

Expanding the Reach of Scholarly Societies: Obstacles to and Opportunities for Enhancing HBCU Faculty Participation in the AHA/APA

In May 2017, with a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the American Historical Association partnered with the American Philosophical Association to direct “Extending the Reach of Scholarly Society Work to HBCU Faculty.” The goal of the project, broadly speaking, was twofold. The AHA and APA sought, first, to better understand how faculty at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) see their own work and the work of scholarly societies; and second, to make professional development opportunities more useful and available to HBCU faculty. When possible, the AHA and APA have also identified areas where they can improve aspects of their own functioning, programming, and communications, in line with findings from this project.

Over the course of the grant, the AHA and the APA jointly convened a steering committee and focus groups to investigate the causes and implications—both educational and professional—of HBCU faculty’s lower participation rates in scholarly conferences and societies. Julia Brookins, the AHA’s special projects coordinator, served as the program’s principal investigator. Her interim report (which can be found in the September 2018 issue of [*Perspectives on History*](#)) laid out findings from a national survey of HBCU faculty and in-person focus groups.

Over the months that followed, the project went on to host eight HBCU faculty members (four historians and four philosophers) at the AHA’s 2019 annual meeting and an APA 2019 division meeting. After refining a list of follow-up actions to deepen HBCU faculty engagement, the APA updated and expanded its contact list of philosophy faculty and programs at HBCUs, while the AHA integrated into its member and department database the contacts gathered through survey outreach. Project staff and members of the steering committee collaborated on a final grant report for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the governing boards of the AHA and APA, as well as this public report of findings for AHA members and the public.

Having concluded this exploratory project, participants identified next steps in the work of bringing more HBCU scholars into conversation with societies like the AHA and APA, and re-making those societies to better serve HBCU faculty, their institutions, and students. Some of these steps involve better communication about the range of functions that the APA and AHA already perform for members, programs, and departments; others will require new partnerships and funding to meet the needs identified by HBCU faculty if humanities work is going to thrive at their institutions.

By keeping the survey open until February 2019—sending out new notices on social media and through membership communications, and continuing to offer a free year of membership to those who participated—the project was able to recruit more than 200 respondents from at least 49 distinct institutions. The additional responses reinforced key patterns that had emerged from the first wave of survey responses detailing which aspects of faculty work prevent deeper engagement between HBCUs and scholarly societies. These patterns included an often unexamined preference for more specialized research networks, high demands for teaching and service work, inadequate research and travel budgets, a sense of marginalization within the larger disciplinary or professional community, a sense that many institutions were disinvesting or had

disinvested in the humanities, institutional leadership challenges, and a less flexible work culture.

Attendees reported discovering that the AHA's annual meeting and the APA offered more than they or their colleagues had previously recognized. But considerable impediments to their participating regularly at the meetings remain, ranging from financial issues (no travel budget), to contractual (some institutions require a time-consuming process with uncertain results before giving permission to travel during term), to personal (e.g. timing around holidays and family obligations), and cultural issues (few faculty have direct positive experience forming and submitting session proposals, and many assume that their research fields are underrepresented among accepted sessions, or that the meeting would not be welcoming to them because of their institutional affiliation or personal background).

Arranging for the initiative's eight attendees to travel to meetings in Chicago and New York served as a reminder that institutional and financial constraints on faculty tend to be greater at some HBCUs than among colleges and universities generally, and that HBCU faculty may require extra flexibility in scholarly societies' administrative processes if they are to participate. Any future phases of this work should not only aim to provide these faculty with the financial flexibility and individual assistance to overcome such obstacles, but should convey the possibility of these accommodations in advance, so that faculty feel comfortable asking for what they need.

The project's coordinators knew before our work began that many HBCU faculty teach predominantly first-generation and/or economically and academically underserved students, and that HBCU faculty members have been underrepresented in scholarly societies. What we learned through the course of this grant falls into three broad categories:

1. Significant and systemic institutional barriers at HBCUs limit historians and philosophers from participating in the AHA and APA.
2. Many HBCU scholars see the AHA and/or the APA as indifferent to, even dismissive of, HBCU faculty and their research interests.
3. The best groundwork for closer cooperation and engagement between the AHA/APA and HBCU historians and philosophers is to recognize and acknowledge what HBCU historians and philosophers do well despite serious time and financial constraints. On this basis we can form a partnership to broaden and deepen our respective work.

Many HBCUs value history and philosophy curricula only to the extent that they are treated as "service" disciplines and required in general education courses. A profound lack of institutional support for research characterizes these and other humanities. More than 75% of survey respondents reported departmental budgets that did not meet basic operating needs. Most of these scholars lack sufficient time to do research due to inordinately heavy teaching loads, the lack of course releases for research, and the lack of adequate (or often any) sabbaticals. Most of these scholars receive no financial support to do and share research: they lack adequate (sometimes any) funding for travel, conference fees, and accommodations, even when presenting work.

Many HBCU's are teaching, not research, institutions. And yet, their administrations increasingly expect faculty to pursue research and bring in grants to obtain promotion and tenure,

without providing the institutional support that makes this work possible. HBCU faculty have little access to existing fellowships and research opportunities, many of which have requirements structured for scholars with flexible teaching loads and institutional financial provisions. Combined with the lack of support for research in general and humanities research in particular, low HBCU faculty salaries constitute significant barriers to paying annual membership fees and the costs of conference attendance for multiple scholarly societies.

Four courses per term is a common teaching commitment among the many HBCU faculty who responded to our survey, though some are required to teach even more. Classes often have a minimum of 40 students, with faculty teaching 200 or more students each semester, frequently without teaching assistants. HBCU faculty members often provide students with remedial instruction concurrent with college-level work due to the large number of first-generation and/or economically and academically underserved students in their classes. This not only leaves less time and energy for research, but also restricts the kinds of teaching that they can do. In addition, many of these faculty members are required to hold long office hours, up to 20 hours each week.

Though many HBCU's are teaching institutions, their faculty still face a pervasive lack of time and financial support for professional development in teaching, much less to conduct research on teaching. For the AHA and APA, this situation suggests unexplored opportunities for targeted professional development programming, not only in person at association meetings, but also through webinars or podcasts on pedagogical and curricular topics.

Project participants also reported heavy service requirements that increase the impediments to research. The stress of navigating a minefield of campus politics and being confronted with the higher value placed on pre-professional programs while simultaneously serving on committees was a source of frustration, discouragement, and in some cases low morale. Faculty undergoing these experiences might not currently turn to their national disciplinary organizations for support on the broader issues facing their campuses. The APA and AHA should increase their efforts to let faculty know of strategies and resources available to support their individual efforts.

Nearly half of survey respondents considered their areas of research incompatible with those that dominate the APA and AHA. Many believe that the AHA and/or the APA focus on research about Europe and North America, and either dismiss or lack serious interest in research on the African Diaspora, Caribbean, and African History, and likewise for research into Caribbean, South American, African, and African-American philosophy. Some of this sentiment is based on old or inaccurate impressions of the actual breadth of research presented at today's meetings. A large number of respondents shared a perception that it would be difficult to have papers accepted for presentation, much less publication, by the AHA/APA, because of this lack of research area compatibility. A smaller number reported experiences of submitting session proposals and being rejected. HBCU attendees at the 2019 AHA meeting in Chicago conveyed surprise and positive feedback about the number of relevant history sessions on the program; those who attended the APA meeting in New York expressed pleasure at the number of relevant sessions on the program and greater optimism at having sessions on their research included in future meetings.

In general, HBCU historians and philosophers tend to participate in smaller scholarly societies with more specialized research interests and lower membership fees. Such regional or research-specific conferences are generally more affordable to attend (not being held in high-priced, often distant cities), and scholars believe they are more likely to have papers accepted for presentation and publication by smaller societies. The AHA/APA conferences seldom meet in the South, usually convening in cities that make attendance more difficult and expensive for HBCU faculty, particularly those with significant time and financial constraints.

Cost is not the only factor. Responses to the online survey indicate that other conferences—from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), to the African Studies Association (ASA), and the African American Intellectual Historical Society (AAIHS)—where respondents reported feeling a greater sense of affinity and community among participants were more popular with HBCU scholars. As a consequence of these problems—differences in areas of research specialization; subsequent difficulties presenting and publishing; AHA/APA conference location and cost—many HBCU faculty members have never attended an AHA or APA meeting

The perception that the AHA and APA are exclusively for faculty at elite institutions was widespread. Worse, many scholars feel that the AHA and APA attendees are unwelcoming of, even hostile to, their colleagues from HBCUs. This phenomenon is likely not unique to HBCU faculty but might reflect a more general sense among African American historians and philosophers who are not at HBCUs as well. Taken with responses to questions about the other societies to which people belonged, these responses reflect an underlying desire for a strong sense of community. The task for scholarly societies is to find better ways to extend and strengthen a sense of belonging and support for all scholars working in the same or shared disciplines.

Following the grant's end, we have three overarching goals drawn from what we learned over the course of the project. First, the AHA and the APA must improve access for HBCU historians and philosophers to the resources and academic networks that both societies provide. In turn, the scholarship and pedagogy of philosophers and historians at HBCUs can and should improve the work of the AHA and the APA. Finally, the AHA and APA will continue learning from HBCU faculty about their continuing needs and research interests, and how our respective associations can better respond for the benefit of all.

The work of fulfilling these goals has already begun. At its January 2019 meeting, AHA Council [voted](#) to establish “an ad hoc committee to explore the history of the AHA with regard to racial discrimination,” and to answer questions underlying the perceptions of AHA/APA exclusivity shared in survey responses. How did AHA and APA desegregate? When and who were the first HBCU faculty members? We also received input on annual meetings from invited HBCU faculty (the AHA's in Chicago in 2019, and the APA's in New York City the same year) and helped the [National Humanities Center](#) to market their HBCU faculty fellowships and recruit more applicants. In the future, another possibility could see the National Humanities Center in North Carolina take advantage of their location to establish an event focused on the needs of HBCU faculty or departments; they have offered meeting space and would like to organize an HBCU conference with the APA and AHA, possibly a workshop for department chairs or something

similar that emphasizes professional development for humanities leadership. This will need additional funding, especially for participants' and speakers' travel.

Longer-term goals have been suggested but not begun. The difficulty that many HBCU scholars reported in carrying out research could be mitigated, for instance, by providing free digital access to research libraries' subscriptions, and (not in-residence) research fellowships through well-endowed university departments. The moment of racial reconciliation and acknowledgement of complicity in white supremacy that a number of elite institutions are now facing could facilitate arrangements that match scholars from HBCUs with those departments. The role of the AHA and APA would be to introduce the idea and, with help from a funder or another convening organization, to mediate conversations with contacts at well-resourced universities. Many existing research fellowships and other opportunities have requirements structured for scholars who operate with more teaching and financial flexibility than is typical at HBCUs.

The AHA/APA plan to conduct a follow-up survey on what interventions would lead HBCU faculty to engage more substantively with either organization, specifically to become members and attend the societies' meetings. Helping departments and programs promote the philosophy and history majors will also remain a central goal, though more outreach is needed on existing resources. It would be useful for disciplinary societies to support efforts at recruiting students to take history and philosophy courses, and to offer professional development for faculty on specific pedagogical strategies to improve learning for students who are unprepared for college-level academic work when they matriculate. Helping faculty communicate to college and university administrators what historians and philosophers actually do will build support for the disciplines within their own institutions.

Southern locations make it easier and less expensive for most HBCU faculty to attend conferences or meetings; Washington D.C., for instance, is a more HBCU-friendly choice than New York. Societies should consider hosting regional or metro Atlanta meetings of HBCU humanities faculty, with an agenda of institutional and program-related issues (recruiting students, pedagogy, chair's workshops). Collaboration across institutions is rare, even among HBCUs themselves, and faculty would welcome the chance to meet under the auspices of a scholarly society to discuss shared issues and concerns. Commitments to fundraising for HBCU conference participation will be essential. And widespread perceptions that scholarly societies are exclusive or less welcoming of colleagues from non-elite colleges and universities will need combatting. Combined with issues of insufficient travel money, this perception is an obstacle to greater HBCU faculty participation.

Scholarly societies should help promote the professional development work they are doing with faculty at teaching-focused institutions. Long, required office hours provide a distinct opportunity for in-seat professional development to reach these faculty members (i.e. webinars, simultaneous online discussions). Faculty institutes held at the start of school years, to which the AHA/APA would send speakers and work with department chairs or others on programming, could prove valuable. Societies might offer to help with agendas and speakers for faculty institutes at Morgan State and possibly Hampton University, as well as doing a better job promoting the function that large societies can perform as a site for professionally-oriented conversations that are too difficult to have among colleagues on their home campus because of

internal politics, turf battles, and leadership hierarchies that can have a chilling effect on faculty. It might be worth conducting outreach along these lines to historians and philosophers at a range of institutions.

Among the APA's ambitions are plans to elicit HBCU sessions from the sections, and to increase submissions from representative scholars. Papers covering underrepresented areas appear at other, small conferences; they should be on APA programs. For members of program committees to review Africana philosophy submissions, they must have those submissions in the first place. An online flyer inviting submissions should be created and circulated to multiple places. Additionally, the APA has plans to implement a system of topic tags for meeting programs to identify sessions of interest—perhaps a hashtag system for topics, AOS, and identities—to improve representation and make diversity more visible and accessible to meeting attendees. Scheduling conflicts will be avoided within topics that have only a few sessions, such as “black philosophy.”

Virtual programming will constitute an unexpectedly large part of our shared work in the months ahead. The APA and AHA had plans to make the annual meeting session submission process more approachable and inclusive—perhaps combining PowerPoint and personable interview snippets into one how-to-submit-a-strong-annual-meeting-session-proposal video—and with an eye towards the return to in-person meetings in the future, that need not change. More specifically: the AHA's Equity Prize is one of the few with no money attached. If we value this work, we should reward it monetarily.

HBCU faculty commit extraordinary time and energy to teaching, tutoring, and mentoring their students to ensure their academic success. These faculty members create pedagogical innovations to retain academic rigor while reaching underprepared students, often without any institutional or other professional development resources. Many of these same faculty members devote significant additional time to performing institutional, community, regional, national, and international service, advancing their institutions' long-standing missions to serve African-American students and communities. The APA and AHA can do more to recognize and effectively promote the contributions that HBCU members can make to professional development resources, publications, and programming across disciplines.

The odds are against the countless HBCU scholars who persist in their research despite a lack of financial support or time and quiet in which to do their work—assets that faculty members at better resourced institutions deem the norm. These historians and philosophers do significant research in addition to their teaching and service. In fulfilling the teacher-scholar model under adverse circumstances, they advance their institutions' long-standing missions to serve African-American students and communities. The AHA and APA should see themselves as partners in this endeavor, and work to make that vision a reality.