

LEADERSHIP AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

By Archons Jack L. Ezzell, Jr., and Alvin J. Schexnider, Grapier, Beta Lambda Boulé

Within U.S. higher education and society at large, a topic of continuing interest is the future of black colleges and universities. The nation's black institutions of higher education, despite their size and stature, have proved their mettle, yet they face persistent challenges to their survival.

The two of us are products of black institutions – North Carolina A&T State University and Grambling State University, respectively – and we know well the history and organizational culture of and opportunities at what many refer to as HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities). It was our good fortune to work together for five years in key roles at Norfolk State University (Archon Ezzell as rector of the board of visitors, Archon Schexnider as executive vice president and interim president). The experience gave us insight into the singular importance of leadership and governance in maximizing the enormous potential of an institution critical to the needs of the African American community. We think that our views contribute to discussions regarding ways to strengthen HBCUs and may be especially valuable to those who aspire to lead these institutions.

Placing all black institutions under a single rubric, while convenient, is misleading. For one, they do not constitute a monolith. Second, of the 103 institutions, fewer than half are independent, or private, and a handful offer two-year associate rather than baccalaureate degrees. Still, black institutions collectively render an invaluable service to this country. Their influence is felt far beyond their numbers. Although HBCUs constitute only 3 percent of the nation's colleges and universities, they produce 23 percent of African American college graduates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Were it not for black colleges and universities, there would be no African American middle class. Similarly, were it not for America's black schools of higher education, there would be fewer black Ph.D.'s, pharmacists, engineers and generals. Xavier University of Louisiana – young even by U.S. standards, having been founded in 1935 – sends more graduates to medical school than any other university, black or white (American Medical Association, 2006).

Indisputably, black institutions add value to U.S. higher education. The question is, How can they contribute more? The answer, we believe, is that they must confront four major issues: leadership and governance, resources, stasis and globalization.

Leadership and Governance

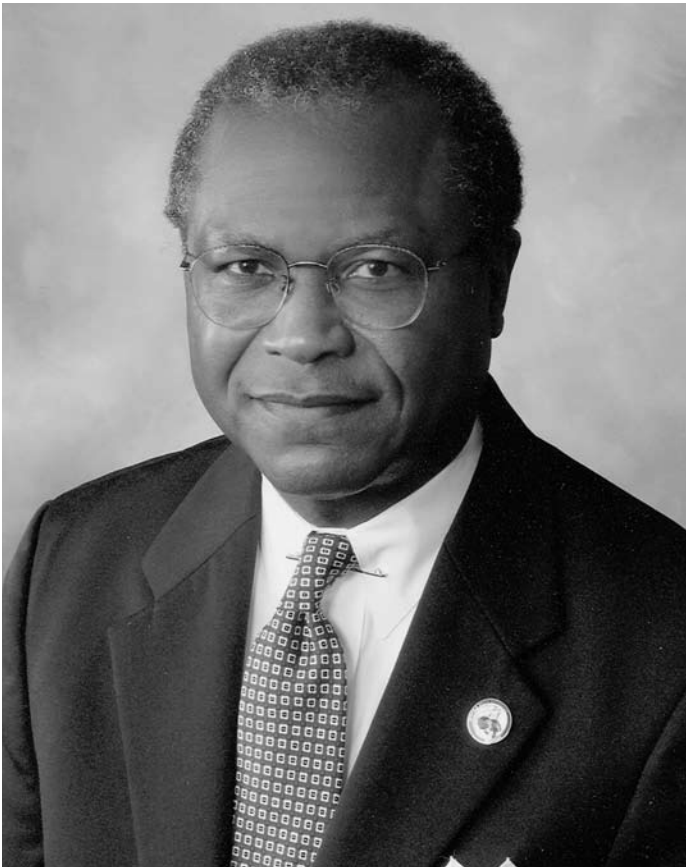
While all four issues are critical, we maintain that leadership and governance are foremost. In far too many instances, the leadership model at HBCUs is dated and ineffectual. For reasons largely related to their origins and evolution in an era of trenchant segregation, the model at HBCUs has tended to be autocratic and top-down. In any modern, complex organization, autocracy is self-defeating, particularly in an institution of higher education where governance is shared. Moreover, the best and the brightest faculty, staff and students, who could attend any college or university, are unlikely to accept an autocratic top-down leadership style. Simply put, HBCUs no longer enjoy a monopoly on black students and faculty.

Effective leadership by the president, along with strong board governance and a commitment to working together to fulfill the mission of the institution, is essential to the success of the enterprise. A president who dominates his or her board, or a board that usurps its president, will invariably lead to failure. It is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain outstanding leaders in higher education. Attracting the best talent to sit on boards of trustees is also challenging. Nonetheless we are convinced that these hurdles must be surmounted in order to achieve success at HBCUs. Equally important, the president and the board must understand their respective functions: leadership by the president and governance or policy making by the board. Both the president and the board must commit themselves to working collaboratively on behalf of the institution. There can be no substitute.

Resources

American institutions of higher learning, whether they serve majority or minority populations, are in fierce competition for students, faculty and resources. Several universities are currently involved in multimillion-dollar campaigns. This means that the larger, better-endowed schools suck up available monies from rich donors, leaving little to be secured on behalf of financially challenged colleges and universities. It is a situation that promises to get worse before it gets better, if it ever does.

The issue of resources is especially acute at HBCUs, most of which were established with limited resources. Their



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disproportionate contributions to the economy and society are especially amazing given the genteel poverty that has generally characterized their existence. According to the article “The Crossroads of History: America’s Best Black Colleges” in the September 27, 2007, issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, “Years of chronic underfunding (both before and after desegregation) have placed some HBCUs in severe financial straits, in some cases leading to accreditation questions.”

Many HBCUs are making valiant attempts to increase resources through private donations, but they are at a distinct disadvantage compared with universities that are already relatively well-off. The combined endowments of all HBCUs total less than \$2 billion; compare that figure with the approximately \$35 billion that Harvard University alone has at its disposal. Perhaps more than anything else, it is the availability of private scholarship dollars supported by healthy endowments that enables majority institutions, private and public, to enjoy a competitive edge in the recruitment of African American students and faculty.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the African American population will expand by 68 percent between 1990 and 2030. It is imperative that black colleges and universities find ways to increase financial support from middle-class and upper-income African Americans, especially alumni of HBCUs. Black colleges and universities are being buffeted

on both sides by majority public and private institutions as well as by two-year community and technical colleges, which in some respects pose the greater threat to the existence of HBCUs. Why? Because two-year colleges are often supported by state and local governments that require their mission to be tied to workforce development.

That is the same reason Mercedes-Benz is in Alabama, Nissan is in Tennessee and BMW is in South Carolina. These firms receive tax incentives to do business in regions where they can stimulate economic development. Hence taxpayers are inclined to support them because their mission and role is clear. It is regrettable that taxpayers do not always understand and appreciate the role of HBCUs with the same clarity. But perceptions won’t change unless something is done to change the situation, and that includes increasing the level of financial support from all sources, but especially from private donors.

Stasis

“Stasis” refers to an organization that has become staid and maintains the status quo. In today’s environment, if an organization is not reinventing itself, it is not likely to survive. Whether in automobile manufacturing, agribusiness, pharmaceuticals or technology, successful, viable companies are thriving because they have implemented quality-improvement programs or have undergone some type of “process reengineering” to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

A major concern on many HBCU campuses is customer service or customer relations. At one institution, Clark Atlanta University, President Walter D. Broadnax launched a student-satisfaction survey concerning customer service shortly after he arrived in August 2002. In doing so, Broadnax acknowledged that establishing “an environment where faculty and staff are truly engaged and committed to ensuring outstanding customer service is an ongoing process rather than an initiative that has a clear beginning and a clear end.”

Students are unlikely to accept dated policies, procedures and services involving instruction, student housing or any of the other programs and activities that define the quality of student life. In today’s competitive environment, institutions that do not meet student expectations will lose out.

Globalization

There is yet another kind of competition on the horizon for American higher education, one that is perhaps more challenging to HBCUs than to majority colleges and universities. We are referring to the competition inherent in a global economy where America’s college graduates must compete not just with one another but also with students from China, India and Latin America. In other words, the nation’s colleges and universities must produce graduates who can hold their own with the best and brightest around the world. If not, they are imperiled. Thomas L. Friedman, in his best-selling book *The World Is Flat*, offers a compelling argument for strengthening higher education in the United States to produce graduates who can compete globally.

Marybeth Gasman is the author of the recently published *Envisioning Black Colleges*, a thoughtful, incisive history of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). The book chronicles the evolution of UNCF and describes how the fund defined, packaged, disciplined and marketed itself to advance its member institutions.

According to Gasman, because of the well-honed UNCF slogan, A mind is a terrible thing to waste, the public has a better sense of the fund's role and mission, including its support of thirty-nine private black institutions. The picture and the message are not so clear, however, for the remaining sixty-odd public HBCUs. These institutions, along with two-year community and technical colleges, must compete for funds with white sister institutions, some of them located in the same city or region. In an era where funding for public higher education is declining and competition for private dollars is increasing, black institutions, public and independent, find themselves in an untenable position.

Unequivocally, there is a role for HBCUs: producing graduates who can compete and foster diversity in every field of endeavor; stemming the tide of African American males who, "tracked" from the lower grades, drop out and end up in prison; sparking a spirit of entrepreneurship among students who seek to write their own ticket and bring others along in the process; and communicating African American history, culture and expectations for the future.

The pathway to achieving these aims may vary from institution to institution. For some schools, it might mean streamlining the curriculum and expanding the use of technology in their administration. For others it might mean creating a strategic alliance with a nearby majority institution. And for still others, it might mean an "articulation agreement" with a nearby community college that matches coursework between the schools. Increasingly, community colleges are the schools of choice for African American students, although most do not earn degrees there. Above all, what is needed is bold, aggressive leadership that thinks out of the box. Higher education, like the corporate and nonprofit sectors, must go the extra mile to attract talented leadership. For black institutions, however, given the enormity of the challenges, the margin of error is small.

Fisk University in Nashville is a renowned and venerable institution that has produced outstanding scholars and leaders, including historian John Hope Franklin, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, former U.S. solicitor general Wade H. McCree, Jr., and the school's current president, Hazel O'Leary. Yet its future is in doubt because the student population it once had a monopoly on now enjoys options that are taking them to college campuses across the country. In short, African American students are voting with their feet as never before.

Our view is that some HBCUs will survive and perhaps even thrive in the future. The likely candidates are to be found in a recent listing by *U.S. News and World Report*, which for the first time ranked black colleges in an exclusive category. Curiously, the top-ten ranked institutions are all private, perhaps reflective of the UNCF's focused mission, the schools' ability to attract top-tier students and faculty members and, equally important, their ability to attract strong leadership.



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We believe that the UNCF deserves credit for fostering the kind of clarity of purpose and organizational culture that enables its member institutions to flourish. UNCF institutions appear to be making a compelling case for continued enhancement and support. They may also offer a template that will benefit public HBCUs as they endeavor to compete more aggressively for students who can no longer be considered their exclusive province.

Improved recruitment of students is a necessary but insufficient condition for success at HBCUs, whether public or independent. Greater attention must be paid to leadership and governance, because, particularly in public institutions, political considerations seem to carry greater weight in appointments. Considering the trade-offs, failure to recruit exceptional leadership in the presidency and on governing boards constitutes an inordinately high price to pay. Outstanding leadership and governance will also ensure that appropriate attention is paid to garnering resources, avoiding stasis and producing graduates capable of competing in a global economy. Ω