

# The Role of a Historically Black College in Adventist Education

**A historically black college in the Adventist context offers (1) access to Christian education, (2) a value-plus factor that combines spirituality, sensitivity, and socialization, and (3) a wholistic educational package that deals with the total needs of not just African-Americans, but also diverse people from around the world.**

**S**ince their inception, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have provided an educational future and change catalyst for generations of African-Americans. This reality holds true inside as well as outside the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>1</sup>

Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama, the historically black college of Adventism, has a great deal to offer African-Americans and other blacks. Its blending of the three angels' messages, a health emphasis, and Spirit of Prophecy insights makes Oakwood's program a unique combination of Adventism and comprehensive education that has served its constituency well. It is as vital in the new millennium as in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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**By Delbert W. Baker**

## History

The history of HBCUs is one of struggle, breakthrough, and survival. The Civil War caused the U.S. educational system to undergo a revolution, thereby allowing the transformation of uneducated slaves into literate citizens.<sup>2</sup> HBCUs were the mechanism to accomplish this task.

Interestingly, the entity that first sponsored black colleges was the church.<sup>3</sup> While several denominations accepted the challenge of starting black colleges, Adventists moved slowly.<sup>4</sup>

The government was also crucial in facilitating the development of HBCUs. Still, it wasn't until 1890,

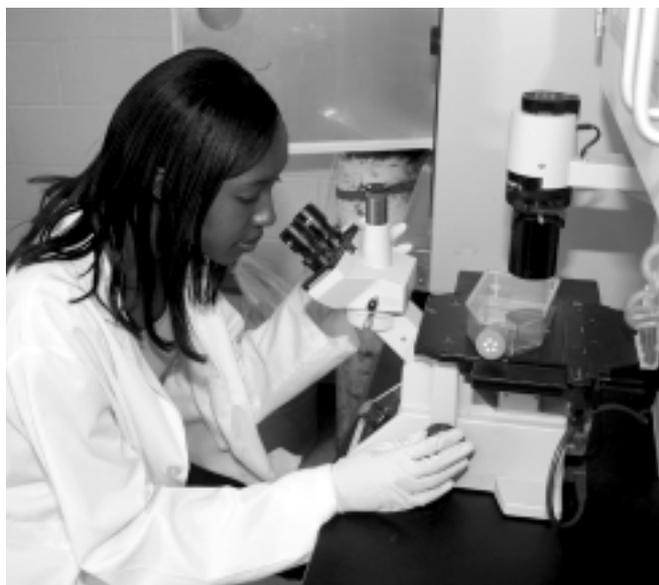
a quarter of a century after the Civil War, that blacks were given land to establish schools. The Southern states then established new land-grant institutions for blacks or took over existing public or private black institutions as land-grant colleges. However, because of inadequate funding, the fledgling institutions faced a long and difficult struggle.<sup>5</sup>

### Role and Direction

Although black colleges have had to adapt with the times, their basic mission remains essentially the same. In the early 1970s, the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education and other studies broadly defined the role of HBCUs as follows:<sup>6</sup> (1) to assume leadership in outreach programs of consultation and service to the black and minority communities; (2) to develop and expand programs of



Oakwood College business and technology building at night.



Oakwood College student in science lab.

education and occupational retraining for people of color; and (3) to continue developing alternate programs to provide improved postsecondary education for students who appreciate an alternate setting rather than the conventional institutions of higher learning. The study further outlined the HBCU role to assume leadership in the development of techniques of overcoming challenges for those who may be educationally disadvantaged; to stimulate the interest of black youth and other minorities in higher education in a conducive cultural setting; to serve as custodians for the archives of black Americans, think-

tanks, and as centers for the systematic study of their challenges and achievements; for the interpretation of black literature, religion, and art; and for the nurturing and modeling of role models.

However, in the new book *Stand and Prosper, Private Black Colleges and Their Students* (2001), Henry Drewry (an African-American) and Humphrey Doerman (an Anglo-American) note the lack of knowledge about HBCUs among the general population.

They observe that most Americans have little direct contact with private black colleges, have not visited one, and are not sure what they would expect if they did. They add that prior to the 1950s and 1960s, black Americans lived a very different history of civil rights and educational opportunity than did white Americans; a difference far greater than what was portrayed in most U.S. history courses.



Oakwood College honor students with President and Mrs. Delbert Baker.

Without appreciation of that difference, one cannot understand the accomplishments of black colleges. Nor can they judge the potential of HBCUs for further service to the nation.<sup>7</sup> Drewry and Doerman advocate that people move out of their comfort zone and visit HBCUs to better appreciate their invaluable service to society. This is a bridge worth crossing within the Adventist Church as well.

### Oakwood, the Adventist HBCU

In 1896, Adventist Church leaders established Oakwood College in response to Ellen White's insistence. It was designed to be an experiment to address the color issue and to assist the black race in the South through education and the gospel.<sup>8</sup> Since

white Seventh-day Adventist institutions were initially closed to blacks, for decades Oakwood College was the only means for African-American young people to obtain higher education in the Adventist Church.<sup>9</sup>

An ardent supporter of the black work, Ellen White remained committed and supportive of Oakwood until her death in 1915.<sup>10</sup> She saw it as playing a significant role in the work of God, in lifting the place of black people in society, and fulfilling a special eschatological role in preparing people for the Second Coming.<sup>11</sup> Foremost, Ellen White saw Oakwood as providing a center where the transforming power of the gospel could train and prepare leaders and workers for the cause of God and for a productive role in society.

### Enduring Purpose

Black scholars, educators, and researchers overwhelmingly continue to advocate the need for HBCUs. Further, African-American teachers consistently indicate their willingness to teach in and support black colleges.

A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that attendance at the nation's HBCUs began to rise in the late 1980s after 10 years of stable enrollments. In 1990, about 258,000 students attended the nation's 105 HBCUs, an enrollment gain of 16 percent over 1976. At the same time, according to a study in 1992, more students from other racial and ethnic groups attended HBCUs, making their student bodies slightly more diverse. Like other HBCUs, Oakwood's growth has been consistent, with increasing diversity and periodic growth surges.

Often people ask: "How are HBCUs faring today?" "What is their purpose now?" and "Are they really needed, since African-Americans can attend mainstream educational institutions?" The following points are from a study by researchers Williams and Harvey:<sup>12</sup>

### Value Analysis

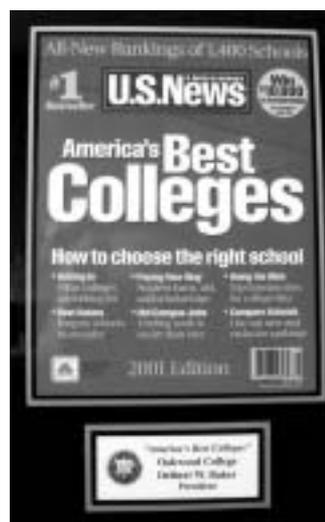
Most scholarship indicates that HBCUs confer significant benefits on their students and on society.<sup>13</sup> These observations relate equally to the value of black educational institutions in the Adventist Church as to HBCUs in the larger society. However, it needs to be stressed that, though predominantly black, Oakwood College welcomes members of every ethnic group.

**Graduation Success:** One way to measure the contributions of HBCUs is to examine the economic value of the education they offer. Although in 1990 they enrolled only 17 percent of America's black students, they graduated 27 percent. Dropout rates for black students at four-year HBCUs are much lower than for black students at other four-year institutions. Graduation rates, and the subsequent performance of graduates in the job market, have led economists to conclude that HBCUs are a bargain and that "they appear to be doing the most with limited public dollars."

**Academic Support:** HBCUs produce merit schol-

ars in all disciplines and provide significant academic support for students with weak high school backgrounds. Second to none, however, HBCUs are proven to provide a supportive social, cultural, and racial environment. Their students are more confident, more involved in campus activities, and more interactive with faculty. Oakwood and other HBCUs have been found to have healthy levels of self-esteem and self-confidence that motivate and inspire its students to notable positions as servant leaders in the church and society.

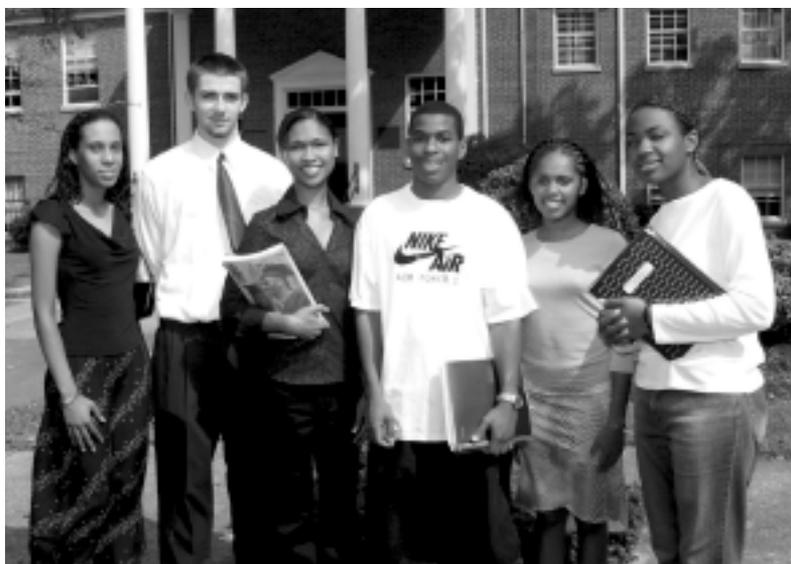
**Role Models/Faculty Relations:** HBCU faculties play a key



Oakwood College was listed among U.S. News and World Report's Best Colleges.



Oakwood College church.



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role in the success of their institutions, since they provide “greater social-psychological supports” for their students. In a comprehensive study, blacks who attended historically black public universities reported more favorable relations with professors than blacks who attended primarily white institutions. This resulted in better academic performance, greater social involvement, and higher occupational aspirations. Further, at HBCUs, students of color are constantly surrounded with positive visible leadership models.

**Clear Focus:** Other researchers have noted the “crippling distractions” for black students at many predominantly white institutions, which include the “oppressive weight of institutional bigotry, limited faculty expectations, and the daily struggle against overt and subtle forms of racism.” Without these burdens and obstructions, black students at HBCUs can concentrate on academic matters.

### The Oakwood Factor

Oakwood College mirrors the success of the best of the HBCUs. During the last decades of the 20th century, Oakwood enrolled approximately 50 percent of African-Americans in Adventist schools and yet graduated more than 85 percent of those who completed college. During the past 60 years, more than 85 percent of the workers in regional conferences (black-administered conferences in the Adventist Church) have obtained all or at least part of their education at Oakwood College. Oakwood’s graduates work all over the world to assist humanity and build the work of the church. Further, Oakwood has consistently been among the top 10 institutions in the U.S. that have graduated the largest number of black persons who have been accepted into medical schools and have graduated. And for the past few years, it has been listed in *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the best colleges in the Southern part of the U.S.

Oakwood combines the values listed above with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the powerful lifestyle teachings of the Adventist Church. It therefore offers a truly unique, success-oriented package for all persons interested in its unique culture. This reality is summarized by its model: “Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve,” and its aim: “Education, Excellence, Eternity.”

### Lessons Worth Learning

Clearly, HBCUs, and Oakwood College in particular, continue to provide invaluable service to society and to the Adventist Church.

What, then, can we learn from the progress of Oakwood College, a historically black college, in the context of higher Adventist education?

1. To value diversity in institutions as we do in people. God can use each institution for a unique role and function as it responds accordingly to its constituents.
2. To celebrate the fact that the vision and investments of our Adventist predecessors have produced diversity that has blessed the church and society.
3. To affirm and support one another as we collaborate and learn from each other.
4. To take the time to become aware of the diversity of our

institutions and thereby rediscover our origins. We can listen and learn from those who differ from us.

5. To reaffirm our commitment to our shared mission as institutions of higher learning. And to demonstrate the value-plus model of the gospel (i.e., love, respect, acceptance, sensitivity) in our academic program.

### Conclusion

Above all, the ultimate goal of the Adventist HBCU, as well as other church institutions of higher learning, is to seek that higher, loftier view that makes our education distinct. Ellen

White says it best: “True education . . . has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”<sup>14</sup>



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