

**The Importance of Theatre in
Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

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This statement has been reviewed and approved by the NAST Board of Directors.

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The Importance of Theatre in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

The theatre profession has been enriched since the late 19th century by the educational and artistic contributions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Actors, directors, playwrights, and other theatre artists have found inspiration and honed their craft at these institutions. In turn, theatre programs have made significant contributions to their host HBCUs. Recruitment, giving, and academic quality all have been enhanced.

The National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) is the national accrediting organization for theatre and theatre-related disciplines in higher education. One of its roles is to speak nationally on matters of educational policy. In this statement, NAST reaffirms the strategic importance of HBCU theatre programs to their home institutions and all other institutions, to the public, and to the culture at large. It describes the importance of support in terms of mission, curricula, and resources. It urges HBCU leaders to ensure continuity and growth to continue and build a great legacy.

Why HBCU theatre?

In light of the critical importance of black theatre in America and African-American contributions to the theatrical arts in general, three HBCU legacies must be protected and extended: preparation of HBCU graduates for work in theatre and related professions; provision of theatre studies and experiences to the HBCU campus, its constituencies and communities; and preparation of productions that inform, inspire, and teach.

Why are these legacies culturally powerful? Why do they warrant continuing HBCU attention?

There are both general and specific reasons for theatre as a component of learning and experience for all students. General reasons include the historic importance of theatre as a unique way to communicate meaning; theatre as a component of general student learning and experience; theatre as a way to give creative voice to institutional mission; theatre as a means for serving the academic and local community; and intense theatre study as necessary preparation for professional practice.

Specific reasons go to the heart of why HBCU theatre is a necessary component of the theatre profession and our nation's cultural effort. HBCU theatre contributes so powerfully because a specific cultural heritage is naturally both base and reference for education, training, performance, and production. Talent is discovered as education and work proceed. Cultural heritage is preserved and advanced through

production and study. The work of African-American playwrights is nurtured through particular and regular attention. Student competencies in theatre are developed, enabling professional engagement and mobility. Focused scholarship and supporting collections provide a cultural resource for all. Students in all majors are introduced to an important and beautiful element of their cultural heritage. Strong foundations for future alumni support are laid as students become engaged with something they can find nowhere else.

What content?

The field of theatre is content rich. Many disciplines are combined in theatre productions. Both artistic and technical elements must be fused in meaningful ways. Scripts address subject matter in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and the arts themselves. Theatre has its own content, which includes various aspects of theatrical creation, performance, and scholarship. Theatre content includes teacher preparation, especially for those who will lead elementary and secondary students to understanding and competence. It also includes the therapeutic use of drama, and theatre as the basis for work in other disciplines such as the psychology of perception, legal advocacy, sociology, and so forth. Because of all these content connections and responsibilities, theatre is a natural component of multidisciplinary study and action. It is a vital component to teach the ways of art to all students, especially as an introducer of the compositional or design qualities of artistic thinking that are critical to so many fields: the arts of diplomacy, investing, teaching, public speaking, politics, and so forth. Culturally, HBCU theatre programs do all of these things comprehensively, but also uniquely in light of the African-American experience. Both are critically important. The blend is invaluable.

What program?

HBCU theatre includes informal and extracurricular performance programs, liberal arts majors in theatre, and professional education and training programs that culminate in the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. In addition to student and faculty productions, HBCU theatre presents visiting artists and scholars, and provides various educational services to the institution as a whole.

Choices among the possibilities define theatre mission. Each institution makes specific choices about breadth and depth of commitment and program. The result is institutional diversity. Each HBCU's engagement with theatre is unique and

addresses an important part of the whole. Such diversity is healthy. Not all institutions have to focus on performance. However, the aggregate HBCU theatre effort needs to fulfill the variety of content responsibilities outlined above. This result is especially critical for audience and professional development, and thus for legacy continuation and enhancement. The health of an irreplaceable cultural enterprise is at stake.

What contributions beyond theatre?

In addition to their theatre-associated contributions, theatre programs regularly produce other benefits for the campus as a whole.

Especially today, students are attracted to studies associated with performance and media, applications of technology, and enhanced self-expression. They seek campus environments that are culturally meaningful to them. Theatre programs are thus powerful attractors in student recruitment.

Theatre programs bring community attention to the campus and produce a unique kind of visibility that can be translated into philanthropic support. Many donors are interested in arts programs, and at times only arts programs, or in cultural issues in which the arts play a part.

Theatre is a difficult subject requiring self discipline, memory, hard work, and a broad range of knowledge and skills in a number of fields. Theatre uses or touches all disciplines. For these reasons, and the intensity of effort required to achieve breadth of competence, theatre faculty and students normally make significant contributions to overall academic quality.

What resources?

Specific choices about theatre mission automatically bring specific resource requirements.

Faculty resources are critical. Numbers need to match the mission, the size and scope of theatre programs offered, the curricular content, and the time necessary to fulfill specific goals and objectives. Time is a most critical resource and cannot be overemphasized, especially in tenure-seeking situations. Each faculty member will have a number of specific responsibilities, each with associated time requirements, but in the aggregate, faculty must prepare classes, coach students, lead productions, engage in scholarship, advise, and often, promote the program.

Other resources also need to be compatible with mission. Certain things are basic to fulfilling any specific theatre objective. For example, theatre production facilities are an obvious need for performances of any kind. Production is theatre's laboratory, and facilities constitute the lab. All theatre programs require at least a modest performing space, together with appropriate shop support. The need for sophisticated capabilities grows significantly to the extent the institution embraces goals for professional preparation or production. The education and training of theatre artists is expensive.

The third necessary element is program funding. Often, the nature of theatre productions and box office revenues create the illusion that theatre programs can be self-sustaining. Of course, theatre productions can make revenue contributions, but the goal of production in most cases is to give theatre students a variety of educational experiences, not just to produce shows with immediate box office appeal.

HBCUs are often extremely proud of student and faculty performances and awards. But outstanding results on stage can obscure the need for resources. The better the performance, the harder it is to focus on how the results were achieved, and what it takes to continue achieving at the same level or higher.

In all institutions, people, space, time, and money are required to teach and produce theatre. When people, space, and money are scarce, time pressures increase. As faculty leaders take on more and more responsibilities, the inevitable happens. Eventually quality suffers because time and attention are insufficient to perform critical tasks necessary to fulfillment of the theatre mission.

For all the reasons stated, HBCUs dare not let this happen to the point that they are unable to fulfill their portion of the composite responsibility for the preservation and advancement of the kinds of theatre education and work for which they are uniquely qualified. Such a culture mandate calls for continuing attention to the presence of theatre in all HBCUs, the funding of that presence, and regular operations under institutional development policies that include theatre programs, and favor them as appropriate to the institution's theatre legacy and mission.

Why continuity?

HBCU contributions to theatre as a whole have been made possible because certain institutions have sustained and nurtured their programs over a long period of time. Continuity—in purpose, content, program, and resources—is critical to continuing success.

Continuing success is necessary for theatre to fulfill large educational and cultural responsibilities shouldered by HBCUs in all academic and professional areas.

Continuity means steady commitment, and at times growing commitment, especially as opportunities arise. It also means careful decisions in difficult economic times, lest necessary short-term decisions harm prospects for long-term success.

Continuity is important for another reason, however. The overall success of HBCU theatre is essential to the overall success of theatre in higher education, in the theatre profession, and the culture. NAST encourages HBCU leaders in their continuing efforts to provide the most careful and thoughtful stewardship for this critically important resource.