

Blacks in STEM: 'Why can't we just be diamonds?'

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By Atira Kennedy

In a society that debates the value of HBCU's -- Historically Black Colleges and Universities -- these institutions generate the most STEM graduates, **Claudia Rankins** of the National Science Foundation said Thursday March 16 at Hampton University's Black Family Conference.

Rankins, Ph.D. and former Hampton U. School of Science dean, said HBCUs produced twice as many Science, Technology, Engineering and Math bachelor degrees per 1,000 students than so-called predominantly white institutions [PWIs] in 2014.

"HBCUs were and always are at the forefront of social justice," she said. "HBCUs overproduce in engineering degrees."

With only 15 accredited engineering departments at HBCUs, Rankins said here focus has been geared toward the success and development of the programs. To assist, the NSF began a "GEAR UP Program" that is very popular at Howard University. The students accepted into the program spend 10 weeks abroad learning different aspects of science and engineering.

Other programs include the "**Hampton Nano Club**" and the "**REU Program**" (Research Experience for Undergrads). Each program provides the eligible students with money towards their schooling such as \$34,000 stipends, and \$5,000 for summer training work. An additional \$12,000 allowance goes towards the student's school. This 10-week paid internship program is offered to majors in the STEM fields and the social sciences.

Back in the late 1800s said Rankins, HBCUs opened its doors to anyone, including women and Native Americans. HBCU's were and still are at the forefront of social justice and change, said the speaker. HBCUs – **107 institutions** – comprise about 3 percent of the nation's higher learning and in 2014, said Rankins, they enrolled about 9 percent of all African-American undergraduate students.

Many non-HBCUs collect funding from the government and additional help from other sources, so Rankins turned the attention to the schools in need. "Diversity helps the community," said Rankins. She believes that every



student that attends an HBCU should be provided with the same opportunities and resources as other colleges and universities, especially because of their value and quality. She is willing to put forth the additional effort to make new opportunities available for students who have open minds to accept them.

"Why do we have to be diamonds in the rough," said Rankins, "why can't we just be diamonds?"

*Kelsey Crimiel and Kaelyn Lowe contributed to this report. The writers are students in the **Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications**.*