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Reflecting on My Experience with HBCUs through the Lens of Catholic School

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After studying abroad twice as an undergraduate student, I was convinced that one way or another I would find a way to experience another culture whilst in graduate school. So when presented with the opportunity to study abroad in El Salvador and Guatemala, it's safe to say, I was intrigued. As a former Spanish minor, already familiar with Latin American culture, it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Yet, at some point, I realized that because of this, the experience would not be as challenging, and I decided to find something with greater potential for learning. In the end, I chose to participate in a study away opportunity that traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, to learn about the culture of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Reflecting on this experience now, roughly a month after our return, it is clear that I made the right call. Yet, in order to make sense of what I have learned, I have found it necessary to draw from what I already know. And thus, as I reflect on my experience with HBCUs, I also find myself reflecting on my experience with Catholic school. Granted, this isn't something everyone can relate to, but given the brevity of our trip, I found it to be of value.

That being said, the first thing I noticed at the HBCUs we visited was the sense of community amongst faculty, students, and administrators that resulted in a family-like atmosphere. Yet, with this familiarity came high expectations and an appreciation for both respect and responsibility. The same was true of Catholic school. You may have known everyone around you, but that just meant you had more people to hold you accountable, and you were challenged just as much as you were supported.

A second connection is that HBCUs also tend to be severely under-resourced despite having relatively high rates of tuition due to limited sources of external funding. But as with Catholic schools, this does not inherently devalue one's education or limit the opportunities available. It just means you work with what you have, even if that means being creative. It also means that faculty and staff are often invested in their work beyond their paycheck.

A third parallel was the bond that students seem to have not only with alumni of their own institution, but with other HBCUs as well. As a graduate of Central Michigan University, I am always excited to meet fellow Chippewas, but nothing compares to meeting those who are also from Catholic school – nothing else triggers such an immediate connection, as we are bonded by countless experiences considered atypical of traditional education.

Beyond that, there is also the assumption that only Black students attend HBCUs. Similarly, there was the assumption that only Catholics attend Catholic school. Yet, just as individuals who identify with other races attend HBCUs, there was a small, but present, population of students who were not Catholic at our school. However, just as I would have never thought to attend an HBCU prior to this experience, most people do not think about sending their children to Catholic school if they are not Catholic.

Finally, there is the fact that I often find myself either further perpetuating stereotypes or else adamantly defending my education, and I imagine that individuals who attend HBCUs experience this as well. More specifically, while I often recount my experiences through humorous antidotes, I must also explain that there was more to my education than nuns, uniforms, and religion. In this same regard, more than Black history is taught at HBCUs. Their curriculum is comparable to other institutions, their admissions process is just as competitive, and their degrees are just as valuable when it comes to employment.

In the end, what I learned is that these institutions aren't all that different. Although we may classify them as historically black or predominantly white, public or private, secular or religious, they are all necessary to our educational system. Therefore, we must recognize HBCUs first and foremost as institutions of higher education. Yet, as student affairs professionals, we must also learn to understand them and the students they serve, so that we are more adequately prepared to advocate for their continued support.

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