

**The Necessity for Good Governance and  
Effective Leadership at Public State-Funded  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)  
in the Midst of COVID-19**

**Melanie Smith Johnson**

*Southern University and A&M College/USA*

**Samantha A. Thompson**

*Southern University Law Center/ USA*

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**ABSTRACT**

*COVID-19 has forever changed the trajectory of higher education and the delivery of services, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Therefore, how HBCUs strategically transform their campus operations with limited resources and remain competitive is vital to their survival. Considering these challenges, examining the role of governance and leadership and their decision-making processes in order to transition every aspect of their instructional services will be critical to the sustainability of these institutions. This essay examines a gap in the body of knowledge related to HBCU governance and leadership during COVID-19 and the considerations encompassing effective leadership during times of crisis.*

**Keywords:** good governance, effective leadership, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), decision-making, COVID-19

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During this unprecedented time of chaos and complexity associated with COVID-19, public state-funded colleges and university leaders across the country are looking for ways to stabilize their campuses to create a sense of normalcy for students, faculty, and staff, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Given that state funding for public HBCUs has been historically diminished in comparison to their higher education counterparts (Commodore & Owens, 2018), the upcoming financial challenges HBCUs will face due to COVID-19 will be monumental. Considering these unique challenges, governing boards and leadership have been placed in a difficult role to make effective, expeditious, and consequential decisions regarding the transformation of their campus operations. Therefore, examining the role of effective leadership and good governance at HBCUs in the midst of COVID-19 is crucial to sustainability of these institutions.

According to many HBCU Presidents across the country, although all colleges and universities have been disrupted due to the COVID-19 closures, and face uncertainties for reopening, the impact is particularly critical for HBCUs due to underfunded operations and small shoestring budgets (Charles & Dobson, 2020). Consequently, with the unique challenges presented from COVID-19, HBCUs' governing board members and leadership must work together collectively, focus their attention on crisis management solutions, and strategically recalibrate models of delivery for teaching, fiscal planning, and administrative operations.

The body of literature in higher education research suggests that there is a distinct difference between good governance and effective leadership. Leadership is defined as the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal (Ward, 2020). For the purpose of this essay, the authors view effective leadership in higher education as: 1) the creation and execution of organizational vision and mission, 2) timely, effective, and collaborative decision making, 3) incentivizing stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, and 4) the utilization and implementation of effective crisis management strategies. According to the Association of American Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AAGB), (2018) there are three key essential elements for good governance: "1) ensuring that boards have the best people serving on them, 2) boards address the right issues, and 3) board members engage in the right manner to add value" (p.1). Additionally, many studies dissect the interconnection between leadership and governance (Lord et al., (2009). Essentially, ineffective leadership results in poor clarity about processes, and limits accountability that is required for good governance (Lord et al., (2009). Therefore, in order to have good governance you need effective leadership.

During this pandemic HBCUs were forced to address key questions such as: 1) How will the institutions be able to afford the essential personal protective equipment (PPE) to reopen? and 2) How will the inevitable costs

associated with academic and infrastructural changes going to be managed? Unfortunately, while other institutions were able to be proactive in their preparation and response to COVID-19, many HBCUs were unable to make timely transitions due to a lack of financial resources (Charles & Dobson, 2020). When Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March that provided over \$1 billion in support to HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), many HBCUs were lagging in the implementation of essential crisis management strategies in response to the pandemic. Realistically, without the funding assistance from the CARES Act, many HBCUs would not have been able to successfully reopen, provide essential services such as personal protective equipment (PPE), critical on campus testing, and purchase necessary technology for COVID-19 screenings (Charles & Dobson, 2020).

To make strategic decisions related to the challenges of COVID-19 and prepare for crises in the future, several activities should be put into practice to provide HBCUs with effective leadership and good governance including: 1) Transparency, 2) Effective communication 3) Shared governance, and; 4) Crisis response planning and implementation. According to the MacTaggart (2020), governing boards must be prepared to lead in a crisis with confidence when they emerge. Therefore, during these unprecedented times, university leaders must be transparent with their decision making, as well as consistently and clearly communicate the day-to-day challenges facing the universities to governing board members. These conversations are critical to ensure that governing board members make good decisions to effectively govern these institutions. Additionally, all stakeholders, including governing board members, senior administration, faculty, staff, and students should have some level of involvement with the decision-making related to university policies and procedures (Association of Governing Boards, 2017). Furthermore, a clear path of direction and crisis response plan with timelines should be developed to ensure that HBCUs have the financial resources to implement the crisis management plans to ensure their institutions' sustainability.

HBCUs have always embraced their unique mission and played a major role in educating the world's best and brightest talent among African Americans and minority populations. HBCUs have withstood the test of time and are resilient, however, for them to survive post-COVID-19 crises, good governance and effective leadership are critical. Therefore, governing boards and higher education institutions' leadership need to make sound decisions to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of its students, faculty, and staff, which includes the implementation of crisis management strategies at HBCUs.

This essay examines a gap in the body of knowledge related to HBCU governance and leadership in times of crisis. This crisis has elucidated the urgent need for HBCU governing board members and their

university leaders to work together collectively to ensure they sustain the institutions they serve during the COVID-19 crisis. Implications for future research should embrace which governing boards were able to make strategic decisions and successfully implement crisis management resources and reforms at their institutions. Additionally, research to examine HBCUs' governing boards and leadership decision-making should be evaluated to determine which colleges and universities utilized the best practices to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, while providing students with the high-quality academic instruction, uninterrupted student services, and support.

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## **Author Bios**

**MELANIE SMITH JOHNSON**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Southern University and A&M College. Her major research interests focus on public policy, governance, leadership, and change in higher education, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Email: [melanie\\_johnson@subr.edu](mailto:melanie_johnson@subr.edu)

**SAMANTHA A. THOMPSON**, PhD, is an Analyst for Institutional Effectiveness at the Southern University Law Center (SULC). Her major research interests lie in the areas of international and comparative higher education, internationalization of education, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and education policy research.

Email: [sthompson@sulc.edu](mailto:sthompson@sulc.edu)