Complexion privilege and color bias have long acted in concert with racism to foster intraracial forms of stratification among African Americans such as the tendency for educational levels and other measurable outcomes (e.g., income) to correspond with skin tone. In this article, we examine the salience of color prejudice at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), including its historical origins, manifestations, and damaging results. We begin with a brief history of Black colleges and then present a historical perspective on colorism in the United States. Based on our synthesis, we offer recommendations for how institutional stakeholders may counter and dismantle colorist issues that commonly arise in HBCU contexts. Last, recommendations for future research and practice are presented.

COLORISM IS a form of discrimination, based on skin tone, that generally privileges lighter-skinned Blacks and penalizes darker-skinned Blacks (Allen, Telles, & Hunter, 2000; Hunter, 2007, 2008; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). Scholars generally recognize that other physical characteristics such as eye color and hair texture also act alongside skin color to inform color prejudice (Hill, 2002). The idea that lighter skin and White European features are “best” has resulted in the disproportionate advancement and positive representation of lighter-skinned Blacks over darker-skinned Blacks in many aspects of daily life, such as the workplace (Keith & Herring, 1991) and media outlets (Fears, 1998). Issues of colorism also regularly surface within educational sectors such as elevated suspension rates that exist among dark-complexioned youths.

Marybeth Gasman is professor of higher education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She also serves as the director of the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. Ufuoma Abiola is the associate director of academic advising at the Wharton School and is a doctoral student in higher education at the University of Pennsylvania.

Correspondence should be addressed to Marybeth Gasman, Penn GSE Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216. E-mail: mgasman@gse.upenn.edu.
(Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, 2013). Specific to the historically Black college and university (HBCU) community, color-based discrimination is frequently identifiable within fraternities and sororities, homecoming queen competitions, and student leadership positions (Giddings, 2007; Taylor, 2009). In this article, we examine colorism at HBCUs, including its historical origins, manifestations, and damaging results. We begin with a brief overview of Black colleges and then present a historical perspective on colorism in the United States. Based on our synthesis, we offer suggestions for how individuals and organizations that are affiliated with HBCUs may work to eradicate color discrimination on contemporary campuses. The recommendations are applicable to other educational settings as well. We conclude by noting how researchers and practitioners may act on or extend the article’s themes in both research and practice.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities—A Backdrop

HBCUs are the only institutions in the United States that were created for the express purpose of educating African Americans. Most HBCUs were created during the decades after the Civil War until 1964. Many campuses were started by the federal government’s Freedmen’s Bureau with the assistance of Whites—primarily abolitionist missionaries and Northern philanthropists who either wanted to bring religion to Blacks or train them for industrial enterprises. Many African Americans also established HBCUs through the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Gasman & Tudico, 2009).

Until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, HBCUs were generally the only higher education option that was available for most African Americans, with the exception of a few colleges in the North. With the push for integration of historically White institutions, enrollments dropped at HBCUs and their role of educating the near entirety of the Black middle class shifted; today they only enroll 11% of Black students in the United States (Gasman, 2013; Gasman & Tudico, 2009). In all, the 105 HBCUs that currently operate represent less than 3% of colleges and universities in the nation (Gasman, 2013; Gasman & Tudico, 2009). These institutions include organizations that are public and private, religiously-affiliated and non-sectarian, two- and four-year, selective and open enrollment, urban and rural.

Historical Perspective on Colorism

Historically in the United States, darker-skinned Blacks have been considered to be inferior to their lighter-skinned counterparts (Frazier, 1957). Colorism ideology in the United States stems from slavery where the closer one was to White phenotypically, the better, a stance that was manifested in the preferential treatment that lighter-complexioned house slaves received in comparison to darker field slaves (Johnson, 2001). In fact, throughout slavery the belief that lighter-skinned Blacks were best suited for intellectual and skilled tasks was common (Johnson, 2001; Neal & Wilson, 1989), as assignments among bondsmen (e.g., field laborers, butlers, cooks) intersected with skin color. Dark-complexioned Black slaves were the epitome of labor. And, as Johnson noted, their dark skin symbolized work and became intertwined with the concepts of physicality, heavy lifting, and intellectual degradation. In fact, Johnson (2001) wrote that

Skin color often served as a stand-in for acclimation. There is a litany of statements to the effect that the “blackest” slaves were the healthiest. From the published writings of Samuel Cartwright (“All Negroes are not equally black—the blacker the stronger”) to the slave-market wish list sent by John Knight to his father-in-law (“I must have if possible the jet black Negroes, [they] stand this climate the best”), White men in the antebellum South talked to one another as if they could see slaves’ constitution by looking at their complexion. (pp. 139–140)
In contrast, historical records point to a more favorable orientation toward light-complexioned slaves. These individuals were sometimes manumitted by their White slave-owning fathers (African American Lives, 2006), and in slave owners’ records light-complexioned Black women were depicted as smarter, kinder, gentler, more attractive, and, most frequently, described as more delicate than darker-skinned Black women (Johnson, 2001). For White slave owners, the purchase of a Black female slave with light skin, long hair, and White European physical features marked a high social status for the slaveholder, as these women were sold at a much higher price than their counterparts (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Johnson, 2001). The famed quadroon balls held in New Orleans and Whites’ willingness to train light-complexioned Blacks to be artisans (Blassingame, 1973) also testify to the generally more positive stance that White society held toward light-complexioned Blacks during slavery and Reconstruction.

Social scientists have also documented that Blacks exhibited similar biases as light-complexioned African Americans often distanced themselves from dark-complexioned Blacks through fraternal organizations, blue vein societies (veins showing through the skin), and marriage preferences. The brown paper bag test was long used as a means of determining whether a Black person had light skin or dark skin (Kerr, 2005), and it became a popular method that Black churches, fraternities, sororities, and social clubs used to bar entry to darker-skinned Blacks to preserve elite and color-conscious circles (Giddings, 2007; Hall, 1992; Maddox & Gray, 2002). As such, colorism has, historically, operated both interracially and intraracially. On both fronts, however, colorism succeeded in suppressing and fragmenting Black communities by manufacturing social division and spurring intragroup friction, hostility, and animosity. The phenomenon has had a critical influence on the psyche of Blacks for decades that, arguably, is still significant today (Norwood, 2014).

Specific to educational sectors, color privilege positioned fair-skinned Blacks to benefit from both formal and informal educational opportunities. Skilled bondsmen were sometimes able to apprentice their children in trades of the day such as bootmaking, cabinetmaking, painting, bricklaying, and blacksmithing—all opportunities that were a farther reach for unskilled slave laborers. Moreover, slaves who became literate could teach their children to read and write, thereby passing on educational advantages generationally. As Blassingame (1973) and other historians have noted (e.g., Litwack & Meier, 1988), such factors coalesced to create a subset of bondsmen and free Blacks who could use their knowledge and skills to purchase their freedom, as well as that of other family members, create wealth, enter leadership positions during Reconstruction, and enroll in newly-created, postwar Black colleges and universities on more secure footing than some of their peers.

**Colorism at HBCUs**

The link between colorism and HBCUs is complex and a bit murky, as education uplifted African Americans but also allowed some members of the community to differentiate themselves from the masses—a practice that is present in all racial and ethnic groups. When based on color, privilege differentiation caused a rift among Blacks (Gatewood, 2000). According to Jones (2000), after the fall of slavery, lighter-skinned Blacks used a combination of their skin color, informal education learned in plantation houses, and adoption of White values to assimilate into White culture to the extent that Whites would allow them to do so. Taylor (2009) added that “fair-skinned Blacks and mulattoes were more likely to gain well-paying employment, receive a formal education, travel internationally, and be moderately accepted by Whites in the general population” (p. 195).

Much like the pecking order among all colleges and universities that perpetuates elitism, HBCUs have a pecking order that is named after the Ivy League. Coined the Negro Ivy League, the term refers to a select group of institutions that educate the upper crust of Black society—or at least did throughout the history of HBCUs. These
institutions include Dillard University in Louisiana; Spelman College and Morehouse College in Georgia; Howard University in Washington, DC; Hampton University in Virginia; Tuskegee University in Alabama; and Fisk University in Tennessee. According to Taylor (2009), Spelman, Morehouse, and Howard, are the best of the best among these institutions, with their liberal arts curricula and esteemed positioning among Whites. Lighter-skinned Blacks frequented these three institutions, above the others, thus creating clusters of light-skinned Blacks and making their presence the norm on campus early on (Gatewood, 2000). According to Taylor (2009):

> From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, HBCUs served as either a barricade or a conduit toward achieving social acceptance and influence within the Black community. Whether Black colleges were a barrier or a conduit to success depended upon one’s skin color, family status, and the education level of the family. (p. 197; see also Gatewood, 2000, for more detail)

Both Taylor (2009) and Gatewood (2000) provide extensive evidence that HBCUs contributed to the creation of the Black bourgeoisie and that this bourgeoisie was undergirded by skin tone bias.

Extracurricular outlets often served as the forum in which skin tone discrimination on HBCU campuses was nurtured. The problem was particularly pronounced in Black sororities (Giddings, 2007; Sheffer-Parrott, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Although most Black Greek organizations were started as a way of bringing Blacks together on college campuses and creating a sense of solidarity, potential sorority sisters at many institutions were subject to blue vein and brown paper bag tests to see if they were too dark to be admitted to the organization (Giddings, 2007; Sheffer-Parrott, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Women who did not pass the test were denied admission. HBCU homecoming beauty queens and members of the homecoming court also brought skin tone and colorism dynamics into play. The vast majority of queens and court members were light-skinned and these individuals were often handpicked by presidents of HBCUs (Taylor, 2009). Moreover, if a darker-skinned woman was chosen as Homecoming Queen, she risked being jeered and becoming the victim of insults (Sheffer-Parrott, 2009; Taylor, 2009).

The politics of colorism played out in cinematic form in 1988, when director Spike Lee, a Morehouse College graduate, depicted the tensions between students of various skin tones in School Daze (Lee, Blake, Jones, Lee, & Ross, 1988). Certainly, many social organizations are philanthropic and have a long history of volunteerism (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Parks & Phillips, 2005). Yet, while Blacks worked to uplift the race and stamp out racial prejudice, many groups ironically engaged in related practices of color prejudice that were tied to remnants of slavery.

During the Civil Rights Movement, HBCU campuses and their skin tone politics changed somewhat. With the onset of the Black Power Movement, ideas of Blackness were embraced and students took pride in their darker hues, natural hair, and African heritage. According to some onlookers, lighter-skinned Blacks were oftentimes held suspect and questioned about the authenticity of their Blackness and their allegiance to Black cultures and traditions. As a consequence, colorism seemed to increasingly encompass new dimensions of backlash, wherein light-complexioned people perceived that they were marginalized within their own communities. Although the matter is less commonly explored, a growing number of voices are directing attention to the issue (Hunter, 2008; Piper, 1992).

**Recommendations for HBCU Campuses and Concluding Thoughts**

Little attention has been paid to the various educational settings in which colorism manifests (Monroe, 2013). HBCUs are ripe with skin tone issues and examining these concerns may help to provide a better understanding of larger societal discrimination trends. To combat colorism on
HBCU campuses, we urge campus leaders to act on at least four recommendations.

First, appropriate departments should provide regularly structured opportunities for students to engage the topic through instruction and course offerings. Social science and humanities classes are excellent forums in which to critically analyze a phenomenon that deeply affects the Black community, but it is often only examined anecdotally. Numerous literary pieces address the matter, such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970) and *Passing* by Nella Larsen (1929/2007), which can be included on appropriate reading lists. Students studying in areas such as criminal justice, sociology, education, and other social science disciplines should also complete programs of study that deliver a sound understanding of how colorism functions concurrently with racism.

Second, leaders should acknowledge and move the topic into campuswide spaces through brown bag gatherings, film discussions, and invited speaker series. For example, weaving discussions of colorism into student orientation events along with issues around sexism or religious difference could be beneficial to students. It would be advantageous for HBCUs to develop and implement on-campus programming such as moderated conversations, town hall forums, colloquia, and/or symposiums on colorism as it is oftentimes not discussed due to the uncomfortable nature of the topic. Documentaries such as *Dark Girls* (Berry, Berry & Duke, 2011) examine the topic of skin tone bias and colorism in ways that college populations may find particularly engaging. Conversations with faculty, administrators, and staff around this issue are necessary to create an inclusive, empowering environment.

Third, create professional development opportunities that explicitly focus on colorism. Researchers have documented that colorism can influence self-esteem and self-efficacy among Black adults (Thompson & Keith, 2001). Staff members who work in student support positions, such as campus psychologists, should be aware of challenges that students may confront as related to skin color and be trained in how to help them.

Finally, undertake critical self-studies. Does collected data reveal any troubling patterns of colorism? Taylor (2009) interviewed a Howard University professor who expressed the sentiment that colorism is still very much alive on HBCU campuses and, in particular, at Howard. The professor noted that modern day brown paper bag tests occur within social groups, within the Homecoming Court, and when choosing students for leadership roles. For example, at both Howard and Hampton Universities, student leaders have complained that they were not selected for leadership roles due to skin color, despite having better qualifications than their light-skinned counterparts (Taylor, 2009). College campuses must answer hard questions. Who are the students that represent the campus in website photographs, flyers, or other forms of institutional literature? Does color prejudice surface in matters that involve faculty members? Which students are selected for awards and special opportunities and why? Tackling questions of this nature will help push institutions to identify colorism in action and address the problem.

Colorism and skin tone bias can be difficult topics to discuss, especially among college students. However, HBCUs need these opportunities and venues for disclosure. We urge constituents at HBCUs to lean into discomfort with addressing and tackling the colorism phenomenon. Colorism can have damaging, life-long effects, and HBCUs have the skills and knowledge that are needed to spearhead counter movements against the negative depictions of both light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans. HBCUs must contribute to the dismantling of colorism rather than participate in its perpetuation.

Although limited research pertaining to higher education has been conducted on Black Greek letter organizations, very little has focused on issues of elitism or colorism on HBCU campuses. As a result, sparse information exists regarding issues of skin tone on these campuses or within modern day Black Greek organizations. Additional knowledge in this area could inform agendas for student affairs functions on campus as well as plans for various organizations.
HBCUs are deeply diverse, but to many they appear monolithic. Research that looks at the influence of within-race diversity and skin color could greatly inform society’s understanding of the needs of Black students within predominately Black environments and illuminate the types of interventions and supports that are needed to evolve in healthy ways.

References


Neal, A. M., & Wilson, M. L. (1989). The role of skin color and features in the Black community:
Implications for Black women and therapy. *Clinical Psychology Review, 9*, 323–333.

**Additional Resources**

   This book offers a longitudinal perspective on Blacks’ experiences in the United States. Although it does not focus exclusively on education, the volume contains extensive contextual information that will help readers to understand trends in the field and the implications of color variation among African Americans.

   This article provides an overview of popular supplemental student activities at HBCUs, such as debating clubs and literary societies. The author writes that fraternities and sororities were generally included later, in part, because some leaders were concerned that such groups might reflect discriminatory practices of many late 19th-century social clubs such as blue-vein tests.

   This article provides an overview of Black women’s collegiate education at the Seven Sister Colleges (Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, Barnard) from the time that each institution opened until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although the piece does not explicitly focus on colorism, the author comments on how the first Black entrants’ complexions, among other factors such as family background, influenced their experiences. In contrast to Black women who entered White coeducational institutions or HBCUs in the South, Seven Sister College graduates joined many male disciplines and became some of the first Black female physicians, lawyers, and scientists.
Copyright of Theory Into Practice is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.