

Manoj Mohanan: In Vice President Kamala Harris's memoir, she talks about her time at Howard University. "That was the beauty of Howard," she writes, "Every signal told every student that we could be anything, that we were young, gifted, and Black, and we shouldn't let anything get in the way of our success." Of course, today, she's the Democratic nominee for president. Kamala Harris found her voice while attending Howard, which is an HBCU, a Historically Black College and University.

HBCUs have played an important role in America's past, present, and future, and it's becoming clear that they're playing a big role in democracy itself. So, I asked my colleague, Duke Professor, Deondra Rose, to explore this topic with us. Her magnificent new book is called *The Power of Black Excellence: HBCUs and the Fight for American Democracy*. I'm Manoj Mohanan, Interim Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Welcome to Policy 360 and to another in our series of conversations related to the 2024 Election. Thank you for joining us, Deondra.

Deondra Rose: Thank you so much for having me here today, Manoj.

Manoj Mohanan: So, Deondra, let's talk about Vice President Kamala Harris, and as you know, she has expressed her love for her alma mater, so HBCUs are in the news today. Tell us a little bit about the history of HBCUs.

Deondra Rose: So HBCUs are a fascinating set of educational institutions in the United States, and so I should tell you a little bit about my perspective on HBCUs. It came about because I'm a political historian, and I'm a scholar of American higher education policy. My work takes a historical lens and applies it to the political history of programs that have shaped educational access in the United States and also, in doing so, democratic citizenship.

So HBCUs were established first in 1837. That's when the very first HBCU, which became known as Cheyney University, was founded up in Pennsylvania. In the years since, HBCUs have made concerted efforts to empower, uplift, and invest in Black Americans. This was especially important when you consider, historically, the web of barriers that limited Black people's access to educational opportunity, to political opportunities, to economic opportunities. So, as a set of institutions, they did really important work in terms of developing citizens.

Manoj Mohanan: Indeed. So if I know correctly about this, although they make up less than 3% of all post-secondary educational institutions in the United States, HBCUs account for about 8% of Black undergraduate enrollment in the US and about 13% of all bachelor's degrees earned by Black students. So that's huge.

Deondra Rose: That's exactly right, and historically, before 1964 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which made racial discrimination in college admissions illegal, we actually saw that 90%, up to 90% of Black Americans who attended college and

got college degrees did so at HBCUs. So before that point, HBCUs really were the core of higher educational opportunity for Black Americans in the US.

Manoj Mohanan: So, Deondra, the higher education opportunity, the statistic that I just mentioned earlier, I believe, is from a press briefing from the White House earlier this year. One of the things they also mentioned in there is that HBCUs tend to foster greater upward mobility than most US colleges, and about 30% of HBCUs' students will move up at least two income quintiles from their parents by age 30 which is an incredible accomplishment, and it's also nearly double of that of non-HBCUs. Is that what you found in your research as well?

Deondra Rose: Exactly right. So my work was mixed methods in terms of how I incorporated the data, the type of data that I collected, and how I analyzed them. So my qualitative analysis is based on more than a hundred interviews with HBCU alumni, and these alums shared some of the most fascinating accounts of their educational experiences and how that helped to shape who they've become as democratic citizens. One of the things that came out of these conversations was just that the HBCU experience was empowering on so many levels.

So I remember one conversation in particular where an HBCU alum who actually went on to become an elected official and a political candidate was someone who said that when he started off as an undergraduate, I believe it was at Morehouse College, that he was the son of sharecroppers, and he'd had access to some uneven quality of K through 12 education. He said that at Morehouse, he was in classes alongside children who hailed from some of the most privileged families in the United States, so in Chicago, industrialists' sons. He said that over the course of their four years at Morehouse, the faculty, the administrators did the work of helping to bring all of those graduates up to a level where they would leave Morehouse able to engage fully and competitively as players in the economy, in social life, in education, in politics, and so on.

Manoj Mohanan: That's great. So what you just described also reminds me about something that Vice President Harris mentions about being at Howard and finding her voice among people who looked like her and had similar experiences. Did you hear that from some of these respondents you talked to as well?

Deondra Rose: Absolutely. So the title of the book is The Power of Black Excellence, and it's this concept of Black excellence that I found to be a really powerful theme that emerged from the data for this book. There are so many accounts of people who say that they, in some cases, went from K through 12 educational experiences where they felt a bit marginalized, where they didn't see their identity necessarily reflected in the curriculum or even among the staff teaching at the schools that they attended, or even in cases where they saw their identities treated in ways that didn't necessarily align with their own lived experiences, their families' experiences. So then, they went to HBCUs where they felt that there was an appreciation for the nuance of Blackness that they had never experienced before.

One of the things that I expected to emerge from my survey data was that Black Americans who attended predominantly white institutions would have expected diversity to be a really important part of their undergraduate experiences. I did not necessarily expect that to be the case from Black students or Black alums who went to HBCUs. In both cases, among both of those groups, they report that diversity was such an important part of their college experiences. For Black respondents who went to HBCUs, they said that there was this appreciation of Blackness in "all its flavors." So there were some stereotypes that they felt they were exposed to or that they grappled with before they arrived at their HBCUs. But then, in that context, they really learned to appreciate the rich history of the Black experience\ not just in the United States, but the African diaspora and this broader experience of Blackness in the world. It really helped them to move forward and as Vice President Harris said, to find their unique voices in an environment that really celebrated and to identify and amplify the Black experience.

Manoj Mohanan: So the Black experience that you describe... In your book, you also talk about how HBCUs have been special in that they developed the generals of the Civil Rights Movement. Did that contribute to that development as well?

Deondra Rose: Absolutely. I mean, and that's something that the students describe as being in the air. So when they're in college, they're saying, "I'm at Howard University. I'm on this historic campus where the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, they also learned, they taught, and the library down the street is where they crafted the legal strategy that ultimately overturned Jim Crow segregation in the United States." There's also this sense of responsibility from the students who say, "I'm a part of this legacy, and I'm a part of an institution that recognizes a unique responsibility not just to uplift ourselves as individuals, but to uplift the Black community and the broader democratic citizenry."

Manoj Mohanan: So, Deondra, is that the theme that you mentioned in the book about building a foundation for leadership? Is that where the foundation for leadership is laid for these students and their future careers?

Deondra Rose: My sense is that's absolutely the case. So one of the most interesting things to my mind about HBCUs is that as academic institutions that were developed initially in the 19th century, they really created the embodiment of Black intellectual power in a society that often denied its existence and even its possibility. So there is something inherently political in creating a set of institutions that not only worked to develop Black intellect, but also displayed it proudly. So there are all these instances and stories of the early HBCUs, for example, holding their examinations publicly so that the broader public could see these young Black scholars exemplifying their mastery of a wide range of subjects in a way that pushed back against some received wisdom or received notions of Black fecklessness, and laziness, and inferiority.

Many of those ideas were actually ingrained in the scholarly literature of that time. So you had the development of these HBCUs that were teaching students, but they also served as the intellectual home for scholars who actually added an appreciation for the Black experience and Black perspectives on race, injustice, and equality that really started doing important political work. You could see that there was a generation of people who I call the Generals of the Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, and others, who were educated in those institutions. Then, they worked to help mobilize those ideas into social change, and they worked with those HBCU institutions and the students there to really drive that movement.

Manoj Mohanan: That's wonderful. Let's stick with that theme. You mentioned in your book that HBCUs can help redistribute political power in the US. So what do you mean by that? Help us understand better the ramification of... for political power in particular.

Deondra Rose: So, historically, access to political power in the United States and more broadly, of course, has been contested. There have been mechanisms that have intentionally restricted certain groups' access to that power. So whether we're talking about a constitution that originally treated Black Americans as a fraction of humans in terms of counting for political representation to the institutionalization of laws like anti-literacy laws or state-sanctioned enslavement. So there were these mechanisms that really did work to control Black Americans, their citizenship, their economic output, their earnings, and what they could and could not do in terms of controlling themselves and their families.

Then, you had HBCUs that provided opportunities to learn about the dimensions of citizenship to gain the knowledge and the skills that could be used as voters or as democratic gadflies, as people who actually raise questions about where our vaunted national principles fell short of the actual lived experiences of so many citizens. So these institutions were really powerful in creating a space where the status quo in terms of political power distribution could be contested, but also, they empowered people who were then able to vie for political power themselves as the leaders of social movements, as potential political candidates.

So one of the things that I found most striking that really inspired this research was realizing that today, these vast majorities of Black leaders in a number of different areas were educated at HBCUs. So the figures are, according to the Thurgood Marshall Foundation, something like 80% of Black judges in the United States hold HBCU degrees, something like 60% of Black members of Congress, 60% or 50% of Black lawyers. I mean, the numbers are pretty impressive, and I don't think that's accidental. I think there's something, maybe a secret sauce in HBCU education and how HBCUs go about their work that has contributed to that trend.

Manoj Mohanan: That is truly impressive. So, Deondra, you've done all this research, and it's given you unique insight into the history and the power of HBCUs. So looking forward when it comes to democracy in general, I suspect you have some ideas for what role HBCUs might play in the future or what they should be playing to show up democratic norms and strengthen our society. So what would you tell our listeners?

Deondra Rose: I think that HBCUs and the broader set of educational institutions in the United States are absolutely crucial for democracy. They're crucial for the strength of our democracy, for our ability to safeguard that democracy. One of the things that I would just emphasize is the fact that HBCUs have offered such a powerful lesson for how a society can work to empower a historically minoritized and marginalized population and can help to foster high levels of civic and political engagement among them.

So this research suggests that it's a powerful combination of the type of education, the approach to education, one that really takes seriously history, and making clear the value of the truly diverse set of experiences that we have in our society, a form of education that is holistic and that really focuses on the entire student. I learned a lot. So, as a quick aside, I have to say there were moments when I was conducting interviews, and students were telling me about what their professors did when they were in college. I remember feeling a little embarrassed because a number of people said, "We were going. Our professor arranged for us to have a field trip, and a number of us overslept. Would you believe that that professor came to the dorms? At 6:00 in the morning, she's banging on the door and was like, 'Get up. Get out. Get on that bus. We're going to the Civil Rights Museum.'"

I thought to myself, "I couldn't imagine going and finding out, first of all, where my students live, knocking on the door." If they missed the bus, I'd be like, "I'm so sorry. I'll see you next time." But there's been, for me, just some inspiration in appreciating my students holistically and really feeling a greater sense of investment in their development as people. So those are just a few of the lessons, I think, that HBCUs and their faculty have offered.

Manoj Mohanan: That's amazing.

Deondra Rose: The way I teach has, I think, benefited from those lessons, and I think that our broader contribution as higher ed institutions in a democracy, in our democracy can be strengthened by paying attention to the lessons of HBCUs.

Manoj Mohanan: That's wonderful, and I think the students who might be listening now know next time they're on a field trip with you, if they oversleep, who's going to be knocking on their doors.

Deondra Rose: Exactly. Right.

Manoj Mohanan: Thank you so much for joining me today, Deondra. Deondra Rose is the Kevin D. Gorter Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Her new book is called *The Power of Black Excellence: HBCUs and the Fight for American Democracy*. That's all the time we have for today. We'll be back soon for more conversations about policy issues related to the 2024 Election. I'm Manoj Mohanan.