

Black colleges look to increase online ed presence

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(AP) -- When Michael Hill needed a doctoral program with the flexibility to let him continue working full-time as a Lincoln University administrator, he chose an online degree from another institution.

With such firsthand experience, Hill is now trying to start an online program at Lincoln. It's one of many historically black colleges and universities that has yet to enter a booming cybereducation market that could be particularly lucrative for black colleges.

Blacks comprised about 12 percent of total enrollment in higher [education](#) in 2007 but were 21 percent of students at for-profit institutions - many of which are online, according to an American Council on Education report released this year.

Tom Joyner, a syndicated radio host with a largely black audience, also sees the market's potential. The longtime historical black college and university booster and philanthropist has invested about \$7 million to start HBCUsOnline.com, an educational services venture run by his son.

"My father noticed very early on that a lot of the students doing the online education boom were members of his listening audience," said Tom Joyner Jr. "Those listeners could be better served by HBCUs."

While black colleges only enroll about 11 percent of all [black students](#), their traditions and legacies still resonate in the African-American community. It makes sense that those schools would want to recapture

students from for-profits like the University of Phoenix, said Richard Garrett, managing director of the consulting firm Eduventures.

"This is, to us, an expected and logical trend," Garrett said. "It's ambitious, the timing is right. There's a lot of opportunity there."

The Sloan Consortium for online education estimates about one-third of the country's 4,500 universities offer online degrees. But only about 10 percent of the nation's 105 historically black colleges do, according to the White House Initiative on historical black institutions. (Larger percentages offer online courses without degrees.)

"In order to keep pace and add institutional versatility, we should be in this space," said John Wilson Jr., executive director of the White House Initiative.

Part of the problem is money: Black colleges generally have small endowments and are largely tuition-dependent. Many don't have the technological infrastructure to support online education, said Marybeth Gasman, an HBCU expert at the University of Pennsylvania.

The schools also have struggled with low retention and graduation rates, partly because of students' financial backgrounds. Some officials worry that online student dropouts could further drag down those rates, possibly affecting accreditation, said Ezell Brown, CEO of Education Online Services, another company working to put black colleges online.

Also at issue is whether the nurturing campus environment often touted by black colleges can be replicated in cyberspace. To be successful online, the schools must offer strong student advising and a cultural component that somehow virtually conveys the campus ethos, Gasman said.

Dallas-based HBCUsOnline.com, which launched in September, aims to be a one-stop shop for browsing online programs at black schools. The site promises students personal guidance "from registration to graduation."

Joyner Jr. said the company is targeting adult learners 25 and older - a huge market considering only 17.5 percent of blacks in that age group had at least a bachelor's degree in 2008, according to the American Council on Education.

So far, Hampton and Texas Southern universities have signed on. Joyner Jr. expects to announce more partner schools in the coming months.

"Combining our marketing resources, we stand a much better chance of establishing a presence in the online market space," Joyner Jr. said.

Hampton is actually a online pioneer, having launched its online program 10 years ago with about a dozen students. Today, it has about 400 and hopes to find more through HBCUsOnline.com, said Cassandra Herring, dean of the college of education and continuing studies.

"Certainly having that national platform to talk about what we're doing was a huge, huge benefit for us," Herring said.

But some schools - both historically black and mainstream - choose not to be in cyberspace simply because "there hasn't been a compelling case made to them that online will serve the mission they're trying to achieve," said Jeff Seaman of the Sloan Consortium.

Gasman said while she believes undergraduates should be on campus for social reasons, online programs for older students could be a good idea for rural HBCUs like Lincoln - about 45 miles from Philadelphia - because the campus is hard to access.

Michael Hill, Lincoln's executive vice president, said the school recently upgraded its distance learning facilities and hopes to offer at least one online program within a year.

"I know the value of it," Hill said of pursuing an online degree. "For me, a person that couldn't take a sabbatical ... I had to work while I did it."

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