knowledgeable of higher education scholarship to unpack the themes that emerged in the data. Finally, transferability was achieved by providing a rich, thick description of participants and the context of their experience in the reporting of the findings. Additionally, as there were two researchers involved in the study, we engaged in analytic triangulation, which allowed us to independently review the data, mitigate selective perception, and challenge each other's interpretation for clarity and consistency with the dataset (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Additionally, the team engaged in techniques to acknowledge our positionality and biases throughout the study. We engaged in researcher reflexivity during the data analysis process to identify and acknowledge how our experiences and personal assumptions could influence our interpretations of the data (Jones et al., 2014; Bhattacharya, 2017). As stated previously, peer debriefing sessions provided a space for us to discuss how we interpreted the data. This included reflected on our previous experiences with HBCUs (neither of the authors are HBCU alumni), our professional interactions with individuals within the HBCU setting, and our understanding of the concept of social capital within education scholarship. These discussions allowed us to center the experiences of participants rather than interpret their experiences through our own.

Findings

The findings from this study illustrate how HBCUs operate as an extension of the Black family in the ways they extend and facilitate access to social and other forms of capital. The environment of HBCUs amplifies the capital that students possess upon entry. Among participants in this study, social capital was translated into personal and professional opportunities that contributed to positive experiences on campus, positive early career

outcomes, and a commitment to serving the Black community. These findings are grouped into three themes. First, we discuss participants' family views and practices. Next, we describe the ways HBCUs amplify the capital possessed by students during and beyond their undergraduate experience. Finally, we analyze participants' reflections of the influence of HBCUs on their racial identity development.

Family views and college readiness practices

Participants experienced family practices in their home communities that established and reinforced the importance and utility of education, and college completion in particular. These practices, rooted within the context of the Black family, supported the decision to attend HBCU. Subsequently, experiences within the HBCU environment shaped educational and professional trajectories.

College and career messages

Participants talked about the messages they heard early and often about the importance of education. Each of the participants identified as Black or African American and described being raised in predominantly Black communities. There was a "college going culture" within these families, even if participants were first-generation college students or from families of modest socioeconomic standing. This study did not specifically collect information about the level of educational attainment of participants. However, several participants noted that attending college was "part of life, even automatic." Further, education was viewed as a tool to achieve career success, critical for opening up opportunities to pursue diverse career pathways. Michael (Florida A&M University, Business Administration), raised within a working-class family, shared, "I always heard that education was key to doing better for yourself. Whenever possible I think my parents did a good job of linking a person's success to better education."

Similarly, Valerie's (Hampton University, Psychology) parents linked education to success, but also verbalized their rationale for doing so as someone raised in a working-class household. Reflecting on the influence of her father, she shared, "He was really focused on my sister and I going to college and getting a decent career. He would always say, 'Go to college, and get your education so you don't have to work so hard like your dad.'" A closer analysis of Valerie's background shows the linkages of these messages to socioeconomic opportunity. She shared, "[My father] grew up in a large family in a very rural area. Out of my dad and his siblings, he had six sisters, only one of them attended college and the rest of them went into the working arena right after they graduated." Not only was an education perceived as important to securing a *job*, but the kind of education you had led to different types of *careers* and different opportunities for economic and social mobility. Michael and Valerie's experiences reflect a familial recognition of the limited career opportunities for individuals without a college degree. Messages from family members about the utility of a college education were internalized by participants and actualized through familial encouragement of academic achievement K-12 and active engagement in school and other educationally purposeful enrichment activities.

Leveraging social capital

Participants grew up in different households with different levels of information and resources available to them to actualize messages about attending and succeeding in college. Consequently, they described the varied actions of their families to connect them to people with access to this information beginning in elementary school. The primary way by which families leveraged their social capital was through school and curricular choice. Parents would advocate on their behalf to ensure they received the best K-12 education possible. Maria (Florida A&M University, Business Administration) struggled with math in elementary school. Instead of giving up, her parents pushed her to work through it and encouraged her to continue taking the most advanced math courses available. She recalled:

I remember a situation where I had these math problems, and I told my mom I can't do it. She was like, "We'll wait until your dad gets home." My dad came home, and she was like, "Tell him what you told me." I'm like, "I can't do it." He said, "You can do it. You're going to do it. Let's work through it." This was second grade. The next day he went and put me in gifted and talented math. Now, fast forward to the end of high school, I graduated with AP Calculus.

These actions promoted the notion that with hard work and the right resources, any difficulties can be overcome. This ingrained "you can do it" attitude followed Maria into college; after earning a degree in Business, she became a Project Manager for an accounting firm.

Given the importance of education as a pathway to careers, families encouraged participation in a variety of extracurricular pre-college programs. Among individuals who identified as first-generation college students, participating in school or community-based college access programs was the route through which they learned information about the college going process. Marquis (North Carolina A&T University, Applied Mathematics) described himself as a first-generation college student from a working-class community. He shared: I grew up in Newport News, Virginia. Not a lot of my family could immediately tell me things about college or how the college process worked. So, I became a member of the Upward Bound Program (at Hampton University), which helped me out a lot in terms of talking about education, getting ready for college, and things like that.

By tapping into the network available through the local HBCU, Marquis was able to gain information about college options. Experiences attending college preparatory programs housed on the campus of HBCUs also provided participants with visual images of other Black students engaged in education beyond high school. Additionally, all participants described the ways that their parents kept them actively involved in educational activities year-round as typified by comments such as, "my family kept me really busy" and "coming home with average grades was not acceptable in my house." There was a consistent pattern of familial encouragement to participate in a variety of enrichment experiences sponsored by the school or community-based organizations.

Personal networks

For those with college educated family members, the presence of these individuals within the household provided access to critical college going information. Specifically, siblings, cousins, and peers became a "living example" of the college going process or offered participants "some knowledge of the whole historic and family oriented experience of a HBCU." Damien (North Carolina A&T State University, Electrical Engineering) was raised in an upper class/affluent household. His mother mom graduated from an HBCU and his elder sister attended an HBCU. He described some of the benefits from a familial standpoint to attend a Black college where he had some sort of connection. Reflecting on his college choice process, he shared:

I had a connection at Tennessee State University because I had an older cousin who went there. Then I did my research on North Carolina A&T and realized they produced the most African American engineers with a bachelor's degree. My sister was there at the time, so I felt like it might be easier if we both went to the same school.

Several participants in the study consistently talked about having at least one person in their network that attended an HBCU that they could ask about college in general or attending a Black college specifically.

Additionally, parents intentionally cultivated a social network that could further support their children on the path to college success. Originally from the Caribbean, Jon (Oakwood University, Computer Science) and his family transitioned to the United States while he was a young child, so his parents had "no experience with the U.S. school system" when it came to prepare him for college. They were, however, well-educated in their home country which allowed for a middle-class upbringing. With this knowledge of college in general, Jon talked about the ways his family engaged their networks to support his college transition. Specifically, Jon had an uncle and a family friend who worked at Oakwood University, his chosen HBCU. During his college search, he was encouraged to connect with them and gain insights into how to navigate the process. Well before deciding to attend Oakwood and study computer science, Jon described visiting the area frequently, making him more familiar with the campus context prior to applying.

HBCU amplification

Building from the foundations established by families as illustrated above, HBCUs functionally amplified the social and other forms of capital that students held by extending their networks into the collegiate and community context. This was evidenced through descriptions of the HBCU environment, other mothering practices, and programs to support the workforce transition upon graduation.

Environment

First, participants talked about the ways that the environment of the HBCU they attended fostered implicit and explicit messages about academic and post collegiate success. Each person in the study attended an HBCU where the vast majority of the students identified as Black/African American. Although several participants attended predominantly Black high schools, they described the predominantly Black college environment as being something "different." These were spaces where folks could be "around people who looked like me, who had a similar mindset." As shared by King (Coppin State, Global Studies), "expanding my network and my friendship with People of Color, that are intellectual in a special way, that was really important."

Being around other high achieving students of color at times was a bit overwhelming, where some experienced the "imposter syndrome" while attempting to live up to the expectations of Black excellence. This was compounded by a desire to make good on the investments made in them by members of their home community (e.g., educators, extended family). Fortunately, participants described experiences where they were able to break down these feelings and work collaboratively with peers. Maria shared:

When I was in biology, I enjoyed being able to study and work with other people in a way that was a little bit different than I was used to. I was used to people keeping their stuff to themselves. When we were studying together, it was more a sense of encouragement and of a mutual understanding. We were able to go to our dorm rooms and talk with each other and ask about certain things, and even go to the professors to have conversation and ask certain questions during their office hours. The ease of doing that helped me to do very well and the others did well also.

As students moved through their undergraduate careers, they began to view HBCUs not as a place of competition and rivalry for being the top student, but as a space that promotes community and cultivates intellectual curiosity, academic knowledge, and leadership skills.

The HBCU environment facilitated access to formal and informal peer networks, instrumental in cultivating career interests and forging peer groups that continued well beyond college. Participants talked about opportunities to join historically Black fraternities and sororities and other culturally affirming professional organizations. Hakeem (Wilberforce University, Business Management) had the opportunity to travel extensively as a member of the Wilberforce University Choir and continues to attend as many concerts as possible as an alumnus. The once shy Danielle (Albany State University, Art) talked about how interacting with older students and getting involved in community service projects allowed her to develop into a bolder individual. Social interactions were shaped by the personality of individual students. There was an appreciation for the variety of opportunities to engage socially with others on and off campus that cut across a variety of interests such as political activism, student government, mentoring youth, fashion, vocal jazz ensemble, and Greek Life.

Other mothering

Participants offered several examples of experiences with other mothering, or the familial supportive relationships with members of the campus community. These types of relationships varied for participants. For example, one participant described his English 100 professor as "very maternal." He highlighted her investment in his success, recalling that she threatened to "call [his] mom if [he] wasn't paying attention." Others described similar experiences with faculty who took an authoritarian, parental approach to working with students where it was clear that, "the teachers didn't cut you

any slack." Omari (Dillard University, Business Administration) shared:

They just really had a hard-core approach for all of the students in their particular program. They were our parents on campus. When they saw you doing, or felt you weren't doing your best– or if you came to class in sweats and not looking presentable, they would get you together, real quick! They always wanted people to be presenting themselves and doing the best that they could at all times. . .. . .And in addition to that, if you were struggling with a particular class, they were very good about getting you resources, or kind of giving you that extra push, motivation, or support that you needed to get through the class the best that you could. I'll never forget that.

This familial nature of relationships with faculty mirrored the important relationships students had within their home communities. For Valerie, the way a faculty member interacted with her mother was reminiscent of elementary school days where there was a greater communication between teachers and parents. She shared:

On Parents' Weekend, my freshman year, I was walking with my mom and my sister, and this professor was driving by in her car. She [stopped], got out, and introduced herself to my mom. It reminded me of being back home. . .and it made me feel like, "Okay, this will show my mom that I am doing the right things."

Given the sense of community and family cultivated on campus, participants were as concerned about living up to the high expectations of their parents as they were about living up to the high expectations of HBCU faculty and staff.

Career transitions

One of the direct ways that HBCUs amplified social capital was through supporting students' transition from their undergraduate education to career opportunities. Students had access to campus career centers with "file cabinets of resources" and HBCUs cultivated long-standing partnerships with companies and graduate programs. Program alumni were invited back to campus annually to recruit and provide advice to students as they worked on interview skills and graduate school application materials. Those in business programs specifically talked about the various "Fortune 500" level companies that were on campus recruiting on a near weekly basis. On some campuses, students were required to dress in "business attire" at least once per week in anticipation of meeting with a future employer. Additionally, students across different programs were encouraged to engage in internships or research opportunities during the summer break. Valerie credited the ease of her transition to a graduate program to experiences engaged in undergraduate research at her HBCU:

I will give credit to the fact that I was in that research program for undergrad. I feel like that was really helpful in helping me build connections with people because my research supervisor in undergrad actually did research with one of my grad school professors. So, I had a better working relationship with her because she knew my background somewhat, and we had the commonality. I think that made my experience a little bit better.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were also spaces where participants learned the non-academic, soft-skills side of transitioning to careers. Omari shared, "I learned that it's not always about grades, but it's about who you know as well. I really learned about networking at A&T and rubbing shoulders, kissing babies, so to speak." Collectively, these experiences also served as preparation for the racial realities of navigating careers, especially for those planning to work for predominantly white companies. Reflecting on his early career experiences post-graduation, Hakeem shared, Working at a corporate office, I worked for some of the nastiest and evil, mean-spirited people possible. But I was able to handle it with grace, handle it with style. That is something [my professors] taught me they taught me how to handle all conflict with grace.

Several participants talked about maintaining relationships with HBCU faculty and staff members after graduation through emails, phone calls, or occasional visits. These professors and administrators wrote letters of recommendations, made calls to facilitate access to interviews, and some bared witness to their weddings or their graduation from professional schools. As HBCU alumni, participants talked about the importance of reciprocating the generosity of the HBCU community by serving as employment recruiters, guest speakers on campus, mentoring students, participating in undergraduate recruitment efforts, and donating to the alumni fund.

Race regard and racial salience

Finally, we explored participants' experiences at the intersection of race and class. The extent to which attending an HBCU for postsecondary education was salient was connected to the salience of their racial identity. This connection was manifested through the racial socialization process. As mentioned previously, participants described how their family members conveyed the value-added notion of attending a college whose mission was to educate individuals of African descent. Messages about the importance of attending college as a means for social mobility was also embedded in the ways parents talked about college going with their children, reflecting acknowledgement of the intersection of race and class. Attending an HBCU became a way of explicitly connecting racial pride with educational and professional excellence, regardless of initial socioeconomic standing. This, in part, was attributed to opportunities to work with and be educated by Black faculty and staff. This sentiment was exemplified in statements like, "no one can educate you better than your own people." This ideology shaped participants' college choice decisions.

Further, the importance of education for Black people, by Black people was central in participants' discussion of the types of support they received as children and young adults navigating the educational pipeline. Contrary to dominant narratives that suggest that Black families do not have the capacity to assist their children in navigating the college application process, mothers and fathers, aunts and other relatives were credited with offering guidance, support, and encouragement in several ways. For example, Michael and Maria's parents maintained high academic expectations, checked their homework, and hired tutors so they would have the academic foundation necessary to thrive in college. Marquis and King's parents, with limited educational experiences themselves, encouraged their children's in college access programs predominantly staffed by Black educators. Valerie specifically recalled the way her father stressed education as a way to promote the social mobility and economic stability among Black families.

Blackness as a collective identity

Within the context of racial regard and racial salience, the subtheme that emerged was the collective racial identity. Two ideas were illustrative of this concept. First, there was the notion of developing a social and professional network of Black professionals that extended beyond the undergraduate experience. Ordinarily rather shy, Danielle's roommate became her connection to social and academic information that changed the trajectory of her college experience. She was able to take part in a co-curricular opportunity that afforded her a significant stipend to spend several weeks per year working at a military-based camp counselor for children. Not only did participating in the program ease her transition into college but she became, "more comfortable participating in more leadership positions." Danielle credits these experiences as important in her decision to become an educator. Additionally, Jon connected with and remained in contact with the head of the chemistry department at his HBCU well after he earned his degree and transitioned to medical school.

Second, attending an HBCU afforded participants with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of themselves within the context of the larger Black community. King, for example, grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland. Consequently, he did not anticipate learning anything "new" about Black culture while attending Coppin State University. He described, however, the heterogeneity of the student population at his institution as, "the most diverse group of Black people I personally have ever been around. it was a lot more diverse than I expected." Interactions with people from the across the African Diaspora fueled desires, as Maria stated, "to learn more [about her culture] and be stronger from a cultural perspective." From the outside world, Black colleges are often viewed monolithically. The individualized experiences of participants in this study showcased the ways that even within a seemingly homogenous community, there are opportunities to develop an appreciation for the uniqueness and complexity of Black culture.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how HBCUs cultivate and extend social and other forms of capital among students, and to explore the linkages between social capital and "success" among Black undergraduate students. This was done by analyzing the experiences of HBCU alumni with an emphasis on examining how the practices at HBCUs amplify social capital while affirming racial identity and community ties.

Environmental social capital

This study highlighted the ways social capital was interconnected with the racial socialization process experienced throughout participants' lifetime. Both Black families and institutional agents at HBCUs transmitted social capital through an affirmation of racial identity. Participants were encouraged to cultivate Black excellence by engaging in educationally purposeful activities both before and during college. At the K-12 level, these activities included completed academically rigorous curriculum, joining enrichment programs after school, and seeking guidance about the college choice process from HBCU graduates. Upon college matriculation, these practices were extended in the HBCU environment; HBCU institutional agents encouraged participants to cultivate positive relationships members of the campus community through classroom engagement, social events/activities, and internships. Each of these environments, home and collegial, promoted messages that affirmed racial identity and academic excellence.

Racial affirmation

When it came to attending college, HBCUs were characterized as spaces where Black students could pursue their academic and career interests while affirming their identity. Thus, building upon HBCU college choice literature, the college choice process of participants in this study was shaped by racial socialization or specifically, how participants viewed themselves as Black people. Community knowledge of the history and mission of HBCUs as institutions of postsecondary education established for Black people influenced the college choice process and led to participants enrolling in the HBCU of their choice.

Families as partners

Acknowledging the ways race and wealth shaped access to quality K-12 schools and high-quality teachers, the parents in this study actively advocated for opportunities for their children to have the best educational experiences possible. Additionally, familial influences were critical in developing students' college choice set. HBCUs should continue to engage parents and communities to provide accurate and update-to-date information about the academic programs and opportunities for students on their campus. Upon college matriculation, institutional agents at HBCUs promoted Black excellence, held students to high expectations, and engaged in "other mothering" approaches to communicate their expectations with students. As the familial network on campus mirrored the one from home, families were not viewed as oppositional to the college going and college success process for these participants.

Pedagogical practices

These findings have implications for P-20 staffing practices. Scholars have noted the positive impact of hiring and retaining P-20 educational professionals who actively invest in the potential of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Madkins, 2011; Williams and Johnson, 2019; Liou and Rojas, 2020; Williams K. L. et al., 2021). Teachers and educational leaders must continue to engage in culturally relevant pedagogical practices when working with students of color generally, and Black students in particular. These institutional agents may also help deflect the negative messages in society about the utility of pursuing educational options among Black youth (Johnson and McGowan, 2017).

Participants saw the Black *collegiate* environment as a space where they could cultivate social connections with others who also were academically minded and aspired to become leaders across a variety of fields. Additionally, we found that faculty and staff members perform their work duties with a particular emphasis on building community. Students reap the benefits of this orientation and leave college not only with a degree, but with long-lasting connections with peers and for many, a renewed community to working in ways to support the Black community at large. This allowed students to bridge the academic and social worlds in ways that were congruent and not in conflict with their cultural and racial identities. Future research should investigate the pedagogical strategies of HBCU faculty for insights on how to replicate these environments across institutional contexts.

Postsecondary success

Encouraging students to seek out opportunities and cultivating personalized relationships throughout their undergraduate career was how HBCUs helped to expand the horizon of career possibilities for their graduates. This was how social capital translated to "success." While analyzing the transmission of social capital, a caveat of this study was that although available, social capital was not simply given away. Rather, students had to be both active and proactive, engaging in opportunities afforded to them, while seeking out additional opportunities beyond those that they were personally aware of. This strategy for cultivating social capital was not simply a ploy for "resume building" but rather was viewed as the way for Black Americans to advance and thrive in a racially charged social environment. The cultural narrative that Black people need to be "twice as. . ." smart, skilled, accomplished, etc., to have the same professional opportunities as white people was transmitted through practices at home and within the collegiate environment. Additionally, attention should be placed upon the psychological impact of navigating these expectations among students, which, for some, could lead to under-performance academically or premature departure from college. Students should have access to culturally diverse mental health professionals equipped to support HBCU students.

HBCU counternarratives

Considering the profile of who attends HBCUs, the findings of this study offer a counternarrative to support scholarship that concluded students who attended predominantly Black schools K-12 are likely to consider attending an HBCU (i.e., Freeman, 1999) and that HBCUs are high-quality educational options (i.e., Williams et al., 2019). In deciding on a college to attend, participants in this study were concerned with the history and mission of HBCUs, describing them as spaces that were created "for" Black people, not just simply occupied by Black bodies. Here, there was an indirect acknowledgment of public education and the raced- and classed- policies that continue to shape patterns of segregation and resource allocation that disproportionally impacts racial minorities and families from poorly resourced communities.

Limitations and implications for practice and future research

Given the limitations of the scope of the qualitative research design, this study raised critical implications for practice and future research. First, this analysis did not explicitly explore the linkages between social capital and financial capital. Contemporary college-going trends suggest that limited access to financial resources continues to be a barrier for students in college. Access to affordable college options for students across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds become an issue of equity. The project did not explicitly explore/capture whether participants were awarded "scholarships" to attend college. Thus, we recognize that we need to know more about the financial resource gap that influences college trajectories—this is an area for future research.

While some HBCUs work to maintain lower tuition and fees than similarly sized TWIs, these institutions could perhaps capitalize on established and new community partnerships with corporate entities and external donors to mitigate unmet student financial need. Opportunities for student scholarships, grants, and work-study, for example, can help offset the cost of attending college. Local economic opportunities may be expanded through increased communication and strategic planning between K-12 educators, postsecondary scholars, and policymakers to build and incentivize practices that encourage urban students to return to work within their home communities upon graduation.

Additionally, research asserts that the ability of students to gain an "HBCU advantage" is influenced by their family context, family size, parental education level, and other indicators of socioeconomic status. The notion of class status may too narrowly focus on these markers without fully acknowledging how structural barriers to employment opportunities, undervaluing of property in predominantly Black neighborhoods, biased lending policies, and gendered pay inequities complicate the "middle class status" with the Black community. There is limited exploration of the influence of social class status of Black college students across diverse institutions of higher education (see Torres, 2009). These are areas of future research within the context of HBCUs.

From an institutional perspective, intentional and strategic collaboration between academic and student affairs units can promote a more holistic approach of ensuring that all students are able to maximize the opportunities afforded in college and beyond. It is important to acknowledge, however, the strain this may put of professional in higher education. For example, HBCU faculty at comprehensive or teaching-focused institutions are facing increasing pressures to become more like Research-1 Institutions, as such, faculty may have less time to dedicate to cultivating the types of relationships that lead to the social capital in this study (Williams and Johnson, 2019). This may be further complicated by faculty status, as there may be different pressures placed upon faculty based on their institutional context or their professional rank. Simultaneously, campus staff and administrators often the first to address and handle the issues and concerns of students who continue to face challenges related to the racial and political unrest gripping the nation. This study raises practical implications for policies that reinforce supports for over-taxed faculty and staff at HBCUs to promote their overall wellness. Research that explores the working conditions of faculty and student affairs professionals,

both qualitative and quantitative in nature, would provide better insights into how these professionals navigate these demands and the support structures that are needed to assist them in these efforts.

Conclusion

Within the contemporary sociopolitical climate, where educational options for Black families continue to be constrained by race and wealth, it becomes critically important for diverse stakeholders to understand how the HBCU experience translates to positive graduate school experiences, employment opportunities, and economic security. For generations, public investment in HBCUs has led to a continued investment in Black communities across the U.S. and abroad. Through intentional practices that promote access to and the amplification of social capital, HBCUs seek to produce graduates who serve as leaders across a variety of fields and areas of specialization who can positively impact society.

As HBCUs tend to admit students into their institutions with differing levels of academic readiness and financial resources, traditional notions of "success" through time-to-degree or graduation-rates may not fully capture the "advantage" associated with attending an HBCU. Situating an HBCU education within the conceptual landscape of social capital, we offer a nuanced analysis of the ways in which an HBCU education provides its students the opportunity to curate social capital in an environment that affirms racial identity.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because access to qualitative data is beyond the scope of study as approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to JJ, jmjohnson@temple.edu.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

JJ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. EJ: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing

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Conflict of interest

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

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