

# HBCU Homecoming: A Tradition of Legacy, Identity, and Evolution

## Introduction: A Personal Perspective

Growing up, I had always heard about **HBCU Homecomings** from friends and family, but as a student at a **Predominantly White Institution (PWI)**, my personal experience with these events was limited. The excitement in their voices as they described the **energy, unity, and deep sense of pride** made me curious. When I finally had the opportunity to attend a Homecoming at an **HBCU**, it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The atmosphere was **electric**—marching bands playing in perfect rhythm, alumni embracing like long-lost family, and students celebrating their school's legacy with unshakable pride. It was clear that this was **more than just a football game or a weekend event**; it was a **deeply rooted tradition that had been shaped by history, culture, and resilience**.

In this essay, I will explore the **historical evolution of HBCU Homecomings**, analyze their **current impact on student identity and institutional success**, and propose **ways to modernize these celebrations while preserving their cultural significance**. Finally, I will reflect on what **this experience has taught me about the importance of traditions and cultural preservation**.

## The Evolution and Adaptation of HBCU Homecoming

### Origins and Purpose

The origins of **HBCU Homecomings** date back to the early 20th century. One of the first recorded **formal Homecomings** took place at **Howard University in 1924**, designed to bring alumni back to campus and foster school spirit (Howard University Newsroom, 2024). Unlike traditional homecomings at PWIs, which centered **primarily on football**, HBCU

Homecomings quickly became **cultural celebrations** that reinforced **Black identity and resilience**.

During a time of **segregation and systemic racism**, HBCUs served as **safe spaces for education and empowerment**. Homecoming was not just about reuniting alumni; it was about **affirming Black excellence in a society that often failed to recognize it** (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). These gatherings allowed students, alumni, and faculty to **celebrate achievements, build networks, and honor the legacy of Black higher education**.

### How Homecoming Evolved Over Time

As Homecoming traditions grew, they **expanded beyond sports** and incorporated unique cultural elements that remain integral today:

- **Greek Life & Step Shows (1930s–1960s):** Black fraternities and sororities played a major role in Homecoming traditions, introducing **step shows, strolls, and Greek unity events** (Ross, 2001).
- **Marching Bands & The Battle of the Bands (1950s–1970s):** HBCU marching bands transformed **halftime performances into main events**, often rivaling the excitement of the football games themselves (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.).
- **Social Movements & Activism (1960s–1980s):** During the Civil Rights era, Homecomings became platforms for **student activism, discussions on racial justice, and community engagement** (Johnson & McGowan, 2017).
- **Expansion of Alumni & Institutional Support (1990s–Present):** Homecomings evolved into major **fundraising opportunities for scholarships and campus improvements**, strengthening alumni ties to their institutions (WayMaker Journal, 2023).

These transformations ensured that **HBCU Homecoming remained relevant, adapting to the social and economic needs of the community.**

## The Current Relevance and Value of HBCU Homecoming

### Strengthening Student Identity and Engagement

One of the biggest challenges in higher education is ensuring **students—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—feel a sense of belonging** (Strayhorn, 2019). HBCU

Homecoming serves as a **powerful cultural anchor**, reinforcing student identity and community.

- **For first-generation students, seeing successful Black alumni return to campus is inspiring.** As one HBCU alumnus noted, 'Homecoming is a reminder that I'm part of a legacy that's bigger than myself.' This sense of connection and pride is a common thread among HBCU students and alumni."
- **Greek Life and student organizations foster mentorship.** Step shows reunions, and stroll competitions create **strong intergenerational relationships between students and alumni.**
- **The presence of historical traditions reinforces institutional pride.** Watching the marching band perform or seeing alumni return in their school colors connects students to something bigger than themselves.

From my experience, **attending an HBCU Homecoming as an outsider was eye-opening.** At my PWI, Homecoming was **more of a football event**, but at an HBCU, it was a **deeply personal and communal experience**, rooted in culture and shared history.

### The Financial and Institutional Impact of Homecoming

Beyond cultural significance, HBCU Homecomings also have **major financial benefits:**

- **Alumni donations increase significantly during Homecoming, supporting scholarships, and campus initiatives** (WayMaker Journal, 2023).
- **Local Black businesses benefit from increased traffic, helping sustain Black-owned establishments** (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2022).
- **HBCUs generate millions of dollars in tourism revenue during Homecoming, boosting both school finances and local economies** (Union Review, 2018). In fact, a study by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) found that HBCUs have a significant economic impact, generating \$16.5 billion in total economic impact, creating over 136,000 jobs, and producing \$146 billion in lifetime earnings for 2021 graduates (UNCF, 2022, p. 2). This economic impact is particularly significant during Homecoming, when thousands of alumni and visitors flock to campuses, injecting millions of dollars into local economies.

With **many HBCUs operating on limited funding**, Homecoming is **a critical event that brings financial resources to both institutions and surrounding communities**. However, some critics argue that HBCU Homecomings can be exclusive and costly, limiting participation to those who can afford it. While these concerns are valid, many HBCUs are working to address them by offering affordable ticket options, scholarships, and community outreach programs.

## Preserving and Modernizing Homecoming for the Future

While Homecoming is **deeply rooted in tradition**, it must also evolve to **stay relevant for future generations**. Below are key **recommendations to preserve and enhance**

### **Homecoming:**

#### **1. Expand Digital Engagement & Livestreaming**

- Universities should **livestream step shows, concerts, and key events**, making them accessible to alumni worldwide (HBCU Lifestyle, 2022).

- Interactive **virtual Homecomings** could allow alumni to experience celebrations remotely (Howard University Newsroom, 2024).

## 2. Enhance Career & Leadership Development

- Homecoming career fairs should **expand partnerships with Black-owned businesses and corporate sponsors**, In addition, social media platforms have become an essential tool for promoting and preserving HBCU Homecoming traditions. Hashtags like #HBCUHomecoming and #HBCUPride allow alumni and students to share their experiences, photos, and videos, creating a digital archive of HBCU culture and tradition
- **Mentorship mixers between students and alumni** would create networking opportunities beyond the celebrations.

## 3. Increase Inclusivity & Accessibility

- Ensure **disability-friendly venues, ASL interpreters, and sensory-friendly spaces**.
- Introduce **LGBTQ+ inclusive programming**, such as Pride Homecoming celebrations (National Women's Law Center, 2023).

## 4. Implement Sustainability Initiatives

- Use **eco-friendly Homecoming merchandise** and **reduce plastic waste**.
- **Partner with local food banks** to donate leftover food from Homecoming events.

By incorporating these **modern advancements**, Homecoming can continue to **thrive while remaining true to its historical and cultural roots**.

## Conclusion

HBCU Homecoming is a **powerful example of cultural preservation, student engagement, and institutional sustainability**. What started as a **small alumni gathering has become a dynamic celebration of Black excellence, resilience, and community**.

By ensuring that Homecoming remains **inclusive, accessible, and modern**, HBCUs can preserve **this cultural institution for generations to come**. Ultimately, traditions like Homecoming **are not just about the past—they shape the future, creating lifelong connections and inspiring new generations to embrace their history with pride**.

## References

1. Gasman, M., & Commodore, F. (2014). *Opportunities and challenges at historically Black colleges and universities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Howard University Newsroom. (2024, October 9). *The first Howard University homecoming*. Howard University.  
<https://thedig.howard.edu/all-stories/first-howard-university-homecoming>
3. Johnson, J. M., & McGowan, B. L. (2017). Othermothering, fictive kin, and the African American college experience. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 88(5), 607-635.  
<https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2255&context=etd>
4. National Museum of African American History & Culture. (n.d.). *Homecoming: A celebration of HBCUs and their legacies*. Smithsonian Institution.  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/homecoming-celebration-hbcus-and-their-legacies>
5. National Trust for Historic Preservation. (2022, October 15). *The legacy of homecoming: Five preservationists on the HBCUs they love*.  
<https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-legacy-of-homecoming-at-hbcus>
6. National Women's Law Center. (2023, October). *For the culture: Celebrating Black joy and legacy at HBCU homecomings*.

<https://nwlc.org/for-the-culture-celebrating-black-joy-and-legacy-at-hbcu-homecomings/>

7. Union Review. (2018, October 15). *Homecoming and the rich history of HBCUs*.  
<https://www.unionreview.org/articles/homecoming-and-the-rich-history-of-hbcus/>
8. WayMaker Journal. (2023). *Why HBCU homecoming matters beyond the party*.  
<https://www.waymakerjournal.com/hbcu-homecoming-season-matters/>
9. United Negro College Fund. (2022). HBCUs Make America Strong: The Positive Economic Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities.  
<https://uncf.org/news/hbcus-make-america-strong>