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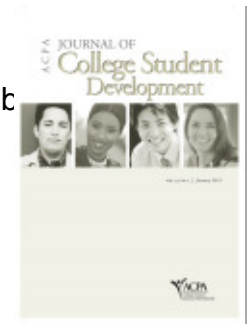
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# The Nature of Student Affairs Work at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Joan B. Hirt Terrell L. Strayhorn Catherine T. Amelink Belinda R. Bennett

*This qualitative study examined the nature of work for 70 administrators (67% female, 33% male) who provide services to students at historically Black colleges and universities. Data were collected by administering the National Professional Life Survey (NPLS) that asked respondents about their work, relationships with others on campus, and the rewards they valued in their work. Survey data were supplemented through in-depth one-on-one and group interviews. The nature of work was defined by three dimensions: pace of work, how work gets done, and work environment. Key findings reveal that work for these professionals is challenging, highly stressful, and that enacting change on campus takes time. Perhaps most interesting, there is a fairly entrenched sense of racial uplift among HBCU administrators. The opportunity to encourage success among Black students was considered both a privilege and a reward.*

The richness of the system of higher education in America is reflected in its diversity. Campuses differ in a number of ways, but the heterogeneity of institutional types is particularly noteworthy. As of 2000, the Carnegie Foundation identified nearly 4,000 accredited, degree-granting two-year and four-year colleges and universities in the nation (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000). Of these, 260 are described as research universities, 611 as comprehensive universities,

606 as liberal arts colleges, 312 as religiously affiliated and nearly 2,000 as community colleges. The remainder consists of tribal colleges and specialized institutions such as medical schools and technical or business institutes (Hirt, 2006; Lucas, 1994).

Not included in the Carnegie schema are institutions that fill other niches in the postsecondary system, like campuses that serve minority students other than Native Americans (e.g., Hispanic-serving institutions [HSIs]). It is difficult to count the number of minority serving institutions as they are captured under several Carnegie categories. Minority serving institutions are colleges and universities that serve a relatively large number of minority students as compared to other mainstream institutions. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are one type of minority-serving institution (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

Historically Black colleges, however, are unique in several ways. They can be distinguished from HSIs, for example, in that they were founded specifically to educate African Americans. HSIs, on the other hand, gain such designations simply because they enroll a certain percentage of Hispanic students.

HBCUs were established in the post-Civil War era as a way to support education for Blacks (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Anderson, 1988; Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002). A series of

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federal efforts supported the development of these institutions. Many were funded through the Morrill Act of 1890 (Brown & Davis, 2001) that authorized land to be designated for colleges and universities. Some states established separate institutions for Blacks and Whites. These public HBCUs are often cited as the “1890 schools.” The establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau represented another major government effort to provide education to Blacks (Brown & Davis; Wallenstein, 2000). The GI Bill and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were two other federal initiatives that influenced the number of African American students attending college (Wilson, 1994).

As a result of federal legislation and funding, the number of historically Black colleges and universities mushroomed over the 20th century. There were nearly 130 historically Black colleges by 1960. Although not all of those have survived, in 2006 there are at least 103 HBCUs in America, representing approximately 3% of all institutions (Anderson, 1988; Evans et al., 2002).

Although HBCUs represent a small proportion of all institutions in the United States, they educate over 14% of Black undergraduate students and confer 28% of all bachelors’ degrees earned by African Americans. They offer degrees in subjects ranging from engineering and physics to theology or religion and education to name a few. Most HBCUs are located in the southeast region of the United States and over 50% of them are private institutions (Brown & Davis, 2001; Evans et al., 2002).

The research on HBCUs has been conceptualized in several ways (see, for example, Gasman, 2005, 2006). For purposes of this study, three categories were relevant: (a) expository essays on the development of HBCUs during the post-Emancipation era (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Anderson, 1988; Brown & Davis, 2001; Browning & Williams, 1978;

Evans et al., 2002), (b) empirical studies involving students who attend HBCUs (Berger & Milem, 2000; Freeman & Thomas, 2002), and (c) studies on Black faculty and those who teach at HBCUs (Billingsley, 1982; Menges & Exum, 1983; Nettles & Perna, 1995; Padilla, 1994). A review of the literature reveals that most extant sources are of the first order. For example, a number of scholars address the era in which HBCUs were established (Brown & Davis; Browning & Williams; Evans et al.) and their historic significance as the only institutions that educated Blacks in America (Allen & Jewell; Brown, 1999; Browning & Williams).

The expository pieces on the purpose and development of HBCUs divulge that the mission of HBCUs has changed over time. Initially, HBCUs provided elementary education (Anderson, 1988). Over time, there were needs for higher levels of schooling. HBCUs evolved to meet those needs eventually offering college-level curricula. As such, they promoted and trained leaders for the Black community (Barthelemy, 1984; Brown & Davis, 2001; Browning & Williams, 1978). Currently, their mission is to provide high quality educational opportunities to a diverse pool of students (Evans et al., 2002; Garibaldi, 1984). Yet, most HBCUs maintain a commitment to their historic roots of educating Black students (Allen & Jewell, 2002).

The second body of work focuses on the students who attend historically Black colleges. These studies cover a broad array of topics ranging from persistence (Cross & Astin, 1981) to graduation (Wilson, 1994) and college choice of African American students (Freeman, 2005). Some examine background characteristics of such students. For example, HBCU students are more likely to have been raised in Black neighborhoods and to have attended Black high schools (Freeman & Thomas, 2002).

Recent studies compare HBCU students

to their counterparts at predominately White institutions (Kim, 2002; Watson & Kuh, 1996). For instance, Black students who attend HBCUs develop significantly higher levels of self-concept than those who attend PWIs (Berger & Milem, 2000). Though a number of studies suggest that differences exist between Black students at HBCUs and those at PWIs (Berger & Milem, 2000), other investigations have found no statistically significant differences between the two groups (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995).

Yet another line of inquiry relative to HBCUs focuses on their faculty members. These studies tend to highlight the experiences of HBCU faculty or to examine the issues related to Black faculty rewards such as salary structures (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Billingsley, 1982). Other works address specific challenges faced by HBCUs to recruit and retain strong faculty members (Billingsley; Nettles & Perna, 1995).

Still other studies report on the worklife of minority faculty members. Faculty of color are less likely to be tenured, spend more time on teaching and administrative duties than research, and tend to have lower academic rank than their White counterparts (Astin, Antonio, Cress, & Astin, 1997; Nettles & Perna, 1995). Findings also suggest that faculty of color fulfill additional roles as advisors and mentors (Menges & Exum, 1983; Padilla, 1994).

Although researchers have studied students and faculty members, they have yet to focus on student affairs administrators at historically Black colleges and universities. Indeed, few researchers have explored the nature of worklife for administrators in any campus setting. An extensive review of the literature revealed only one investigation on administrative worklife, and that study was an exploration of work at liberal arts colleges (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneider, 2004). Clearly there is a need for

data on professional life for administrators at other types of campuses. HBCUs, with their entrenched commitment to educating Black students, offer a unique setting in which to examine administrative work: many professionals on these campuses serve students directly or manage the delivery of services to students.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of work for administrators who serve students at historically Black colleges and universities. We employed one element of Hirt's (2006) conceptual framework to describe professional life. The Hirt model explores professional life through three components: the nature of work, the nature of relationships, and the nature of rewards. Our study focused solely on the nature of work for administrators at HBCUs.

The nature of work refers to the shape, breadth, and scope of the tasks, duties, and responsibilities of administrators who work with students. Three constructs are associated with this perspective: pace of work, how work gets done, and the work environment. Pace of work is measured by the degree to which change occurs, the level of stress involved, and the degree of balance between one's personal and professional life. How work gets done refers to the processes and/or procedures for accomplishing work. Working on a team, using creativity, and taking risks are a few of the factors associated with how work gets done. Finally, the work environment refers to the setting in which work is conducted and whether it tends to be collaborative, friendly, hostile, or positive, for example (Hirt, 2006).

## METHOD

A mixed method approach was employed to collect data. Respondents completed a pencil-and-paper survey and participated in one-on-

TABLE 1.  
Demographic Characteristics of Participants ( $N = 70$ )

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Institution</i>			<i>Years at Institution</i>		
4-year public	46	66.0	0 to 2	22	32.0
4-year private	24	34.0	3 to 5	15	22.0
<i>Undergrad Enrollment</i>			6 to 9	11	16.0
999 or less	1	1.5	10 or more	21	30.0
1,000 to 4,999	43	62.3	<i>Years in Student Services</i>		
5,000 to 9,999	21	30.4	0 to 2	14	20.0
10,000 to 14,999	3	4.3	3 to 5	17	24.3
15,000 or more	1	1.5	6 to 9	10	14.3
<i>Primary Activity</i>			10 or more	29	41.4
Academic Advising	3	4.3	<i>Gender</i>		
Admissions	3	4.3	Female	47	67.0
Career Planning	7	10.0	Male	23	33.0
Counseling	2	2.9	<i>Age</i>		
Sports	1	1.4	20 to 30	18	26.0
Judicial Affairs	2	2.9	31 to 40	14	20.0
Orientation	3	4.3	41 to 50	15	22.0
Residence Life	17	24.2	51 to 60	19	28.0
Student Activities	4	5.7	61 to 70	3	4.0
Student Affairs Adm.	19	27.1	<i>Attended/Graduated from an HBCU</i>		
Student Union	1	1.4	Yes	44	63.0
Other	8	11.5	No	26	37.0
<i>Level of Responsibility</i>			<i>Attended/Graduated from the HBCU at Which You Now Work</i>		
Entry	20	28.6	Yes	31	44.0
Mid	22	31.4	No	39	56.0
Cabinet	28	40.0	<i>Highest Degree Earned</i>		
<i>Highest Degree Earned</i>			High School/GED	5	7.1
High School/GED	5	7.1	Bachelor's	18	25.7
Bachelor's	18	25.7	Master's	32	45.7
Master's	32	45.7	Doctorate/Professional	15	21.5
Doctorate/Professional	15	21.5			

Note. Adm. = Administration; GED = Graduate Equivalency Degree; HBCU = Historically Black College or University.

one or group interviews in which they expanded on their survey responses.

## PARTICIPANTS

Data were gathered from a total of 70 HBCU professionals who worked at over 25 HBCUs in the United States. Eighty-nine percent (89%) were African-American, 6% identified

as multi-racial, 2% as White, and the majority (67%) were females. They represented a mix of professionals across several functional areas including admissions, advising, career services, residence life, student activities, and counseling. Participants in our sample also had an array of educational backgrounds and ranged in age from 20 to 70 years. Sixty-three percent

of respondents graduated from HBCUs and almost half (44%) graduated from the HBCU at which they were employed at the time of the study. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of participants.

## INSTRUMENT

The National Professional Life Survey consists of 69 items designed to elicit information about the nature of professional worklife as measured by the conceptual framework (i.e., work, relationships, and rewards) (Hirt, 2006). Twenty-one of these items measure the nature of work. The nature of work exercise consists of pairs of words that describe various work environments. For example, word pairs include *high stress/low stress*, *team oriented/individual oriented*, and *theoretical/practical*. Respondents are asked to rate the degree to which a particular word describes their work environment using a scale of 1 (*favors word A*) to 6 (*favors word B*). The instrument was used in previous research (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneider, 2004).

## PROCEDURE

We used two procedures to collect data. First, we attended a national conference of administrators who worked with students at HBCUs. While there, we conducted a focus group with 30 HBCU student affairs professionals. During the focus group, participants completed the National Professional Life Survey (NPLS) developed for this study and talked about their responses in the group setting.

In addition, some conferees completed the survey but did not participate in the focus group. In these cases, members of our research team conducted one-on-one interviews with the respondents.

To add to the data collected at the national conference, we contacted professionals at 25 other HBCUs. We asked them to complete the written exercise and, if they were willing,

to participate in either a focus group or a one-on-one interview with a member of the research team. In some instances, members of the research team made site visits to campuses. In other cases, interviews were conducted by phone. All of these are widely accepted methods for conducting qualitative interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Manning, 1992). In all instances, focus groups and interviews followed the same protocol and were audiotaped and transcribed.

From the survey, we obtained ratings that indicated the degree to which a particular word represented a respondent's work. Respondents rated each pair of words along a 6-point continuum. First, we assigned all participants to one end of the continuum or the other. Those whose responses fell in the 1 to 3 range were assigned to a group that favored the first of the paired words. Those whose responses fell into the 4 to 6 range were assigned to a group that favored the second of the paired words. Then, we calculated percentages of those who favored the first versus the second of the paired words.

The paired words were grouped into themes: the work environment, how work gets done, and the pace of work. For each theme, the words in each pair on which there was the greatest consensus were used to delineate the theme. Comments from respondents were used to unpack the meaning and context of the theme.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). That is, the researchers analyzed the data after each interview to consider more appropriate questions for the next interview or focus group. Then, data were reduced to individual units or "chunks of meaning" (Carnaghi, 1992, p.119). Once all data were analyzed, the researchers coded units by categorizing the data around the central themes of work environment, how work gets

TABLE 2.  
Responses to Nature of Work Exercise (N = 70)

Word 1	Favored Word 1		Favored Word 2		Word 2
	n	%	n	%	
<i>Pace of Work</i>					
Positively Challenging	56	80	14	20	Negatively Challenging
High Stress	52	74	18	26	Low Stress
Slow to Change	45	64	25	36	Quick to Change
Work/Life Imbalance	38	54	32	46	Work/Life Balance
Reactive	36	51	34	49	Proactive
<i>How Work Gets Done</i>					
Multitasked	65	93	5	7	Single Tasked
Hard To Say No To More Work	55	79	15	21	Easy To Say No To More Work
Team Oriented	53	76	17	24	Individual Oriented
Collaborative	51	73	19	27	Competitive
Security Is Valued	42	60	28	40	Risk Taking Is Valued
Values Conformity	36	51	34	49	Values Creativity
<i>Work Environment</i>					
Practical	58	83	12	17	Theoretical
Highly Professional	50	71	20	29	Minimally Professional
Student Centered	49	70	21	30	Administrative Centered
Service Oriented	49	70	21	30	Business Oriented
Highly Bureaucratic	46	66	24	34	Minimally Bureaucratic
Highly Political	43	61	27	39	Minimally Political
Centralized	43	61	27	39	Decentralized
Work Not Understood by Faculty	41	56	29	44	Work Understood by Faculty
Little or No Recognition	39	56	31	44	Lots of Recognition
Too Little Management	32	46	38	54	Too Much Management

done, and the pace of work. The results provide a rich, thick picture of the nature of work for administrators who serve students at historically Black colleges and universities.

## RESULTS

The word pairs were categorized into three distinct themes—pace of work, how work gets done, and work environment. In terms of pace of work, 80% reported that their work is

positively challenging, and highly stressful (74%), but that their institution is slow to adopt change (64%). Under how work gets done, 93% described their work as multi-tasked, reported that it is hard to say “no” to more work (79%), and noted that their work is team oriented (76%) and collaborative (73%). Their work environment is best described as practical (83%), highly professional (71%), student centered (70%) and

service oriented (70%). Table 2 summarizes responses to the nature of work exercise.

## **Pace of Work**

The pace of work refers to the relative speed at which work is conducted and change is enacted in one's job, the level of stress involved in one's work, and balance between one's personal and professional life. The pace of work at HBCUs can be generally described as positively challenging and highly stressful, but change is difficult to institute.

Most respondents (80%) described their work as positively challenging. It requires one to "stretch and grow" within reasonable limits:

I would say "positively challenging" . . . because there are a lot of things that have happened. We're actually going through some transitions as far as staffing within our department and so it kind of creates a situation where some of us take on different tasks that we may not have worked with—you know, different areas that we are working on to move the department forward. And so in some ways it's challenging because you're overwhelmed with a lot of different tasks and a lot of things that are going on. And then sometimes it's always "positively challenging" because we're a growing university and we have a lot of projects going on relating to the growth. I would say it's "positively challenging" because we're moving towards becoming more proactive.

These challenges led respondents (74%) to rate their work as highly stressful. They reported that they tend to work long hours, juggle multiple tasks at once, and have few support staff members. For example, respondents noted that their work is "very stressful, especially having to be on call 24 hours a day" and "getting telephone calls at 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning, not knowing what the issue is" imposes a "high degree of stress."

Note that the source of stress stems from limited resources in terms of staff or funding. The lack of resources is an overarching theme in our findings as these comments suggest:

[My work] is so TIME-CONSUMING . . . I work from 7:30 to 10:00 every single day of the week and often have to come in on weekends. . . . I don't have a lot of layers of staff. I do it all. And so that's where my stress comes in—the inability sometimes to balance work and play.

I think we are slow to get monies from the state. I think we are paid less than other people in our positions. And they always base things on the number of students you have, the number of programs you have, the number of sports events you have—and that's why you have less. But we are doing the same thing. So that's not good. So it's based on . . . I'm thinking of HBCU schools. So it's always less. We do the same thing within the same environments, but on a lower scale.

Oh, the lack of resources. Not getting our fair share of the pie has always been [a problem for HBCUs]. . . . Between now and 2025 there's some HBCUs out of the 103—some of them are going to fail. . . . They're just . . . well, you see [name of one HBCU that just failed]. Some others are in trouble. [Name of another HBCU] down in [name of state] is already closed. And [name of first HBCU] is on the way [out]. They're not going to make it.

Adding to the stress inherent in their jobs is the amount of time it takes to introduce change into the work environment. Sixty-four percent of respondents described the campus as slow to change. For example:

[My work] is slow to change. We're like a really big family and we tend to be a little traditional. So things that other universities are doing, we're slow to make those changes. One of the biggest things in residence life is co-ed visitation . . . you



go to most schools and their freshmen are [living with each other]. But, we have a big thick book of guidelines of when they can come, when they leave, how they enter in, and who they visit.

Other respondents said, “It takes forever to get anything done,” and further explained how their work is slow to change:

I move pretty fast and things change slow[ly]. People are comfortable with the status quo, what it’s always been. [Some coworkers say,] “I’ve worked here for 8 years and this is the way it’s ALWAYS been, so I don’t know why it needs to be any different.”

I think [the work environment is] very much based in traditionalism, and because it’s based on traditionalism, it becomes very hard to begin talking about new initiatives [or change].

In general, then, the work at HBCUs is rather paradoxical. Respondents report that their work is fast paced on a daily basis, yet change occurs only very slowly. Indeed, one respondent noted little or no change in the 24 years he had worked at his institution.

## How Work Gets Done

The way in which work gets done refers to the processes and/or procedures for conducting work at HBCUs. Specifically, we explored the degree to which work was accomplished by teams of staff members versus individuals. We also asked about the breadth of responsibilities assigned to administrators at HBCUs and whether they always assumed the extra duties others asked them to adopt.

A large majority (93%) of the respondents multitask on a daily basis. For example:

I’m on so many committee assignments. A number of us serve . . . I mean you’re doing your work and you have this assignment in addition to that assignment. And some people serve on Council, so

there’s a lot of multitasking going on.

I would have to say “multitask focus” because I supervise directors in three different areas. . . . So multitask focus, bouncing around back and forth to all those different areas, making sure that my department is up to snuff, but at the same time make sure that everyone ELSE is on track for meeting their timelines, deadlines, goals, so forth and so on.

I would say “multitask focus” and that’s because there are so many different areas. There are so many different things that we work with in residential life. I mean you’ve got the assignments part, so that’s more administrative. And you’ve got the side where you’re dealing with judicial issues and meeting with students. And you’re also working with parents. And you’ve got the programmatic side. And then you [have] all types of other little tasks—staff selection is going on and at the same time we’ve got to get prepared for summer school. So there’s so many different things that you’ve got to kind of juggle all these different tasks all at one time.

Multitasking is not unusual for student affairs professionals. What makes professional life unique for those at HBCUs is that multitasking is driven by limited resources and a duty to serve students.

It is this same sense of duty that led 79% of all respondents to report that it is hard to say “no” to more work as a professional at a HBCU:

Sometimes we don’t have a choice. . . . It’s like administration and academics are always calling on me. And you want to say no, but it sort of interacts with all of the areas on campus. But it’s just hard to say no when Administration says—they try to put it in an asking-your-permission type of thing. But it’s not. Yeah, I want you to do this. You just can’t say no to it.

It's like convocation and we know that we have to chair the convocation. If you ask . . . If you sent out a memo asking people for assistance, the first thing they'll say is, "Well, I have something else planned for that day," but they'll still say, "Why do the same ones work on it all the time?" But they're going to call on the ones that they know that are not going to say no. And you feel so bad if you do have to say no, for whatever reason, that you're busy doing things up to that day to help them get ready. Because believe it or not, whatever you do, it always comes back. It's for the students and it's for the good of the university. So you just can't say no. I can't.

It would seem that it is not simply a matter of declining assignments. Their comments suggest that at times professionals feel coerced into assuming additional responsibilities. Assignments often originate outside their particular realm of responsibility yet their sense of institutional responsibility leads them to accept these assignments, albeit begrudgingly.

This inability to say "no" to more work may promote a sense of teamwork among student affairs professionals at HBCUs as they look to one another for support. HBCU professionals report that their work tends to be conducted via teams. For example:

We're very team oriented where I am. You [are] working with a number of students, so you can't pretty much do a lot of that by yourself. And with so many different entities involved in dealing with students, no one person can do it all. So we're very team oriented.

I work quite a bit with orientation and we pull that together in the beginning of the semesters. And I think everybody in here just about pulls in with us as to presentations or workshops for our new students.

Teamwork is also reflected in com-

municating and sharing ideas with others: Pretty much we all share the responsibilities collectively and striving towards one goal, and that's to serve our participants with excellence. So everything we do, our ideas are shared across the board. Everybody fulfills their own responsibilities, but ultimately we talk. We do a lot of communicating and sharing of ideas and thoughts to complete each individual task.

The findings suggest that professionals cope with the stressful pace of work by collaborating with one another and using teamwork. All of this occurs within the context of their work environment.

## Work Environment

Resources, or the lack thereof, also led student affairs administrators at HBCUs to describe their work environment in certain ways. Their work environment is practical, highly professional, student-centered, and service-oriented. Eighty-three percent of respondents described their work environment as practical. The following quote unpacks the meaning of this theme:

And I think at most times we've got to weigh it. And what is the most appropriate practical way of getting this done? What's the urgency right now? We may have planned well on something, but something may not have come through. We've got to be practical and realistic resource-wise in terms of what are the human resources that we have to get something implemented. What are the fiscal resources? So I think practical enables us to be fair about our business, about our mission as a university, and about our objectives here in the office. I mean, some of these others I think we do, but I think in most cases we're being more practical than anything else.

Although they may consider their work more practical than theoretical, administrators

(71%) believed it is their duty to handle their responsibilities in a highly professional manner.

I think it requires—and again this is why I get into this issue around how you're defining *professionalism*—for me, it requires a great deal of administrative skill to function in this particular context. I would define that in terms of professionalism. In other words, in my role in particular, one HAS to be constantly aware of not only the political dynamics that are going on, but also—you know, everything from putting things in writing to making sure that there's appropriate follow-up around certain issues. So I'd call it "highly professional" in terms of most of my space.

At [said university] I do a professional parent orientation. And the positive feedback has also produced a newsletter that I do for the entire year, first year, so they get information about what's going on. Because of course freshmen tend to tell you a whole different ballgame than what's going on campus. So I kind of give them a real picture. And the positive thing is that I have embraced a lot of parents, or a lot of parents have embraced the university and getting involved in what their child is doing that first year.

The pragmatic nature of their work, coupled with the pride they take in their professional endeavors, led the vast majority of respondents to describe their work environment as student centered (70%) and service oriented (70%). This is another element of professional life for HBCU administrators that is distinct from professional matters at other types of institutions. Almost without exception, individuals talked about devoting themselves to students. This is particularly telling given that 71% of respondents were midlevel (31%) or cabinet level (40%) administrators. At other institutions, direct service to

students diminishes as level of responsibility grows. Not so at HBCUs:

My work environment, in particular, deals with direct involvement with students and student organizations, handling development of students and their leadership ability. And those things that I do have an impact on or enhance the total development of students.

My priority is to improve the quality of life for students here on campus. And so it's very important for me that I'm doing meaningful work. And in that effort, I'll be doing everything I can to make sure that they're using their leisure time as best they can, in constructive manners that will keep them out of trouble and doing something constructive and positive. Everything I do is based upon improving their lives.

[Student centered]. . . . Oh yeah. Our issues, complaints, projects all center around students, and how to improve the overall quality of their life here in terms of faculties, resources, and programs. So they're the center for us.

Although these comments may seem common for those who work with students at any type of campus—to be centered on students—the results of this study suggest that HBCU student affairs professionals are much more like parents or extended family members to students. For example, one respondent said, "A lot of parents believe that we are [their child's] parents away from home." Participants pointed out that their work environment is student-centered because the campus is "family oriented" or "like a really big family." A few respondents noted:

I don't know if you can say it would be positive—on our campus, they view me as their mom. They just look at me and . . . If I tell them something, you know they're going to do it.

I'm so student-oriented 'till I am at everything. I'm at every function. I'm there. They may be cutting up, but when they see me come through the door, it's all [about] getting straight. Because the approach that I use—I'm not going to pull you outside to talk to you. Or I'm not going to wait until the session is over. I'm going to embarrass you like your momma say, "You cut up, and I'm gonna cut up."

Indeed, many of them reported that students see them as mother, father, sister, or grandparent. This orientation has implications for the nature of their work and specifically the core of their work.

At HBCUs, service really means a devotion to students; 70% of respondents described their work this way:

We serve our students. It's a joy to go home and to know that you made a difference in somebody's child or you made a difference with some parent. You've worked across campus and everybody . . . You get the sense that everybody is in this to help you to meet that one student's need.

Because we're all here to serve students living in a good environment that is conducive to learning. . . . You have to be in a place where people can really look up to you, and know that you're going to make sure that you're going to handle whatever the situation that they're faced [with] or whatever they're going through at that present time. So it's kind of imperative to make sure that you are available—that's the main word I want to use—being available for the students and making sure that things are going well.

In general, then, administrators at HBCUs are practical in their approach to their jobs but handle their jobs in a highly professional way. Their work environment is student centered and driven by a commitment to service.

## Racial Uplift and Empowerment

Interestingly, another major theme emerged from our data analysis that related to racial uplift and empowerment. Although it is important to note that this theme fell outside of the pace of work, how work gets done, and work environment framework, its salience to the work of administrators at HBCUs is no less important. In fact, it represents a powerful, unanticipated finding.

This is particularly noteworthy as HBCUs were founded as a means of uplifting the quality of life for African Americans in the U.S. (Anderson, 1988). Informants in this study talked at length about their desire to "give back." This involves giving back to their race:

It's important to me that I'm dealing with children or students that are from backgrounds such as mine—you know, similar to mine. So I feel like I'm giving directly back [to my race].

The commitment to racial uplift also entails giving back to the Black community, in particular to those at HBCUs. Consider the following:

I don't know if you're familiar with the movie, *Pay It Forward*? I never actually saw the movie, but I saw enough of the commercials for it, and then looked it up on a Web site to make sure I had the concept right. And I probably don't have the whole thing, but certainly I have endeavored to pay it forward . . . .The good things that have been done on my behalf during my life and particularly during my college years. And encourage the students I talk to to do the same thing, whatever field of endeavor they go into.

I think the sense of accomplishment, and for me—and I've worked in this business for a long time—being really, really able to give back. And knowing that I'm in an

area that I feel is MY purpose in life. And to be able to really give back and to be a part of molding and shaping another young person's life, especially young African Americans. And that is my greatest joy.

Not only did participants note their desire to give back to the Black race but a number of administrators noted that they chose to work at HBCUs to give back to the institution which, in many cases, was their alma mater:

I happen to be a graduate of [name of] University, and by doing so I was fortunate enough to be able to come right out of school and go into the workforce first with the United States Job Corp Center for a very minimal time, and then have the golden opportunity to come back to [name of] University, which is my alma mater, to work. And I guess the most gratifying thing is that it gives me an opportunity to say thank you to not only the HBCU that I had an opportunity to come back and work for, but to have that experience that I know that's going to be something that will carry me on and be rewarding to me for the rest of my life.

Yeah, that's the best part of the whole deal and that's why I, like many other people, that's the main reason I got involved in the first place. [I] was looking forward to the opportunity of working with students, to kind of repay the debt the I owe the people who worked with me when I was a student [at an HBCU]—helped me and my peers to develop, get some appreciation for ourselves and life and all the rest of it.

Finally, a number of HBCU administrators talked about an outcome of racial uplift, empowering students. Consider the following:

I have [had] some of the sharpest students I have EVER seen in [my] life [at my] HBCU. And I have some students that were so very marginal. [They] come to a

college campus like a HBCU and leave here with all the confidence in the world. That enables them to gain that job that makes them shine.

The commitment to giving back and racial uplift echoes the sentiments HBCU administrators expressed about devotion to students and their orientation toward service.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of this study provide a useful snapshot of the nature of professional work for student affairs administrators at historically Black colleges and universities. In general, professional life at HBCUs is driven by three themes. First, the lack of resources is pervasive. Comments about the levels of stress they endure, the breadth of responsibilities they assume, and the difficulty in declining additional work are all symptomatic of the dearth of resources available to student affairs administrators at HBCUs.

The second theme revolves around a sense of duty and devotion to students that is emblematic at HBCUs. The notion of serving students goes well beyond what professionals at other types of campuses experience. HBCU administrators consider themselves guardians of their students and talk about themselves as family members (e.g., parents, siblings) to students and not simply as administrators.

This devotion to students leads to the third theme of racial uplift. HBCUs were founded to advance opportunities for African Americans and to change the material conditions of the Black race. That historic mission continues to guide professional practice at these institutions. Administrators are committed not just to student success but to Black student success and promoting a sense of Black pride.

In terms of professional worklife, findings suggest that the pace of work tends to be

positively challenging, highly stressful, and slow to change. Student affairs work at HBCUs tends to be multitask focused, it is hard to say “no” to more work, and work is team oriented. The work environment is practical, highly professional, student centered, and service oriented. Finally, the notion of racial uplift is firmly entrenched in the worklife of these administrators and giving back to their race and to HBCU students is what drew many of them to the profession and what sustains many of them in their daily life.

The findings have implications for future research and practice. We examined the nature of work for administrators at historically Black colleges and universities. Previous researchers have explored the nature of work for administrators at liberal arts colleges (Hirt, Amelink, & Schneiter, 2004). Future researchers might also examine the nature of work for administrators at comprehensive universities, community colleges, or other specialized types of institutions (e.g., religiously affiliated campuses, medical schools).

In addition, researchers may consider examining the nature of professional life for those who work with students at other types of minority-serving institutions. Future researchers should explore student affairs work at Hispanic-serving institutions and tribal colleges. Additional studies might compare our HBCU findings to those for other minority-serving institutions.

This study discussed findings for all respondents and did not consider differences by race, gender, or other characteristics such as level of responsibility or years of experience. Prior research has suggested that such factors influence the nature of faculty work (Astin, 1978; Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999; Blackburn, Bieber, Lawrence, & Trauvetter, 1991; Creamer, 1998). Future studies should explore whether the same holds true for administrators at Black collegiate institutions.

A study that explores differences by functional area may be warranted. The purpose of this study was to describe the nature of work for administrators in a variety of functional settings at HBCUs. It is reasonable to suggest that work may be different for those in residence life when compared to those in admissions, career services, or judicial affairs. Future research should explore these differences explicitly.

Finally, a number of administrators with whom we talked reported that their work changed over time as new responsibilities were assumed. For this reason, a longitudinal study of the nature of work for administrators who serve students may be warranted. Such a study would allow researchers to examine trends in job satisfaction and the nature of work among groups over time. In addition, researchers could study the ways in which work changes as new responsibilities are assumed. There are a limited number of longitudinal studies in the field using qualitative methods. Future research of this kind may break new ground on our knowledge of professional worklife and make a valuable contribution to the literature.

Although additional research is certainly warranted, the current results have implications for professional practice. Supervisors and those who hire professionals at historically Black colleges may use the findings of this study. The results suggest that the pace of work is positively challenging, highly stressful, and that change is slow to be adopted. Employers may use these findings to shape recruiting techniques to attract candidates whose talents and character match the work environment. In addition, they may consider asking questions in interviews that elicit information about a potential candidate's ability to work in an environment that is positively challenging and highly stressful. Eliciting candidates' sentiments about institutional change would

also shed light on their compatibility with the HBCU work environment.

Administrative work at HBCUs is multi-task focused and usually gets done via teams. Employers may want to shape interviews in such a way as to assess potential staff members' ability to thrive in such an environment. Interviewing candidates in a group setting or having them work with current staff members during the interview are ways to observe their skills in this area.

The results of this study may also be of interest to faculty members in graduate preparation programs. These programs often overlook the unique elements of institutional settings when they socialize professionals. For example, our findings suggest that working with students at historically Black colleges tends to require teamwork and multitasking skills. Faculty members may consider using these as learning outcomes for their courses. Course assignments could be designed with the purpose of developing such skills in graduate students.

Faculty members in graduate preparation programs might also consider the findings with regard to the pace of work. Results suggest that work at HBCUs tends to be positively challenging, highly stressful, and that these institutions do not adopt change quickly. To prepare their students for success in such work environments, faculty members may consider addressing these topics in introductory courses or conducting workshops on how to manage stress and how to promote change in organizations.

Finally, the results of this study have implications for graduate students and those professionals who aspire to work at historically Black colleges. Such persons should be comfortable working in practical, highly professional, positively challenging, and highly stressful work environments. Likewise, they should want to work on teams in a very

student-centered setting. Candidates may consider these findings when searching for jobs or considering job offers.

Our unanticipated findings may also be of interest to those who aspire to work at HBCUs. HBCU professionals tend to be drawn to such work as a way of giving back to the Black race and encouraging students to achieve future success. Thus, HBCUs present unique opportunities to professionals who are committed to racial uplift and the empowerment of students.

There are a number of limitations to the study that should be noted. First, we explored the nature of work at HBCUs by using a convenient sample. However, the sample may be somewhat different from the population. These differences were minimized in several ways: (a) data were collected from administrators across a wide range of functional areas and levels of responsibility; (b) data were collected via focus group, one-on-one interviews, and phone interviews; and (c) data were collected from respondents at HBCUs in a number of states. Nevertheless, the participants were all volunteers and this may limit the inferences that can be drawn from the results.

Second, this study was intentionally qualitative in nature and did not employ quantitative methods of inquiry. This may limit the use of these findings by those who prefer quantitative data and may subject our findings to a degree of scrutiny by those who question alternative ways of knowing. However, naturalistic approaches like the one used in this study do not seek to make inferences about causation. Instead, they are used to provide rich, thick descriptions of phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additional studies using appropriate quantitative methods may add to the understanding of the nature of student affairs work at HBCUs.

Despite these limitations, this study was worthwhile and provides a useful snapshot of

the nature of work for student affairs administrators at HBCUs using “voices from the field” as the primary data source. Who would know the nature of this work better than those who do it?

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