***Reimagining Resilience at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs):
Emergent Governance, Leadership, and Crisis Management Practices***

Melanie S. Johnson, Southern University and A & M College, United States
Samantha Thompson, Southern University Law Center, United States

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for an array of challenges in higher education, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). These challenges included not only reinventing traditional pedagogical approaches but restructuring their academic service delivery options. As a result, examining these complexities warrants reviewing the role of governing boards, leadership, and their decision-making processes, which will be critical to the resilience of these institutions. Moreover, this crisis has demonstrated the need for HBCUs to collectively work together and not in silos, as well as igniting the urgent call for university board members to play a more active role in the governance of their institutions. Board members have a unique responsibility to engage in crisis management best practices to mitigate severe risks to their organizations. Essentially, poor crisis management can have egregious effects on organizational reputation and financial performance. Considering these challenges, this study examined the role of crisis management and investigated the decision-making processes of the governing boards and leadership at four (4) HBCUs. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, this study will highlight the importance of leadership in times of crisis, explore the complexities of board decision-making, and provide insights and strategies to strengthen and improve HBCUs through crisis management models. The paper will also foster a dialogue about how university boards can address constantly changing educational priorities in the wake of the pandemic.

Keywords: HBCUs, COVID-19, Crisis Management, Governance, Leadership

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Introduction

Although HBCUs across the country have reopened since the COVID-19 pandemic, they are still experiencing aftereffects, which have highlighted the need for them to reimagine how they plan to move forward when crises occur. Often, governing boards and leadership at these institutions do not think about managing crises until they occur, but ultimately, their decisions impact if these institutions can remain resilient. In the context of higher education, resilience is defined as the capability to bounce back from difficulty and cope with stress (Southwick and Charney, 2018). COVID-19 and other crises have "illuminated the necessity for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to build on their history of their resilience and develop effective crisis management practices to respond, mitigate and recover in the face of ongoing risks and crises" (Quiett Smith, 2020, p1). For this study, governance is operationalized and defined as the governing board members and administrative leadership at their respective institutions (AGB, 2015). According to the American Governing Board (AGB) governing boards and leadership within higher education have fiduciary responsibilities to the institutions they serve (AGB, 2015). Subsequently, these fiduciary obligations require governing board members to do more than just oversee the college or institution, they should also make decisions in the "best interest of the institutions with loyalty and obedience" (AGB, 2015, p.1). According to the U.S. Department of Education White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities, they have taken the charge to develop ways to improve and increase the HBCU campus crisis preparedness and resilience through the provision of grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). It is for these reasons HBCU governing board members and administrative leadership should consider innovative ways to circumvent crises and develop a crisis management plan with detailed information on identifying, preventing, and recovering from vulnerable threats like COVID-19. Today, there are 101 HBCUs, of which 51 are public institutions and 50 are private nonprofit institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The governing structure for these institutions is divided into three categories: 1) statewide; 2) local; and 3) shared. The purpose of this study is to conduct a post-COVID-19 assessment of four (4) HBCUs that were previously studied (Johnson & Thompson, 2021) and determine if leaders were successful at implementing any crisis management strategies. The researchers sought to understand if the lack of crisis management at public state-funded HBCUs impacted the decision-making processes of the governing boards and administrative leadership at HBCUs in the post-pandemic period. Understanding the decision-making of governing boards and leadership will continue to provide deeper insight into why crisis management preparedness should be at the forefront of the HBCU agenda to remain resilient.

Study Background

In March 2020, HBCUs across the county were forced to close their doors due to COVID-19. As a result, when these schools had to reopen it was evident that due to the lack of funding, technology, and other resources, HBCUs were in desperate need of funding to reopen their doors and provide a safe environment for faculty, staff, and students. As a result, a State-by-State analysis was conducted, which resulted in the American Rescue Plan Investment Act instituted by the White House. This act allocated $2.7 Billion to Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) but how these resources were spent post the COVID-19 crisis has yet to be determined. The following four (4) HBCUs' governing and leadership structures were reviewed: 1) Fort Valley State University; 2) Savannah State University; 3) Grambling State University and 4) Southern

University and A & M College. These HBCUs are all public-state funded institutions, where Fort Valley and Savannah State Universities are governed by a statewide board, known as a *"Superboard"* comprised of thirty-five (35) colleges and universities, and Grambling State University, which is part of a consolidated statewide governing board comprised of nine (9) institutions within a statewide system and makes it one of the most unique systems in the country (Johnson & Thompson, 2021). Southern University and A & M College is the only HBCU system in the country and is considered a statewide governing structure, responsible for governing four separate institutions within the Southern University System (Southern University System, 2023). These HBCUs were reexamined to see if the lack of crisis management at public state-funded HBCUs impacted the decision-making processes of the governing boards and administrative leadership at HBCUs. Literature suggests that COVID-19 has added much uncertainty within the realm of higher education and how we mitigate these negative impacts is important to organizational resilience (Abdullah, Husin & Haider, 2020).

The Cycle of Crises

HBCUs continued to face significant crises in the post-pandemic period, encompassing bomb threats, natural disasters, and emergent communicable diseases. On January 4, 2022, and then at the outset of Black History Month in February 2022, 24 HBCUs received threats that bombs were going to explode on their campuses (on January 31 and February 1, 2022) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022. Since the beginning of 2022, at least 49 HBCUs and 19 Predominantly Black Institutions have received bomb threats (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). However, the protracted investigation that extended over almost a year engendered an atmosphere of uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and heightened discomfort, especially among students, making it difficult to focus on academic responsibilities (Owens, 2022). The emotional calamity caused by the bomb threats continues to take a toll on HBCU stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic along with the racial reckoning that occurred during the Summer of 2020 had already exacerbated mental health measures among faculty, staff, and students; these bomb threats served as the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Following these terroristic threats, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security met with HBCU leadership to extend resources and support and provide bolster partnerships with these institutions (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). Subsequently, the U.S. Department of Education created the Project Schools Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) program (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) to provide grant funding to support mental health programs at affected institutions.

Without a sufficient recovery period from the active 2020 storm season, many parts of the State of Louisiana were devastated by Hurricane Ida, one of the most powerful hurricanes in 2021. Institutions within the Southern University System were impacted by the storm with Southern University of New Orleans incurring $384,000 in storm damages while Southern University A & M College sustained $270, 000 in damages from Hurricane Ida (Canicosa, 2021). Furthermore, during the fall of 2022, HBCU leaders just like other higher education institutions, had to contend with the spread of several viruses as infection rates substantially increased towards the end of the year, which inevitably affected students and faculty, and staff on their campuses (Knox, 2022). Unfortunately, the holiday season brought an increase in infection rates for COVID-19, the Flu, and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) (McCrimmon, 2022). The aforementioned crises have a cumulative effect, compounding myriad challenges of HBCUs. Moreover, these unexpected threats to the security, health, and mental well-being of HBCU students, faculty, and staff are consummate examples of why

HBCU leaders must be intentional about excogitating crisis management strategies for their institutions to ensure future resilience.

Funding

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are culturally distinctive institutions, but they all possess a shared mission to educate young scholars from underrepresented backgrounds and prepare them to be feature leaders. Notwithstanding, these higher education institutions have been historically underfunded compared to Predominantly White (PWI) universities in the United States (The Hunt Institute, 2022). Consequently, COVID-19 was a crisis that disproportionately impacted HBCUs and their ability to respond because of their considerable financial apertures. When the U.S. Government passed the American Rescue Plan in 2022, it opened a pathway for these institutions to receive much-needed funding. The Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) allocated over $2.7 billion dollars as a part of the Biden-Harris Administration's dedication to supporting institutions that educate minority communities (The White House, 2022). HEERF requires that at least half of the funds disseminated to these universities be used to provide support to students through direct financial payments. (The White House, 2022).

The State of Georgia received over $260 million dollars in funding for a total of eight (8) HBCUs, which include Morehouse School of Medicine, Albany State University, Clark Atlanta University, Savannah State University, Fort Valley State University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Paine College (The White House, 2022). Savannah State University received $41,412,308 or 15.9 % while Fort Valley State received $26,524,053 or 9.81% of the total funds allocated to the State of Georgia. (The White House, 2022). The State of Louisiana had six (6) HBCUs to receive a total of $211 million in funding for the following institutions: Southern University and A & M College, Grambling State University, Southern University at New Orleans, Xavier University of Louisiana, Southern University at Shreveport, and Dillard University (The White House, 2022). According to the White House (2022), Southern University and A& M College received the largest allocation of funds in the State, totaling $64,130,696 while Grambling State University received the second highest with $48,074,370. While these institutions were awarded notable financial resources in 2022, due to the legacy of diminished funding, it did not solve all their fiscal challenges.

Institutional Indicators

The impact that the pandemic had on the higher education landscape cannot be understated; enrollment rates at most institutions still have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. In fact, compared to the year 2019, overall student enrollment declined by over five percent (5.8%) in 2022, which constitutes a reduction of both the undergraduate and graduate student population by 1.1 million students (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). It is clear that prospective students have begun to weigh their options after high school and will no longer automatically choose to attend traditional college experiences. In the post-pandemic world, these vacillations can be attributed to increased remote learning options, the burgeoning burden of student debt, and the perceived diminishing returns of a college education (Dickler, 2022). This fundamental shift in students' outlook toward college degrees paints a drab picture for many institutions that need to sufficiently market the college education as desirable to a new generation of students; many of whom have successfully leveraged the capital returns of social media and turned it into a high-earning career. The data

points to a bleak outlook for some institutions, with experts predicting numerous school closures in the near future (Sanchez, 2023).

Fortunately, HBCUs have defied national trends with an uptick in enrollment post-COVID-19. Between the years 2018 and 2021, HBCUs experienced a 30% increase in college applications (Maynard, 2023). Researchers believe this increase occurred due to HBCUs' unique value proposition which entails their inimitable institutional cultures, affordable tuition, and smaller classes that can generally amount to low faculty-to-student ratios (Thompson and Hoy, 2022). This unique academic and socio-cultural higher education experience that promotes a sense of community and belonging is also becoming more attractive to high-achieving students who would typically attend Predominantly White institutions (Maynard, 2023). HBCUs in Georgia have varying levels of enrollment, ranging from Paine College's 253 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) to Albany State College with over 6,000 students in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Louisiana HBCUs' enrollment rates differ from Grambling University having 5, 270 students, and Southern University and A &M College with 8,317 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). However, HBCUs should not get comfortable based on this data; as federal funding inevitably wanes to pre-pandemic levels, these institutions must make strategic financial investments in technology, student services, and a committed professoriate to sustain the current trend in enrollment.

Governance and Leadership at HBCUs

To understand the context surrounding this study, it is important to comprehend the governing structures and leadership at HBCUs. According to the literature, governance structures are unique, and the selection process of their board members varies from state to state (Freeman, Hilton & Lee, 2016). According to the American Association of Governing Boards "effective governance begins with who is appointed to the governing boards at HBCUs" (Nelms & Schexnider, 2020, p.1). Although research is limited related to governance at HBCUs, it is critical to analyze the decision making at these institutions (Minor, 2004). Subsequently, it is equally as important to understand the governing boards structures of HBCUs in the US. Governing Boards structures within the realm of higher education at HBCUs include the following: 1) statewide; 2) local; and 3) shared (Freeman, Hilton & Lee, 2016). Within this structure there are 26 statewide governing boards at HBCU's, with Southern University and A&M College being the only system-level board in the country that governs multiple campuses (Freeman, Hilton & Lee, 2016). The local governing board structures are comprised of a single institutional board and are often called *"Superboards"* and provide oversight of all aspects of the institutions within a state. The shared governance structure is comprised of a bicameral statewide and local board oversight of the institutions (Freeman, Hilton & Lee, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

It is evident that HBCUs are not immune to the occurrence of emergency events, however, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic upended traditional academic operating models and highlighted the need for agile and effective decision-making. Moreover, these institutions have been subjected to concurrent crises and need to be fastidious about ensuring that they harness the strategic value of resilience for the sake of the student populations that they serve. Tony Jacques' Issue and Crisis Relational Model (Relational Model) provides a comprehensive approach to the process of efficaciously managing crises (Jaques, 2010). The

Model contains two (2) Phases, Pre-crisis Management and Crisis Management, along with four (4) key elements: Crisis Preparedness, Crisis Prevention, Crisis Event Management, and Post-crisis Management (Jaques, 2007). When Jaques established the Relational Model, crisis management theory was at a pivotal juncture and needed a fresh perspective on how to approach crises from an integrative, non-linear lens (Jaques, 2007). This model is intuitive, cyclical, and non-sequential; each element is accompanied by several cluster activities that are geared toward ensuring that organizations can effectively manage calamities when they occur.

Although not always feasible, the cluster activities for the Pre-Crisis Management phase serve to provide institutions with concrete steps that should happen before a crisis takes place. Crisis Preparedness encompasses the planning, documentation, resource management, and training that is required before emergencies occur. Crisis Prevention entails conducting early warning scans, identifying, and prioritizing risk management, and creating infrastructures for emergency responses. Most higher education institutions were not adequately prepared for the academic, and operational disruptions that were engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Thompson & Hoy, 2023) and were actively in Crisis Event Management during the year 2020. The activities associated with this element include crisis recognition, system activation and response, and crisis management. To be successful during this phase, crisis management must be viewed as a critical institutional function for HBCUs. It entails strategy selection and implementation, damage mitigation, stakeholder management, and timely responses to the media (Jaques, 2007), all of which were critical components during the pandemic.

Post-Crisis management issues can often get overlooked because the seemingly drastic effects of the catastrophe have decelerated. However, this is arguably one of the most important steps of the crisis management process, because failure to effectively complete these activities can result in serious missteps when handling crises in the future. These activities include operational recovery and business resumption, addressing post-crisis issue impacts and evaluation, and modification of processes. Figure 1 depicts the Issue and Crisis Relational Model.
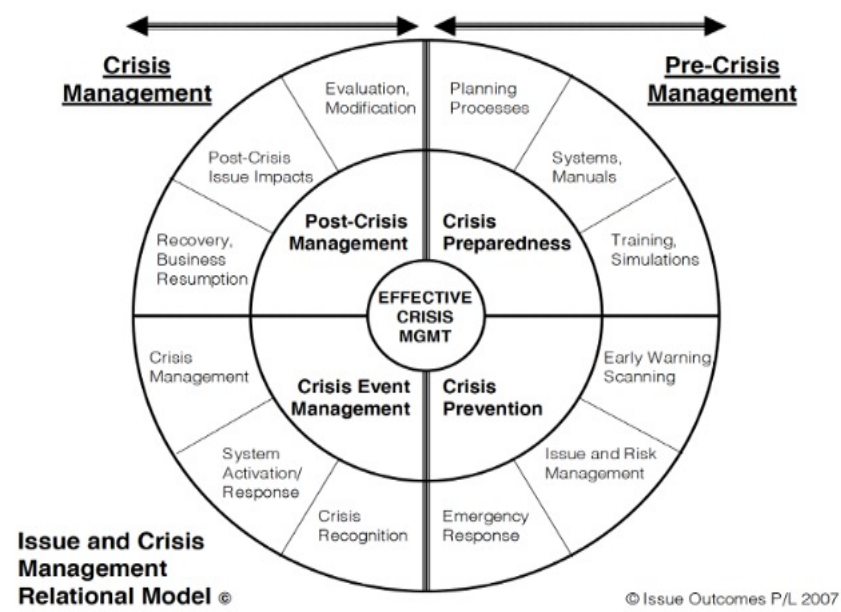

Figure 1. Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model Source: (Jaques, 2007, p.6)

Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative research design for this study to address the research question: Does the lack of crisis management strategies at public state-funded HBCUs impact the decision-making processes of the governing boards and administrative leadership at HBCUs? According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), a qualitative approach allows researchers to obtain rich, thick descriptions and deeper analyses of phenomena because the data can assist researchers to go beyond initial findings and "generate or revise conceptual frameworks" (p. 4). A qualitative content analysis was performed using secondary data. The body of knowledge on content analysis provides varying definitions but agrees that it generally entails "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278).

There are six (6) key questions that must be answered when conducting content analysis: 1) Which data are analyzed? 2) How are they defined? 3) What is the population from which they are drawn? 4) What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed? 5) What are the boundaries of the analysis? And 6) What is the target of the inferences? (Krippendorff, 2013). The researchers purposely sampled a total of four (4) public state-funded HBCUs located in the United States to determine if the lack of crisis management strategies at public state-funded HBCUs impacts their decision-making processes. Fort Valley State University and Savannah State University were selected in Georgia. Two (2) additional universities in the State of Louisiana, Grambling State University, Southern University and A & M College were utilized for this study. The researchers selected documents relevant to university decision-making for review, including university board meeting minutes, university press releases, strategic plans, hazard mitigation plans, COVID-19 dashboard data, and emergency response website data. To code the data, the researchers used a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), ATLAS.ti, which has the functionality to search, code as well as relate data from text, audio, video, and images (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). ATLAS.ti also has the capacity to amalgamate data into cases, create memos, and assign codes in order the conduct a thematic analysis (Johnson & Thompson, 2021). The coding categories for this study were established based on the cluster activities from Jaques' (2007) Issue and Relational Crisis Management model for post-crisis management: 1) Post-crisis management to include: operational recovery, finances, and business momentum; 2) post-crisis issue impacts, and 3) Evaluation and Modification.

Findings

Post-crisis management: Operational Recovery, Finances & Business Momentum

Findings indicated that 50% of the HBCUs within this study did not encounter operational recovery or financial issues when students, faculty, and staff began returning to their respective institutions after the COVID-19 shutdown. Whereas, other HBCUs did encounter major post-crisis recovery issues and had major financial issues they had to deal with when returning to their normal face-to-face operations. For example, due to the governing board structure and decision-making of the University System of Georgia board members, Fort Valley State University and Savannah State University were able to reopen without many operational and financial issues due to the revenue stream availability to both institutions. They were also able to: 1) increase their classroom capacity by increasing the number of seats in each classroom by 75% for COVID safety protocols purposes; 2) provide full-time faculty

and staff members with new laptops, iPads, and training keep their business operations streamlined and keep positive momentum at their university's; and 3) teach classes utilizing a blended synchronous option available for students (University System of Georgia Board Minutes 2021). Subsequently, Southern University and A & M College, and Grambling University encountered major operational and financial recovery issues. Although these institutions received large amounts of financial assistance through the CARES Act from the Department of Education, they still lack the aforementioned to recover their operations post-COVID. One major post-crisis issue was the lack of adequate classroom space and housing for students to meet school safety protocols when they returned to school.

Post-crisis issue impacts: Reputational impact, media scrutiny, evaluation, and recovery

Other findings suggest that COVID-19 has placed a significant strain on all HBCUs across the country related to their ability to bounce back, recover and remain resilient after the COVID-19 shutdown. Although there was no negative media coverage of HBCUs during the pandemic, currently, two (2) HBCUs within this study are experiencing the long-term reputational impact of COVID-19. These issues include: 1) lack of all the necessary updated technology infrastructure in classrooms; 2) students are still incurring account balances, and 3) in the fall of 2021, these institutions experienced major housing issues for incoming freshman and returning students, which resulted in hundreds of students returning home (Southern University Board of Supervisors Meeting, 2021 & University of Louisiana System Board Meeting, 2021). According to the notice posted on one university's website stated that "campus housing had reached full capacity for the Fall 2022 term, therefore, students needed to make other arrangements" (Southern University and A & M College, 2022). Consequently, hundreds of students were sent back home, which impacted enrollment, retention and graduation rates at these institutions. Additionally, there has been a large turnover in faculty, and several faculty members have retired, which has made it hard for the institution to recover post-COVID (Southern University Board Minutes, 2021). These findings imply that the lack of a post-crisis management plan impacted governing board members' decision-making. Findings also indicated that Savannah State University (SSU) and Fort Valley State University were given money from the US Department of Education to clear all student account balances (The White House, 2022), and as a result of their governing board members' decision-making, all student debts were removed. Due to these factors, 50% of the HBCUs in this study have experienced a slow recovery process, which indicates the necessity for board members and administrative leadership to implement a crisis preparedness and post-crisis management plan.

Discussion

The study findings highlight that HBCU leaders can still learn from their decision-making after the COVID-19 crisis. In order to successfully navigate through future crises and remain resilient, HBCUs must prioritize resources to garner and retain institutional crisis management knowledge aa well as to support and sustain those efforts (Thompson & Hoy, 2023).
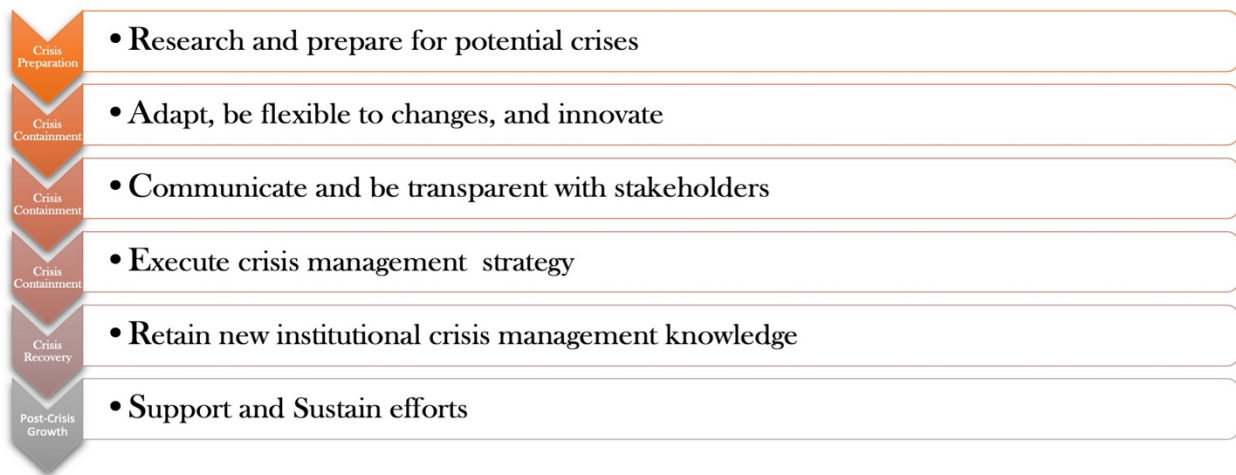
Figure 2. RACERS Model (Thompson & Hoy, 2023, p. 265)

The RACERS model contains some of the elements of previous crisis management strategies, is predicated on transformative crisis management approaches, and contextualizes an area of concern for HBCUs. As a result of chronic underfunding, poor infrastructure, and high leadership turnover, HBCUs are predisposed to a loss of institutional knowledge. High leadership turnover is especially a threat to the resilience of these institutions. A key component of the process of planning preparing, anticipating, and responding effectively to crises is the ability to apply knowledge garnered from previous crisis situations to prognosticate outcomes, efficaciously strategize, and navigate around crisis black holes. When HBCUs senior-level administrators and mid-level leaders leave to seek employment at other institutions or retire, critical knowledge, experience, and crisis management expertise abscond with them. Consequently, it is terribly important that these institutions have a crisis management plan that is an integral part of their strategic planning process, Board of Supervisors Training, and leadership training at all levels of the institution. Moreover, each institution must devise a method by which lessons learned, best practices, and strategic partnerships that were previously created as a result of a crisis are documented and held in an institutional repository for future leaders to utilize (Thompson & Hoy, 2023). Equally important to the retention of institutional knowledge is the ability to support and sustain those efforts on a continuous basis. Financial support for technology, training, resources, and strategic partnerships are pivotal for future resilience. These institutions must allocate funds in their budgets each year to ensure that leaders across all levels of the institution are appropriately trained, are cognizant of crisis management strategies, and have access to resources and tools needed to manage crises.

Conclusion

A crisis is a double-edged sword. On one side it can create stress, financial impacts, and reputational damage while on the other side can produce an opportunity to fortify, institutional operations, streamline processes, and improve upon practices that were previously lacking. All in all, a crisis has the potential to be a transformative event. Based on the researcher's findings the lack of crisis preparedness and post-crisis management at public state-funded HBCUs impacted the decision-making processes of the governing board members and administrative leadership at HBCUs. As HBCUs ponder the future, they must continuously look for ways to retain the unique heritage, history, and mission of these institutions, while moving forward with a strategic vision, increased fortitude, and a growth mindset. Therefore, it is vitally important the HBCU governing boards and leadership

mandate crisis preparedness and post-crisis management plans to be included in their Emergency Preparedness plans and strategic plans moving forward. As a result, governing board members and administrative leadership will be able to mitigate problems with their operational recovery, financial costs, faculty and staff momentum reputation, and ability to quickly recover and remain resilient after a crisis occurs at their respective institutions. HBCU leaders should also allocate more financial support in their annual budget for assessments and feedback from the current COVID-19 crisis to implement changes to remain resilient. Now more than ever, HBCUs must recognize the changing times and be willing to adopt modes of instructional delivery, as well as programs and initiatives that create strategic partnerships, to ensure that they will continue to produce scholars who can meet the future workforce needs. These steps will be critical for the future of the institutions they serve in order to truly reimagine resilience.

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Contact email: melanie_johnson@subr.edu