Evaluation of Free Speech and Civic Engagement: On Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Campuses for 2020 Social Justice Summer and General Election

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1. Background

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were established to serve the educational needs of black Americans, and they continue to serve educational centers that foster free expression, activism, and civic engagement for their students and surrounding communities. One-hundred and seven HBCUs exist today, and they serve over 228,000 enrolled students (HEGIS 2019). Almost all HBCUs have an articulated commitment in their mission statements or strategic plans to develop global minded citizens, develop student capacity to make meaningful contributions to communities, and to foster civic awareness and engagement. Indeed, HBCUs have been the historical sites of student activism for civil rights, issues of social justice, and democratic inclusion. Many of these same campuses have an enduring commitment to develop leaders and to preserve figurative and literal spaces for students and individuals from surrounding communities to continue rich traditions of engagement.

The pandemic that gripped the world in the spring of 2020 directly impacted how institutions of higher education, HBCUs included, engaged students. Many campuses shifted to online instructional modalities, and students participated remotely in courses and campus life. Institutions rushed to develop online campus communication platforms, leverage existing social media presence, and modify policies and access for online campus engagement for course-related and extracurricular activities. Some campuses, like Clark Atlanta University, mailed every enrolled student a laptop computer and provided hotspots to those who expressed a need. Changes in campus communication and access from primarily in-person to now online, created new opportunities for campuses — particularly students, faculty, and staff — to operationalize campus missions, visions, and goals as well as expanding campus engagement and responses to the shifting social cultural contexts in new and meaningful ways.

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On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was killed by police officers, and on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by police officers. Both events led to a ground-swell of public outcry and outrage on the internet and in the streets of communities across the nation. Students from HBCUs joined others from across the nation on social media platforms to articulate frustration, outrage, and demands. They marched and protested in the streets, and they organized to build national awareness about police brutality and momentum for non-electoral and electoral response in the General Election to take place in November 2020.

Vitriolic political party speech and deep partisan divides shaped the national narrative leading to the 2020 general election. Malicious speech proliferated in online and social media environments, and racially charged discourse shaped public policy narratives. State and local politics were battlegrounds for national struggles for voter attention and election participation.

The aim of this project was to evaluate speech, activism, and civic engagement on the campuses of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), particularly during the social and racial unrest of the summer of 2020 and the polarizing general election in fall of 2020.

2. Research Focus

Historical traditions and contemporary connections of activism and civic engagement with particular attention given to the impact of the pandemic on approaches to student organizing and mobilization are central to the project. In response to the pandemic and social distancing guidelines, campus responses ranged from fully in-person to fully online; some campuses permitted select student groups to return to campus. Innovation and creativity mark the strategies utilized by campus administrators, student leaders, and campus organizations to facilitate success through voice and engagement. Additionally, HBCU campuses have a history of serving as sites of student mobilization to contest encroachments on democratic freedoms, challenge and promote public policies, and push for democratic inclusion.

Defining Key Concepts

Free speech was defined as students feeling empowered to share their perspectives, reactions, demands and aims using a variety of formats, including social media platforms personal accounts and accounts associated with campus organizations; in conversations with peers, faculty and staff, and in online communities; in courses with classmates and instructors who will provide graded assessments; on campus and in campus spaces both in person and virtually; and through campus organizations that may have in person and online presence, and that may or may not require approval from campus officials. Activism included forms of non-electoral participation that could include participation in marches, protests, social media campaigns and discussions, activities and events organized or hosted by student organizations, and participating in activities and events organized by local and national organizations. Civic engagement was operationalized as student voter engagement that materializes through voter education activities, voter registration, voter turnout, and participation in political campaigns.

Free Speech	Activism	Civic Engagement
Sharing perspectives, reactions, demands, aims · Social Media · Conversations · Classes · Campus Organizations	Non-electoral forms of participation · Marches · Protests · Social Media · Student Organizations · Local and national organizations	Operationalized as student voter engagement · Voter education · Voter registration · Voter turnout · Political campaigns

Dimensions of these three elements are explored to varying degrees throughout the project and as they particularly pertain to civic and voter engagement at HBCUs.

Methodological Approach and Information Sources

Several data collection and review activities were completed to gather relevant information to (1) establish context, (2) understand institutional capacity, (3) identify strategies, and (4) isolate innovations. Dates of data collection and analysis: June 2021-March 2022.

Activity	Data	Purpose
Interviews and Focus Groups with Students and Administrators	· 23 Interviews · 4 Focus Groups · 12 Community of Practice Meetings	· Understand attitudes, motivations. and perceptions · Probe strategies, techniques, and decision-making calculus
Evaluation of 2016-2020 Campus Voting Data	· 37 HBCUs · 13 NSLVE Reports	· Document trends and shifts · Assess outcomes and impact
Evaluation of 2020 General Election Action Plans	· 15 Campus Action Plans - 2020 General Election	· Evaluate campus resources · Assess plans and approaches to engagement
Additional/Background Analysis	· Literature Review · Development or dataset · Evaluation of "Youth Participatory Politics Project Survey, 2011, 2013, 2015"	· Understand political socialization of black youth · Engage in robust analysis of characteristics and variables

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with students and administrators (including staff and faculty responsible for student organizations on their respective campuses). Twenty-three interviews were completed and four focus groups that included three individuals each were completed using Zoom. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insights and understanding about the student voter landscape and experiences on multiple campuses. Additionally, the interviews and focus groups provided opportunities for respondents to share their perceptions about the social and cultural contexts, campus strategies and activities, techniques, approaches, support student voting in the general election, and reactions to the political climate and Covid policy response (impact on free speech, activism, and civic engagement).

The ALL IN HBCU Community of Practice was organized to include faculty, staff, and administrators who submitted action plans, planned to submit action plans, participated in one of the Democracy Challenges, or was interested in talking with others from similar campuses about strategies and innovations, challenges, setbacks, and approaches to support student civic engagement. The Community of Practice met at least once monthly, and twice monthly during certain periods; attendance varied depending on individual obligations. At least 21 different campuses were represented over the duration of the meetings from May 2020 through July 2021.

Campuses that participate in the ALL IN Democracy Challenge submit action plans for review and the action plans are made available online along with submitted reports of the National Study for Leadership and Voter Engagement (NSLVE). Action plans are strategic plans prepared by campuses that outline planned activities, events, and timelines for campus based voter education, registration, and turnout. NSLVE reports are prepared by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education in the Tisch College at Tufts University. The reports are prepared for institutions based on the terms of a Memorandum of Agreement and sent to key university officials, and reports can then be shared more broadly.

Additional context for analysis and discussion was provided through a review of existing literature on activism and civic engagement on college campuses, particularly HBCUs, voting behavior and attitudes of young adults, and the political socialization of black youth in America.

The observations, findings, and recommendations that follow in the report are based on the information outlined above that was collected and reviewed.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Characterizing 2020 and the Social Justice Summer of 2020

Individuals were asked to identify events and occurrences of 2020 they believed impacted the social and political context of 2020 and that impacted the activism and speech of students at HBCUs. Listed below are events and occurrences that were considered to be pivotal or impactful.

- Confederate statues were removed or their removal was discussed.
- Juneteenth became a paid federal holiday.
- Corporations and academic institutions issued diversity commitment statements.
- Corporations and academic institutions acknowledged historical legacies or connections to racial injustice.
- Defunding the police was hotly debated.
- Coronavirus was sweeping the nation, and racial disparities were seen in health outcomes.
- Conversations about police brutality were occurring between individuals and policymakers at local, state, and national levels.
- Conspicuous absence of concerts, vacations, sports, dining out, travel: the world was shut down by choice or policy.
- People were spending considerably more time online and on social media.
- Political discourse was polarized and caustic.

Respondents shared that they did not believe the summer to be one of racial reckoning for America, but rather it served to highlight the continued struggle for social justice. For this reason, the summer of 2020 is termed the Social Justice Summer of 2020 when referring specifically to social justice issues and that time period.

3.2 Reflections on the Dovetail of the Social Justice Summer and the 2020 General Election for Black Youth and Black Voices

Interviews and focus groups with students, faculty, and staff provided insight into how individuals and groups connected the activities of the Social Justice Summer of 2020 with the 2020 general election. Several expressed a recognition of opportunities to catalyze the frustration, agitation, concerns, and demands from the Social Justice Summer of 2020 into a political agenda, as well as momentum for electoral engagement and turnout.

Students spoke about anger and frustration that, although strides have been made politically for the democratic inclusion of black communities and black voters, systematic oppression, voter suppression, and marginalization remain contemporary issues with which they must contend. Some students spoke with disgust as they described the inability of the two major political parties and major voter engagement organizations to contextualize, catalyze, and mobilize a political agenda that reflects the political concerns of young black voters. One student stated, "It's like we are stuck in a time loop – we keep living the politics of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. We are still being killed in the streets [and] we still have to fight voter suppression… only now we don't have a Dr. King or Malcolm X; we have to lead ourselves." Another student stated, "The thing about the pandemic happening before the election is that everyone is communicating online more, not just in person. I can connect with students at other [HBCU] campuses across the country, and I wouldn't have done that before."

Participation in rallies, marches, and protests provided students with opportunities to physically engage in non-electoral political speech, and many students participated by either organizing in online spaces, sharing information, or attending. Many of the respondents indicated that they were aware of protest activities that occurred locally and nationally. A majority expressed a belief that the awareness during the Social Justice Summer increased their awareness about and interest in voting in the 2020 general election.

Additionally, students highlighted in the focus groups and interviews the media portrayals and participation in rallies, marches, and protests:

> "For the most part, we were pissed but peaceful. But, you could tell that there were people who participated and were up to no good. You could tell that they were from outside the community and meant to cause trouble – often they were white people [visiting] in black communities and they wore masks."

> "People acted like we didn't have the right to be angry, like protesting and marching are equal to the police violence of killing a woman in her home or killing a man in the street. They act like the only thing we should do is vote."

> "Voting has its place, but we [have] been voting and they [are] still killing us. They [are] still suppressing us. So, what do we do now?"

The students were keenly aware of the limits of protests and voting, and the need for innovative strategies and approaches to address persistent racial injustice.

4. Findings from a Review of Campus Action Plans

Thirty-seven HBCU campuses prepared and submitted action plans to the ALL IN Democracy Challenge, and these action plans were reviewed to identify strategies, techniques, innovations identified by the specific campuses leading up to the 2020 general election. The following observations were made after a systematic review of the action plans:

Campuses partner with local and national capacity-building organizations to help with funding, information access, and logistics of getting to the polls. For example, organizations like National Action Network, NAACP, National Council of Negro Women, ALL IN Democracy Challenge, Students Learn Students Vote, Campus Compact, etc. are instrumental in supporting student voter engagement. Black historical organizations tend to focus on voter mobilization, and many of the nonpartisan national organizations focus on building the capacity of individuals and organizations that engage in mobilization. HBCU campuses are strategic in how they engage these resources to support student education, mobilization, engagement, and turnout so they can make the most of resources that are available at a given time to ensure that campus specific goals and objectives are met.

Student-led organizations play a central role in raising student awareness and implementing strategies, but have issues with sustained presence and momentum on campuses. Often the student-led organizations have life-cycles that are impacted by external support (from faculty or community-based organizations), individual students, membership, and alignment with contemporary social cultural contexts and timelines.

5. Factors that Impacted HBCU Student Voter Engagement Activities

Campus efforts to support voter registration and turnout were impacted by students remaining in their hometowns which were across the country instead of being centrally located on or near campus. Instead of informing students about election processes for one city and state, campuses were tasked with ensuring that students were aware of voting related information for multiple states and precincts. Feedback from faculty, staff, and administrators highlighted unique challenges in the categories listed. Action plans were indexed to identify process and procedure challenges as well as additional concerns. Results are shared in the table below.

List of Process and Procedure Challenges	Additional Issues of Particular Concern to HBCU Campuses
Accessing Absentee Ballots: Knowing who qualifies, how and when to request and return ballot	**Lack of trust in government and politics**: history of mistrust, acrimonious contemporary politics, patterns of voter suppression efforts
Voter ID Laws: Obtaining and Verifying Appropriate ID	**Misinformation**: Incorrect dates, deadlines, processes, and locations communicated
Voter Registration Processes: Knowing how, when, and where to register	**Empty promises and hollow prizes**: Promises and commitments made to black communities, HBCU campuses, and young people to promote voter registration and turnout but no intention of follow through
Voting Locations: Location changes due to Covid-related closures	**Lack of viable third party options**: Concern that the two-party options and available candidates do not reflect the aims, aspirations, or perspectives of black youth voters and their communities
Early Voting Access: Knowing when and where locations would be available	**Misconception of apathy and indifference**: Perceptions that young black students are not politically aware, educated, or motivated to vote
Deadlines: Multiple cut-off times and dates for various processes and locations	
COVID Safety: General awareness of protocols and measures to be taken	

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Interviews and focus groups with campus staff, faculty, and administrators provided additional insights.

- Social media was a key resource for organizing and coordinating. Many of the networks used to discuss, inform, and engage in the social justice summer were used for election engagement.
- There was an "urgency of now" that centered around the lived experiences of black students in ways that did not solely rely on historical reflections or the traditional narratives about black voter engagement or student voter engagement.
- Students engaged in local politics with which they could connect remotely and in-person, instead of the local politics of their college campus location.
- The political socialization processes of black youth include recognizing the politicization of the everyday (driving while black, playing video games while black, shopping while black, etc.) so to be in an environment (home) they were able to interact with family, community, and friends for a common cause, and this may have impacted their electoral participation.
- Perception of a common cause existed: remove Trump from office, hold back repressive policy encroachment, and amplify the social justice concerns of black youth.
- At home, you know the neighborhood, you know the issues, you understand the political context, so it is logistically easier to find your polling location.
- For many college students, this was their first presidential election and it felt high stakes to them. That they mattered, their voices mattered.
- Electoral engagement was seen as an extension of political activism: black lives matter and black votes matter. Students and black voters did not see voting as a matter of trying to save the Democratic Party or to be a coalition partner, but a rational choice of engagement for self-preservation.
- HBCUs continued to have campus-based partnerships with the NAACP, Urban League, NLWV, NCNW, and other organizations. Capacity building of students was fostered through partnerships with student voter engagement organizations like Andrew Goodman Foundation, ALL IN Democracy Challenge, Campus Vote Project.
- Institutions (educational and business) are articulating support for social justice issues through statements and financial contributions. There was a dual effect: increased tolerance for political engagement of students and constraining the activities of academic departments and institutions because of targeted initiatives with specific goals.

6. Strategies and Innovations in Action Plans

Strategies deployed and utilized to address process and procedural challenges, as well as many of the additional issues that were highlighted in action plans include the following:

1. Students and campus-based student organizations used social media platforms and campus websites to distribute accurate information to the campus community.
2. HBCU campuses partnered with organizations that provided free or low cost access to voter registration and information apps, like TurboVote, to support online voter registration, as well as digital reminders about upcoming deadlines based on the location of an individual.
3. Formal and informal campus-based coalitions were organized to support students and student organizations engaging in similar or overlapping activities.
4. University administrators articulated support for student voter registration, and they connected contemporary electoral processes and challenges to historic legacies, campus history of student civic engagement, and contemporary social justice struggles.
5. Campuses collaborated with local and national voting organizations to gain access to resources, the national narrative on student voter engagement and social justice issues, and educational materials and toolkits.

7. Research Observations from Data Analysis

The following observations emerge from the project after reviewing compiled data about HBCU campuses:

Campus size, location, and type matter: Majority of HBCUs are located in the southern and southeastern United States, and the political contexts of the campus location impacts the relationships of the campus with state and local election officials. Additionally, the size of the campus, and whether or not the institution is public or private, can also shape campus-based civic engagement activism.

Institutional responses to student activism and speech: Most HBCU campuses have a history and rich tradition of supporting student speech and activism on social justice issues. Some campuses also have policies and processes that channel student concerns from public expressions to internal policy processes that may be opaque to the broader student body or relatively unknown to students and organizations advocating for changes.

Campus leadership matters: HBCU presidents and provosts can be key supports and advocates for student voter engagement. With their support, many things may be possible but without their support, outcomes may be constrained. HBCU presidents are often community leaders and have relationships with individuals and organizations across the nation who can heighten awareness, leverage resources, provide a national platform, and provide opportunities.

Resource accessibility: Few HBCUs have a dedicated center or office that focuses solely on student voter engagement, and this is due in part to resource constraints. Individuals and offices responsible for student voting activities are often responsible for numerous other tasks. This reality may account for the periodic ebbs and flows in focus and emphasis on student activism and student voting. Most campuses and student organizations partner with local, state, and national organizations to build capacity and gain access to resources (trainings, educational materials, small grants, etc.)

Resources for Year Round Civic Engagement: The persons on campuses who take responsibility for civic engagement activities can include student affairs personnel, faculty, staff, administrators, and student organizations so it can be difficult to identify a point person for such activities. The decentralized nature of civic engagement and mobilization activities are common on HBCU campuses because individuals often take on the tasks as a reflection of personal passion, deep commitment, or the activities align with existing work-related functions. Individuals are often not compensated directly by their institution for their work in civic and voter engagement, and may not have a title that clearly indicates that the individual is a campus point person for the tasks. There is no standardized campus location for civic engagement activities on campuses.

Social Justice Mandates: Almost all HBCUs have a clearly stated commitment to social justice, civic engagement, or civil rights in the institution's mission or strategic plan. Such statements reflect the historical legacies of the institutions in local and national struggles for equal rights, democratic inclusion, free speech, and civic engagement. Campuses are actively working to bridge historical legacies with contemporary social justice challenges. Student activism and voter engagement are central to campus articulations of commitment to serving as a community resource and leader in struggles for democratic inclusion and equal protection.

Community Connections: Community is broadly defined by individuals at HBCUs, and is inclusive of surrounding neighborhoods, the broader black communities in the area, and at times black communities in the city or state. Inclusive definitions of community directly impact the scope of action plans and outreach efforts. Additionally, there are expectations by individuals and organizations beyond the boundaries of the campus but who consider themselves to be a part of the broadly defined campus community, and they expect to be included and considered in campus planning activities. The recognition of the institution's responsibilities to the community are most apparent with issues of social justice, activism, civil rights, and democratic inclusion.

8. Opportunities for Innovation: Voter Engagement

Innovation and opportunities for innovation to amplify and protect student voice and activism may vary across HBCU campuses. The table below identifies specific opportunities and potential strategies for implementation.

Opportunities for Innovation	Strategies for Implementation
Understand Political Socialization for Diverse Groups	While the agents of political socialization (role of family, school, media, friends, religion) may be consistent across groups, outreach efforts can be improved by understanding the political socialization experiences of specific groups (e.i., interactions with police, media characterizations of black people and communities, broader social and cultural contexts).
Responsive to Campus Demographics	Tailor outreach and engagement activities to populations and groups on campus. One size may not fit all.
Diversification of Strategies	Use multiple and diverse approaches to engage student voters. Remain flexible and willing to try new approaches.
Leveraging Social Media and Technology	Take advantage of existing social media usage and outlets to connect with students, organizations, and groups.
Consistent and Cohesive Messaging	Have a clear and cohesive message that is impactful and relevant.
Managing the Ebbs and Flows of Election Cycles	Recognize that it may be difficult to sustain momentum and focused attention on voting during off-years and midterm elections.
Contextualization	Reevaluate the relevance of messaging, processes and procedures to ensure that they reflect contemporary contexts.
Amplifying Student Voices	Include and prioritize student voices and ideas in planning process and implementation.
Capacity Building Initiatives	Establish and maintain collaborations with local and regional organizations for capacity building and resource sharing.

9. Opportunities for Innovation: Student Voice and Activism

Innovation and opportunities for innovation to amplify and protect student voice and activism may vary across HBCU campuses. The table below identifies specific opportunities and potential strategies for implementation.

Opportunities for Innovation	Strategies for Implementation
Hold Space for Voice and Dialogue	Formalize coalitions with rules of engagement that support robust dialogue and provide opportunities for coalition members to be heard
Support Inclusivity	Move beyond the usual suspects for coalition building activities. Focus on diversity of perspectives, approaches, and membership
Recognize Articulations of Self Determination	Amplify student voices, demands, and agendas. Recognize that the end goal may be a reflection of individual or group self-determination instead of simply process outcomes
Encourage the Flow of Dialog (Facts and Feelings)	Establish processes that encourage open discussion, but allow for distinctions between facts and feelings
Balance Community Expectations and Student Needs	Develop an action plan that clarifies expectations and needs, and provides a balanced approach for processing differing perspectives and needs
Allocate Resources	Dedicate resources to developing student leadership in areas of activism and voice
Context and Relevance	Reevaluate the relevance of messaging, processes and procedures to ensure that they reflect contemporary contexts
Connect to National Conversations	Continue to connect and collaborate with national organizations to affirm perspective, identify best practices, and identify opportunities
Local and Regional Collaborations	Establish and maintain collaborations with local and regional organizations for capacity building and resource sharing
Reimagine Operationalization of Campus Missions	Think broadly about how the campus mission can align with student activism. Collaborate with student coalitions to ensure contemporary relevance and applicability of the mission.

10. Conclusions and Final Reflections

The traditional roots of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that are grounded in civic engagement, social justice, and student activism continue to serve as a foundation for contemporary student civic and voter engagement as evidenced in the summer and fall of 2020. Student activism in response to police brutality and social injustice included local and national organizing through social media; collaborating with classmates and peers to use existing student organizations to share information and resources; challenging institutions and organizations to take concrete steps to address social and racial injustice. Notably, students mobilized their peers and communities to shift non-electoral participation to voter turnout. HBCU campuses encouraged students, most who remained home and attended classes remotely, to explore the various ways to vote – early voting, absentee ballots, in-person voting, same-day registration, and any other options that may have been available in specific states.

Interviews, focus groups, and a review of campus action plans reveals that many HBCUs used strategies and processes that were innovative and forward-thinking in response to COVID and the politically charged political landscape. Many campuses relied on the momentum created by students to drive campus voting activities. Students helped reshape historical narratives about the importance of voting to black communities by using contemporary political contexts, social justice issues, and examples of police brutality to emphasize the contemporary relevance of student voter engagement. Conversations about student voting, civic engagement, and student activism remained student led, student focused, and student dominated. The challenge going forward will be to develop, maintain, or redesign institutional processes and policies at respective campuses to maintain a space for such dynamic student voice and activism.

11. Acknowledgements

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