The Mission and History of Howard University

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Howard University is a historically rich institution with strong ties to America’s growth, particularly after the Civil War. The highlights of our research of this institution include Howard’s mission and how it has changed through the years, the creation of the university, and critiques of select available histories.

The Mission

To understand the focus and goals of any institution, one can look only as far as the institutional mission. Howard University’s formal mission is:

Howard University, a culturally diverse, comprehensive, research intensive and historically Black private university, provides an educational experience of exceptional quality at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels to students of high academic standing and potential, with particular emphasis upon educational opportunities for Black students. Moreover, the University is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a cadre of faculty who are, through their teaching, research and service, committed to the development of distinguished, historically aware, and compassionate graduates and to the discovery of solutions to human problems in the United States and throughout the world. With an abiding interest in both domestic and international affairs, the University is committed to continuing to produce leaders for America and the global community. (Mission & Vision Priorities, n.d.)

Through the mission, Howard University has incorporated its founding principles. In addition, today Howard University’s mission holds true in how it portrays education, academics, faculty, and student life on a daily basis.
Over time, this has evolved into a dual mission to include Howard’s dedication to
the education of all persons and the uplift of the Black community.

Howard University is committed to the philosophy of the publicly-
supported university which holds that all persons, irrespective of race,
creed, color, sex religion, or national origin who are capable of pursuing a
higher education should be given the opportunity to do so. (Logan, 1968,
p. 578)

Although the dual mission of an institution is explicitly stated, the living mission can be understood in “how students, faculty, administrators, graduates, and others describe what the college is and is trying to accomplish” (Amey & Reesor, 2009, p. 26). In a commencement address at Howard University, W.E.B. DuBois concluded that the average college man is “untouched by real culture. He deliberately surrenders to selfish and even silly ideals, swarming into semi-professional athletics and Greek letter societies, and affecting to despise scholarship and the hard grind of study and research.” (Thelin, p. 187) However, Howard University’s living mission is to encourage the standard understanding of education. They seek to advance their students’ education by utilizing cultural, societal, and political resources.

The mission at Howard University has evolved to help the university and campus to be a better atmosphere for all students with the dual mission. Over time, the students, faculty, administrators, and graduates have helped to showcase Howard’s mission by living it every day. Through the next few pages you will see the evolution of Howard University’s history and discover how the mission has (and still is) been put into place on the campus.
The Creation of Howard University

Shortly after the Civil War, in 1866, the First Congregational Society of Washington wanted to establish a seminary to educate and train African-American clergymen. Later that year, a second proposal expanded that vision for “The Howard Normal and Theological Institute for the Education of Teachers and Preachers” (Logan, 1968, p. 3). At the time, there was a belief in the “inherent inferiority” of African Americans. This kept original discussions of educating freedmen and freemen from expanding beyond the creation of seminary or Normal schools (Logan, 1968). The necessity to establish an institution such as Howard became even more apparent. The founders believed “that slaves and the children of slaves could be educated in the same manner as all others, and that the advantages of higher education should be made available to all persons, without regard to distinctions of race, sex, creed, or nationality” (Logan, 1968, vii). The new institution was named in honor of General Oliver Otis Howard, a Civil War hero who was both a founder of the University and commissioner of the Freedman’s Bureau (Howard University, n.d.). Within the first two years, the University also added the colleges of Liberal Arts and Medicine.

Since its development, Howard has received annual government stipends. In 1879, Congress approved a special appropriation for the University. The charter was amended in 1928 to allow an annual federal appropriation for construction, development, improvement and maintenance of the University (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Stipends such as these were used to help strengthen institutions that catered towards an underrepresented population of Black students, who may otherwise not have attended an institution of higher education.
Currently, Howard continues to receive the federal stipend which is intended to fund academic programs, endowment programs, and the Howard University Hospital. Some of these programs include construction for new and updated academic buildings, research, and technology resources for the entire university (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). For the past ten years, the stipend for the academic programs has ranged from $200 million to $210 million. The endowment program means that the government will match the support that Howard can gain on its own. Therefore, this stipend is constantly changing depending on how much money the school can raise from private donors. However, the amount that Howard chooses to raise has remained the same for the past three years. The purpose of this program is to help Howard continue to increase its financial strength and independence by gaining more private contributions. In regards to the Howard University Hospital, it continues to receive a stipend as it is a major ambulatory and acute center as well as a large teaching and training hospital in the Washington, D.C. area. For the last ten years, this stipend has ranged from $28 million to $31 million. With a combined federal stipend of about $240 million a year, Howard has been able to continually provide a quality education for its students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Although Howard is now a historically Black institution (HBCU), the school’s first faculty members and first four students to receive degrees were White. However, changes in the racial composition of the administration and student body began to change in 1926, when Howard University named Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson as the first Black president of the institution. In 1926, student enrollment was at 1,700 and there was a budget of only $700,000 (Howard University, n.d.). During Dr. Johnson’s long
tenure as President (1926 - 1960), he began to replace the White instructors with qualified Black educators. During Johnson’s term the faculty included some of the most notable African American scholars of the time (McKinney, 1997). This included: philosopher and Rhodes Scholar, Alain Locke; Nobel Laureate, Charles Drew; noted chemist, Percy Julian; and Harlem Renaissance poet, Sterling Brown (McKinney, 1997).

Under his leadership, Howard “received accreditation for all of its schools and colleges, and graduated most of the leading scholars of the race in the fields of medicine, law, engineering, social work, education, and many others” (Hunter, 1994, p. 54). Facilities in Howard were also expanded. At the time of Johnson’s retirement in 1960, the university had grown to 10 schools and colleges, while enrollment had increased to over 6,000 students, and the budget had grown to $8 million (Howard University, n.d.).

During his tenure, Johnson appointed Charles Hamilton Houston as the dean of the law school; Hamilton Houston was widely regarded as the individual who constructed the legal strategy which led to the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. Board of Education (McKinney, 1997). Another key indicator of the University’s enhanced academic status was the introduction and accreditation of a graduate college that had the authority to grant doctoral degrees (Howard University, n.d.).

An additional factor in Howard’s history was its role during WWII. During that time, President Johnson spoke to the New York Urban League, Inc., pointed out the similar causes between African Americans in the U.S. and Jews in Europe. In his speech, Johnson stated that “We do more than sympathize with the Jewish people. We identify ourselves with them as in a common cause, for we recognize that what they suffer is a forerunner of what we in America and Africa will inevitably suffer, if the
aggressive program of persecution comes to success” (Hunter, 1994, p. 56). President Johnson later condemned the actions of the Nazi’s against the Jewish people, and even called the United States to discard Jim-Crowism and promote democracy to all citizens.

During the time leading up to the war, there seemed to be a great push from Howard students, including multiple protests and surveys about volunteering for service in the war. In these surveys, which were given mostly to Black men, students responded that “unless the Negro would be benefited,” or “to protect my family,” that they would have no desire to volunteer their services (Hunter, 1994, p. 57). However, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, views began to shift and many people began to reconsider their political positions and attitudes toward the war. The attack urged hundreds of men to leave campus and volunteer their services, resulting in participation in the war effort becoming the number-one priority at Howard (Hunter, 1994, p. 62). Overall, the war had many effects on Howard, but most importantly was the impact it had on the young men that had served in the war. After returning from a long term of unpleasant military careers, one Howardite stated, “we’ve got to go from here and make sure blacks are included as first class citizens” (Hunter, 1994, p. 67). This attitude became campus wide, which resulted in the “momentum that would carry the struggle for equal rights at Howard and across the country,” all of which took place under the term of President Johnson (Hunter, 1994, p. 68). Dr. Johnson’s successor was Dr. James M. Nabrit, Jr. An established constitutional lawyer and educator, Dr. Nabrit established what is generally considered the first official course in civil rights in an American law school during his time as Dean.
Today, Howard University is one of only 48 U.S. private, Doctoral/Research-Extensive universities, and is comprised of 12 schools and colleges with 10,500 students enjoying academic pursuits in more than 120 areas of study leading to undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees. The University continues to attract the nation’s top students and produces more on-campus African-American Ph.D.s than any other university in the world.

**Critique of Select Histories**

**Howard University: ‘Capstone of Negro education’ during World War II**

When considering the absent voices of the Howard University story, we must examine the time period surrounding the Second World War. During this period, “all male college students between the ages of 21 and 36 years were required to register for the selective draft” (Hunter, 1994, p. 59). The voices of these students were unheard, simply due to the fact that they were fulfilling their duty by providing service in the United States military. Whether it was due to a low representation of males or other underlying reasons, the effects of the war are still apparent at Howard and are demonstrated through the significant difference between male and female enrollment. The demographics of Howard University show that women make up a total of 65% of the campus, while men make up only 35%. This absence of male voices may have influenced the portrayal of Howard University and may continue to affect future historical recordings.

**Howard University Brief History**

Through reviewing the brief history provided on the Howard University website, it is clear that the institution functions with a public relations purpose. This history is
included on a subpage entitled, “Explore Howard University,” which indicates that it is one of many pages used to recruit new students to the university. The history is overtly biased in a way that the information provides a minimal amount of details. The stories emphasize the positive historical highlights and portray Howard University as having a grand and pleasant history. However, we realize that such a wholesome recording of their history may be a great way to attract prospective students.

According to the Howard University web history, in 1969, Dr. Nabrit was succeeded by Dr. James E. Cheek, who had been the president of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Dr. Cheek retired in June 1989 (Howard University, n.d.). Not mentioned on the website is the fact that his retirement was in response to rampant protest by the student body against the appointment of RNC Chairman- Lee Atwater to the Board of Trustees. This included disrupting the school’s anniversary celebration and eventually occupying the administration building (Kinzie & Alexander, 2007). He was followed by an Interim President, Dr. Carlton P. Alexis, who had been the University’s Executive Vice President. In 1989, the Board of Trustees announced the appointment of Dr. Franklyn G. Jenifer to head the University. Dr. Jenifer was the first alumnus of Howard to serve as president in its 123-year history (Howard University, n.d.). Dr. Jenifer served through 1994, followed by the appointment of Dr. Joyce A. Ladner as interim President.

In 1995, H. Patrick Swygert was chosen as Howard’s 15th president. Swygert was another alumnus of Howard University, receiving a Bachelor’s degree in history in 1965 and a law degree in 1968. Not mentioned on the website is that in April 2007, the head of the faculty senate called for the ousting of Howard University President, H.
Patrick Swygert, saying that the school was in a state of crisis and it was time to end “an intolerable condition of incompetence and dysfunction at the highest level” (Lamar, 1989). This came on the heels of several criticisms of Howard University and its management. The following month, Swygert announced that he would retire in June 2008 (Lamar, 1989). In 2008, Dr. Sidney A. Ribeau was appointed as the 16th president of Howard University.

**Howard University: The First Hundred Years**

One of the largest histories written about Howard University summarizes the first one hundred years of the institution’s history. This saga follows the major accomplishments and changes to the institution during different presidential administrations. Written as a celebration of Howard’s centennial, this book combines administrative accomplishments, social and political influences, and other factors that have sparked change throughout Howard University’s early years. A combination of the vertical perspective and horizontal perspective, this history allows the reader to consider not only the standalone events that have made Howard the institution is it today, but also the tumultuous times in which this institution evolved. The history of Howard University could not accurately be captured without considering those social influences, as they fueled the creation and expansion of this institution (Logan, 1968). While this history provides a detailed narrative of the social and political hardships faced by Howard administration, it fails to provide student perspectives, a critical component to any institutions history, as students form the heart of an institution and fuel much of the change on campus. What this source does provide, however, is some analysis of Howard’s history and some explanation of why certain events occurred the way they
Rayford Logan told the history of Howard University through multiple lenses. Although his work primarily focused the use of Romantic and Policy schools he was also able to merge components of the Cultural school. His version of Howard University’s history persuaded readers to focus on political and social influences that affected the establishment and historical changes of the institution. Logan frequently emphasized the role that administrators and external stakeholders had within Howard’s history. His message that Howard was established through governmental agendas “for the erection in the District of Columbia a college for the instruction of youth in liberal arts and sciences,” (Goodchild & Huk, 1990, p. 18) was frequently enforced. He also worked to dispel the image of Howard as a “Negro University,” commenting that the “small number of white students was a matter of choice and not of University policy” (Logan, 1968, p. 578). He mentioned that while “Howard’s Charter provided for the education of youth, it [could] hardly be denied that the Founders expected a sizable number of the students to be Negroes. Howard was thus unique because it also planned the education of a sizable number of Negro men and women, and white men and women” (Logan, 1968, p. 25). Logan’s depiction of Howard University’s history, although politically informative, glazed over the student and organizational influences that helped to shape the institution.

Logan utilized the Policy school as a lens to demonstrate that Howard University had roots in political policies. In the Policy school, “authors attempt to deepen the coherence of their complex descriptive narratives with casual referents. Such linkage often occurs, namely, when public policy historians show the relationship between
governmental action and collective collegiate developments…” (Goodchild & Huk, 1990, p. 250). According to Logan, the entire implication for the incorporation of Howard University was based on the political agenda of government officials. Logan began his historical study of Howard University by mentioning the preliminary discussions for the establishment of an institution such as Howard University. He mentioned the motivation of the Congregationalists who “envisioned an institution of the ‘higher grade’ for training colored preachers and teachers to help uplift some of the four million recently emancipated slaves and a quarter of a million Negroes who had been born free.” (Logan, 1968, p. 14). As Logan’s historical study continued, he discussed the influence of the Howard University founders and the role that national U.S. presidents had on the incorporation of the institution. Within his historical analysis, Logan was able to juxtapose the initial religious motivation of the Congregationalists, to “train colored preachers,” with the resulting incorporation of Howard as a liberal arts institution for the instruction of all youth (Logan, 1968, p. 12). Logan demonstrated the possible governmental influence and political roots of Howard University when he mentioned that, “on the same day that President Johnson signed the law for the incorporation of Howard University, he also signed a law for the establishment in Washington of a Federal ‘Department of Education… It [was] quite possible that the Founders had advance information about the imminent birth of the ‘Department of Education…” (Goodchild & Huk, 1990, p. 26). Logan utilized the Public Policy history approach to convey his analysis of Howard’s history to his readers. Although the policies and governmental influence do serve a major purpose in understanding the history of Howard, the institutional accomplishments including testimonies from students and
other stakeholders are absent from his analysis of the history.

Through the Romantic School, Logan utilized the Administrative history approach. “The administrative history approach features two groups, namely, presidential, and presidential-topical. Within the presidential group, historians portray presidents as: (1) overshadowing personalities influencing all activities, (2) powerful forces within institutions, or (3) dynamic leaders as organization catalysts” (Goodchild & Huk, 1990, p. 231). Logan divided several sections of the book, in order, by past university president. He often referenced the accomplishments of each administrator in order to show the progression of the institution. Throughout the entire chapter entitled, Fifteen Years of Trials and Progress, Logan discussed Howard’s history through the lens of the institution’s former administrators. Also, the structure of the book was done in relation to the changes in administration within Howard University and within the United States as a whole. The dichotomy between the development of Howard University and the development of the nation is also a salient theme throughout Logan’s historical analysis.

In the Cultural School, Logan was able to incorporate elements of the Synthetic Cultural history approach. “In a highly analytical fashion, these authors elaborate such vertices as a means to explain the external and internal forces driving the development of their institutions” (Goodchild & Huk, 1990, p. 265). Logan was able to portray to his readers the influence of internal administrators, and external policies and government involvement, on the history of Howard University. Logan also briefly commented on societal influences that helped to shape Howard University. He mentioned that “the Nation in the 1960s was confronted by one of its most serious crises in domestic
relations and foreign policy… Howard University inevitably was an important center of unrest” (Logan, 1968, p. 563). He also briefly discussed the importance of “the ‘Revolt of Negro Intellectuals’ against the educational, social, economic, and political ideas of Booker T. Washington” (Logan, 1968, p. 139). Logan was able to merge all of these elements together to provide his analysis of Howard University’s history.

The 100 year historical interpretation of Howard University, presented by Logan, was meant to give readers a different perspective on the founding and history of the university. Logan was able to utilize several approaches in order to portray the political undercurrents that fueled the establishment of the institution and continues to influence it today. Although the voice of students seems to be missing from Logan’s historical analysis, the book provides readers with an understanding of which political forces can be powerful in establishing a university and in determining its purpose.

**Conclusion**

Through our research we have learned that Howard University is indeed a school of historical excellence. We have also gained a better sense of appreciation for historically Black institutions in general. The key takeaway from our research, as future student affairs professionals, is the value of an institution’s history. Educators, researchers, and students should be encouraged to analytically interpret history and understand how several factors may contribute to the overall story that is told about an institution. As future student affairs practitioners and educators, we will benefit greatly from a deeper and thorough understanding of institutional histories.
References


http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget13/justifications/u-howard.pdf