



Sandra M. Phoenix May 11, 2022

The [HBCU Library Alliance](#), a voice of advocacy and body of knowledge for libraries in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), works to develop library leaders, preserve collections, and plan for the future. In this virtual event, Sandra M. Phoenix, Executive Director, describes the HBCU Library Alliance’s Sankofa Experience in remembering and embracing the past to make positive progress in the future. View [the recording](#) to learn about collections, HBCU Library Alliance programs, and how together we can envision a future to strive toward.

Use this viewing guide to expand your learnings from the talk. Use it to take notes, reflect, and frame discussions you would like to have with colleagues and peers, and plan for your next steps.

The Sankofa Bird

The Sankofa symbol is one of the popular symbols of the collection ascribed to the Akan people of Ghana. This visual symbol illustrates the importance of past lessons in shaping the future and is depicted as a bird that appears to be moving forward while looking backward. This supports the idea of incorporating aspects of the past into the future and this also sheds light on the struggles of enslaved African peoples that should be acknowledged, remembered, and never forgotten so that we can move forward productively.

Some of what we bring forward is tradition, our culture. We bring the powerful voices of our ancestors, their stories, their struggles and contributions, their resilience, their determination, and strength. We do this as we design our future.



REFLECTION

Using the concepts surrounding the Sankofa bird above, consider how your institution might be more deliberate about incorporating what's been learned from the past and move forward with intention.

What about your institution should be remembered and never forgotten, whether painful or praiseworthy?

What should be remembered but never forgotten in the communities you seek to serve?

HBCUs

HBCUs were established in the United States in the early nineteenth century to provide undergraduate and graduate level educational opportunities to people of African descent. Prior to the Civil War, anti-literacy laws prevented the education of Black Americans. Slave owners believed that literacy was a threat to the institution of slavery and their financial investment in it. During the antebellum period in the United States, anti-literacy laws were used by southern plantation owners to dehumanize and control the enslaved black population. Making it illegal for Black people to learn to read and write reinforced the notion that Africans were inferior to whites. HBCUs were established by philanthropists, religious organizations such as the American Missionary Association and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the federal government, and some free African Americans. Most HBCUs originated between 1865-1900, with the majority located in the southern region of the United States.

The HBCU Library Alliance formed in 2002 and incorporated in 2006, established as an organization to provide services to and strengthen the HBCU library community.

REFLECTION

Why are HBCUs important?

What is an aspect of these institutions' history that is important to connect with the future?

TAKE ACTION

Learn about libraries and archives at [HBCU institutions](#) in your region. What is your institution's role in supporting community-facing organizations that help grow opportunities for remembering and embracing the past, to make positive progress in the future? Discuss ideas and opportunities with colleagues and brainstorm some next steps.

In her presentation, Phoenix highlighted notable HBCU alumni. Consider learning about HBCU alums who have impacted your community and explore ways to honor and share their work using your institution's capacity.

Honoring the Past with Digital Collections

[A Digital Collection Celebrating the Founding of the Historically Black College and University](#) is a collection of primary resources from HBCU libraries and archives. It includes several thousand scanned pages and represents the HBCU Library Alliance's first collaborative effort to make a historic collection digitally available. Contributed collections from member libraries date back to the early 1800s and include photographs, manuscripts, alumni letters and campus event programs that present HBCUs as cultural, social, and political institutions. It is the first digital collection of documents and materials chronicling the founding of the United States' historically black colleges and universities, and it contains more than 16,000 historic documents for teaching and learning.

REFLECTION

As the HBCU Library Alliance seeks to move forward, how do the digitized collections documenting the founding of HBCUs help to inform the future? How does this effort help to support the Sankofa Experience?

Are there similar founding documents that help to tell the story of and inform the future of your own organization, or community-facing organizations that are important to those that your library serves? How are those documents made available, and what is your role in helping to share these stories?

Capacity for Special Collections

In 2018 the HBCU Library Alliance was awarded an NEH Matching Challenge Grant for the project [Building Capacity for Humanities Special Collections at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#). Building Capacity is a five-year program designed to build capacity for the long-term preservation and conservation of collections at each of the participating member libraries. Through the program, the member libraries competitively request regrant funding for preservation planning documents, collection surveys, treatment and rehousing services, and educational programs.

REFLECTION

Why is capacity building for special collections especially meaningful for HBCU libraries? How does this relate to the idea of Sankofa?

Does your library have capacity to support special collections at your own institution that are important to the communities you serve?

Shaping the Future

The HBCU Library Alliance has collaborated with multiple organizations and institutions on projects focused on mentoring, leadership, and building a future workforce. Each of these partnerships is built on a previous record of support and collaboration.

The Authenticity Project

The [Authenticity Project](#), hosted jointly by the HBCU Library Alliance + CLIR's Digital Library Federation, is an IMLS-funded mentoring and professional development program for early- to mid-career HBCU library staff. The goal of the project is to build a more diverse, inclusive, collaborative, and cohesive next-generation digital library workforce, ready to work across types of institutions in building infrastructure of various kinds (social and technological) in service to a wide array of communities.

Stronger Together, Excellence in Library Leadership

The [Stronger Together, Excellence in Library Leadership Program](#) was created as part of the formal partnership that the HBCU Library Alliance has established with Brown University Library, welcoming Brown into its community of practice as its first invited, non-HBCU affiliate member. The program for emerging library leaders is the first leadership program to intentionally unite emerging library leaders from two distinct communities of practice, HBCUs and Brown University. The curriculum and immersive exchanges of this intensive, nurturing program will develop core leadership competencies.

Summer Conservation/Preservation Internship Program

Since 2018, the HBCU Library Alliance [Conservation/Preservation Internship Program](#), in partnership with the University of Delaware and the Kress Foundation, has provided undergraduate interns with fully funded summer internships in library and archives preservation at nationally recognized library preservation/conservation laboratories. To date, 28 interns have completed the internship program with a number of interns subsequently pursuing a career interest in librarianship or library-related positions.

REFLECTION

What steps can your institution take to build and strengthen a diverse library workforce? What lessons can you draw from the success and sustainability of the efforts lead by the HBCU Library Alliance?

How is your institution investing in a library workforce that reflects and supports the communities you want to serve?

Shared Visions for Building and Sustaining Networks

In 2019 the HBCU Library Alliance and CLIR formed a partnership, and in 2020 the partnership received a Mellon Foundation grant for a study to inform a sustainable shared infrastructure for creating access to HBCU Library Alliance members' archival collections. The report, [Creating Access to HBCU Library Alliance Archives: Needs, Capacity, and Technical Planning](#), documents the identified needs of HBCU libraries and is based on a series of online focus groups facilitated with HBCU library directors and deans in 2021. The study provides insight into the significance of special and archival collections for HBCU libraries and their communities; the management and capacity of archives and special collections; and these libraries' values, priorities, needs, and aspirations. The findings also reveal information related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HBCUs and broader topics of significance that were not anticipated when the project began.

REFLECTION

Review the findings of the study.

What networks are you part of? Do the barriers and visions presented in those networks align with those outlined in the HBCU – CLIR report?

How do networks you participate in uplift the work of the HBCU Library Alliance Network, or the work of other communities that may benefit?

Consider ways to raise awareness of, reach out to, and explore collaboration with networks that have similar visions and barriers as yours.

If you do not participate in a network, how might understanding these challenges and capacities help inform a network you might join or create?

You might integrate understanding of these needs identified in the report into your institution's mission and vision and consider ways to strengthen the HBCU Library Alliance network.

Resources

[HBCU Library Alliance](#)

[A Digital Collection Celebrating the Founding of the Historically Black College and University](#)

[Building Capacity for Humanities Special Collections at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#)

[The Authenticity Project](#)

[Stronger Together, Excellence in Library Leadership Program](#)

[Conservation/Preservation Internship Program](#)

[Creating Access to HBCU Library Alliance Archives: Needs, Capacity, and Technical Planning](#)

[HBCU Library Alliance Tour](#), CLIR, Material Memory podcast Season 3, features an audio tour of six HBCU libraries

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