



HBCU Fashion Program NASAD Accreditation and Fashion Industry DEI Reform

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Introduction Historically, Blacks have maintained dressmaking as a trade producing garments for North American households since the pre-civil war (i.e., Elizabeth Keckley) yet still battling with obtaining professional, equitable career opportunities and recognition (Bain, 2017; Deihl, 2019; Way, 2021). A perpetuated justification as to why Black designers have low success rates as independent apparel designers is due to a lack of formal design education and funding despite having access to fashion apparel programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) (Cramer-Reichelderfer, 2019). Although fashion apparel educational opportunities exist for Black students at thirteen HBCUs, only four of the programs have the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) accreditation that provides federal funding and apparel industry support. The Carnegie Foundations researchers Cohen-Vogel, et al. (2022) reveal “there is a growing recognition that the education system perpetuates inequality by design—that it was not created, nor does it currently operate to produce equal experiences or outcomes for all students.” (p. 3). According to theoretical grounding in Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996), Black students in fashion apparel programs are at a double disadvantage from the start of their careers as higher education, in general, was never intended for Blacks in addition to a persistent deficit of Black talent within the fashion apparel industry. Existing literature reports that the lack of education and funding has historically been a barrier to Black designers’ success (Wagner, 2018; Way, 2021). Utilizing CRT (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996), this study aims to develop a conceptual framework delineating the significance of HBCU fashion apparel programs receiving NASAD accreditation to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Arsel et al., 2021) within the fashion apparel industry.

Literature Review To address the study’s purpose, a literature review delineates the current state of DEI within the fashion industry, the current state of HBCU fashion apparel programs, and the potential impact of NASAD accreditation on HBCU fashion program graduates. Based on the synthesis of relevant literature, a conceptual framework was developed to highlight the significance of HBCU fashion apparel programs receiving NASAD accreditation. There exists a research gap in which the current apparel industry’s DEI efforts have underexamined the potential transformative impact of recruiting HBCU fashion apparel graduates. The industry support for HBCU fashion apparel programs to obtain NASAD accreditation will help increase equitable education and inclusive career opportunities for Black fashion apparel graduates.

The Current State of DEI in the Apparel Industry According to the report from The Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), *The State of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Fashion Report*, Black employees reported greater inaccessibility to the fashion industry (68%) vs. white employees (37%) and Black employees reported feeling less prepared for their first job search (38% reported that they were “not at all equipped”) vs. White employees (19%) (CFDA, 2021). When considering the context of equity in DEI, the president of the CFDA, CaSandra Diggs recognized, “The fashion industry, both in the U.S. and worldwide, has historically struggled with opportunities and pipelines for Black and Brown talent. We need to collectively address and change this” (p. 5) in the State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Report (CFDA, 2021). As a solution, the fashion apparel industry has embarked on a conscious renaissance to improve DEI at all levels within the industry, including stakeholders/executives, store associates, operational procedures, and culture.

The Current State of HBCU Fashion Programs With almost 350 fashion schools and over 150 undergraduate fashion apparel related programs in the United States, only thirteen HBCUs offer programs in this field (Brown, 2022; Mau, 2020). The thirteen HBCUs fashion apparel programs include four NASAD accredited programs (Delaware State University, Howard University, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and Virginia State University) and nine nonaccredited (Alabama Agricultural and Technical University, Bowie State University, Clark Atlanta University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, North Carolina Central University, the University of the District of Columbia, Hinds Community College, University of Maryland of Eastern Shore, and Morgan State University) (*Accredited Institutions*, 2022; Brown, 2022; Mau 2020). Amongst a list of 50 best higher education fashion design programs in the United States, only one HBCU fashion program, Delaware State University, was included in the list, and it ranked the 29th (Fashion-Schools.org, 2022).

The Potential Impact of NASAD Accreditation on HBCU Fashion Programs As the fashion apparel industry embarks on the challenge to recruit black talent, now it is the time to increase equitable career opportunities for Black students attending HBCU fashion apparel focused programs to ensure they receive resources and funding on par with leading non-HBCU fashion apparel focused programs accredited by the NASAD. Visiting HBCU programs and becoming a financial sponsor and partner will help ensure current and future Black aspiring fashion apparel talents have equitable standards of education and opportunities to indeed be prepared to enter the industry. HBCU fashion programs are an ideal source of Black creative talent that can be a strategic answer to fashion apparel brands’ DEI reform. Fashion apparel brands can fulfill their long-term DEI goals by creating endowed scholarships and an annual gift to support the upkeep of their HBCU fashion apparel program to ensure the program sustains NASAD and industry standards. The leading institutions of the fashion apparel industry must also leverage their financial support and brand reputation to support the improvement of the internal

structure of HBCU fashion apparel programs to qualify for NASAD accreditation. This will ultimately improve the quality of education for all emerging Black talent.

Conceptual Framework. Based on the synthesis of the literature and the current industry situation, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed to illustrate the significance

of HBCU apparel program NASAD accreditation and DEI in the fashion industry in improving apparel higher education standards and Black students' competitiveness and career opportunity.

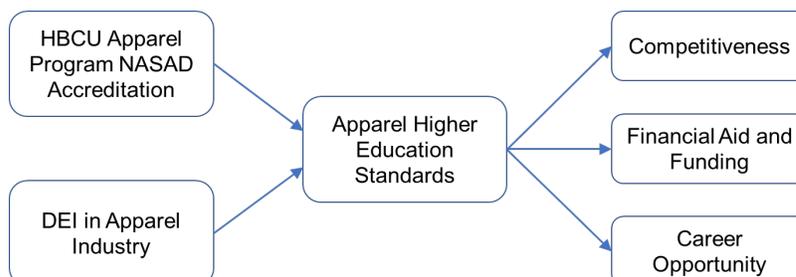


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Discussion and Conclusions

This study supports the significance of HBCU fashion apparel programs becoming NASAD accredited. As HBCU programs receive federal funding as a result of being NASAD accredited, their students can benefit from having industry guest speakers, producing quality fashion shows and exhibitions, and being able to competently participate in industry sponsored competitions. The apparel industry and stakeholders have an opportunity to simultaneously implement their DEI missions by sponsoring HBCUs to become accredited while creating a direct pipeline to Black talent.

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