

Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Albatross of Undignified Publicity

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Thank you and good morning. I am pleased to be invited to join you here today.

I begin by commending Johnny Taylor, the CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund for pulling together this theme and this crowd. Most folk steer clear of controversies, but others are both wise and courageous enough to face and derive lessons from them. Anytime people and institutions are under attack, it is a good idea to huddle to develop some creative and innovative responses. That is why we are here today.

I. UNDIGNIFIED PUBLICITY

I want to start by taking you back to 1917. That was the year when Thomas Jesse Jones published the very first formal, large-scale, two-volume assessment of the condition of black colleges. He called it “Negro Education: A Study of the Private and Higher Schools for Colored People in the United States.”

For the first time ever, a public or private agency used systematic, large-scale research to shape a perspective on our colleges. Jones said he wanted to conduct an “impartial investigation” into the status of “Negro education.”

It was largely a survey of the historically black colleges and universities at the time, and in his introduction to the Survey, Anson Phelps Stokes, Secretary of the Phelps-Stokes Trustees, wrote this:

*“There is no more important agency to bring about the improvement of education than **dignified publicity**...it brings good institutions and good methods to the favorable attention of patrons, voters and teachers everywhere, and similarly, by disclosing the actual facts, shows what institutions and methods are unworthy of general support.”* [p. xii, bold emphasis added]

So, reporting on the educational and life prospects for ten million African Americans (at that time, a tenth of the nation and a third of the South), Jones understood that what he had to say – his observations, conclusions, recommendations...*his publicity* -- would do

much to set an important tone for how HBCUs would be thought of, invested in, and advanced.

Imagine that. Even in 1917, *dignified publicity* was understood to be *the key* to accessing and tapping the philanthropic marketplace, in order to competitively strengthen the capacity of these institutions.

Now, for the record, Jones's findings generated anything but "dignified publicity" for black colleges. After he isolated and praised only Howard University, Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, he generally referred to all other HBCUs with phrases like a "most impoverished group", and "seriously handicapped," and the quality of the education they offered was described as "most unsatisfactory".

Many African Americans at that time thought Jones was unfair. Based on his read of the reactions, Carter G. Woodson later contended that Jones's report had done "incalculable harm" to black colleges.

Woodson essentially concluded that in overlooking all of the good he could have focused on, Jones instead produced a heavy dose of *undignified publicity*. And there is no question that it set an unfortunate and negative tone that has only persisted and worsened over time.

That is the history. And that is where we find ourselves today. But rather than a research study triggering the storm of controversy, it was instead recently triggered by an opinion piece written by Jason Riley of the *Wall Street Journal*. On September 28, 2010 the Journal headline read: "*Black Colleges Need a New Mission: Once an essential response to racism, they are now academically inferior.*"

The article caused a stir and, as if on cue, other headlines followed:

- "Declining Payoff From Black Colleges"
- "Why do we have Black Colleges?"
- "Are HBCUs Still Needed?"

Responses from within and beyond the HBCU world reveal that many believed it all seemed so skewed, so distortive...and, perhaps, so undignified.

I want to make just three points, or offer three perspectives on where we find ourselves today, to help set the tone for this gathering. I will end by examining what HBCUs might do about all of this undignified publicity.

II. IT IS A BAD TIME!

First, it may not be obvious to you, but it is obvious to me that it is a bad tune for this kind of challenge. Why do I say that? Well, it's very simple.

You all know, President Obama and Secretary Duncan have established the 2020 goal – by the year 2020, we intend to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world – that is, the best educated, most competitive and diverse workforce in the world.

We used to be number one, but we have not been number one since 1995. Since then, we slipped all the way to number twelve, and now we are number nine, behind countries like Norway, Netherlands, New Zealand, Denmark, Korea, Sweden and others.

So by 2020, we need about 8 million more graduates in order to regain the number one position in the world.

And everybody in this White House understands that we cannot reach that goal without an enormously enhanced contribution from HBCUs. That means we have a national goal that incorporates us.

Don't miss that point.

We have a national goal in which HBCUs are figured to make a substantial contribution.

We are not on the outside trying to get in; we are part of the national plan. This nation is counting on us right now.

That is why it is a bad time for another round of undignified publicity.

HBCUs need to produce an extra 135,000 graduates by 2020. That is, we need to reach a new annual base of 50,000 graduates, up from the current base of 36,000. And because our department has analyzed this, we know how many graduates we need from every state and from every HBCU.

And let me just whisper something to you...let me just pause and tell you that Johnny Taylor and I would like to see some of our presidents regard this as *an opportunity*.

We want you to see the 2020 goal as a pull factor – it pulls us toward a new HBCU narrative. It ties our value proposition less to where we have been and more to where we must now go.

Let me put that another way: with respect to how this Washington or this White House has factored in the HBCU contribution, the 2020 goal invites us *to shift from plaintiff to partner*.

We are partners. That is why we:

- Extended for a decade the two-year annual \$85 million started by President Bush.
- Are defending the Pell Grany program. Iit doesn't cost too much to do...it costs too much not to do.
- Are proposing to spend about \$1.4B to help get more students to graduate.

- Are investing in teacher production. HBCUs still produce half of all African-American teachers.
- Have reshaped the Capital Finance Program to make it easier to enhance your physical infrastructures.

We are partners in pursuit of big national goals.

So that is why I say it is a bad time to be dealing with all of this undignified publicity.

III. IT IS ABOUT TIME!

But right there beside my feeling that it is a bad time, I also think that it is about time.

We need new perspectives right now...and we need them badly.

One of my twin daughters recently came home from college after her sophomore year and said, "Dad, we're in trouble." I asked, "why?" She said, "carbon emissions. If we do not do something different and drastic within the next ten to fifteen years about carbon emissions, we are done. Most of us anyway."

She was talking about the ecosystem we call earth, but she could very well have been talking about the ecosystem we call HBCUs.

A lot of this undignified publicity is like carbon emissions in our HBCU ecosystem. It distorts and weakens us... and it may soon doom us.

But if it is true that the carbon emissions coming from the undignified publicity are harmful, then it is also true that the carbon emissions coming from some of the realities upon which that undignified publicity is based – well, those carbon emissions could be lethal. In other words, all of the news about our problems is not unfounded.

But like the proverbial squeaky wheel, our HBCU deficiency list seems to receive the majority of what little airtime we get.

You know it well, and the American public is given regular doses of it.

I am reminded of a point Jesse Jackson made during his 1984 run for president, and I paraphrase: If HBCUs were to walk on water, the headline would read: "HBCUs can't swim!"

HBCUs cannot seem to get a fair shake from the media. But deficiency in American colleges and universities is common.

Nobody feels they have enough. Nobody! And yet it seems like the face of institutional deficiency – just like the face of welfare used to be, and just like the face of Pell Grants now tends to be – the face of institutional deficiency is usually ours.

And this is the real danger of undignified publicity. We get defined by and then we become the

definition of:

- Small endowments
- High attrition
- Needy, less-well-prepared enrollments
- Limited financial aid
- Deferred maintenance
- Less competitive faculty salaries
- Thin advancement teams
- Anemic alumni support
- A fragile, if not broken connection to the transformational sectors of the philanthropic marketplace

But, again, most of American higher education has been fighting to reduce those carbon emissions for more than a century, and yet the undignified publicity that these common conditions provoke at least seems to be uniquely ours.

But listen, I am among those who called Jason Riley to talk to him...and I think it is both possible and wise to take a step back from all of his inflammatory language, give him the benefit of the doubt and see that he is simply calling for change.

He says some of us need to consider adopting new ways to do business.
That is not a new message, and it should not be so controversial.

Riley says, “remake these schools to meet today’s challenges.” He thinks we should consolidate some, repurpose others, and supplement the management of still others.

By the way, regarding the Obama/Duncan effort to reform K-12 education in America, the Department of Education is investing heavily in four school intervention models: the turnaround model, the restart model, the transformation model, and the school closure model.

Now that may or may not be the kind of change needed in HBCUs, but if we are not constantly, effectively, and fruitfully calling for our institutions to change, then we should not be in our positions – and here I refer not just to all HBCU presidents and boards, but to Johnny Taylor of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, Michael Lomax of the United Negro College Fund, Lezli Baskerville of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Lorenzo Esters of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and especially me, since the President who appointed me, rose to power on the wings of a change message.

So I see Riley as one who is simply calling for change...he just has a relatively undignified way of doing it.

You know, I got myself in trouble when I first took this position because in my very first interview, I was asked for my perspective on why it is that HBCUs have not been able to raise as much money as other, more aggressive colleges and universities.

I said, “well, one reason is, as is true for many nonprofits, when many of us go out and raise money; we need to stop playing the violin and start playing the trumpet.”

I said, “the violin evokes the kind of sadness that can attract small gifts, while the trumpet evokes the kind of greatness that can attract large investments.”

Translation: It is about time we changed.
 It is about time we acquired some new perspectives.

I spent the first 16 years of my career at MIT, and a common saying on campus at MIT was, “perspective is worth 100 points of IQ.”

No matter how paralyzed or sluggish you may feel on your journey through life, if you find a way to change your perspective (your outlook or worldview) – you can actually increase your individual or institutional IQ – you can reach a brand new brilliance or intelligence.

It is about time that we adopted some new perspectives because “perspective is worth 100 points of IQ.”

Let me offer a quick example. So, Jason Riley quotes the 2007 Fryer and Greenstone study, using it as a judge of HBCU effectiveness.⁴ You saw and read the loud quotes and headlines back in 2007:

- Wage penalty – HBCU graduates see a 20% decline in relative wages.
- Traditionally white colleges get better at educating African Americans.
- HBCUs possibly inferior to TWIs in preparing blacks for post-college life.
- HBCU attendance appears to retard black progress.

There is absolutely nothing dignified about that.

Like most HBCU supporters, I was troubled at first, but then I gradually developed a different perspective about it. I grew to think it was a good thing. In fact, I came to see it as research that could be leveraged to our benefit more than any research since I can remember.

Now, why do I say that? Well, throughout most of the period they studied, between the '70s and '90s, we saw the greatest college and university endowment run-up in the history of higher education in this country.

So, I remember checking the list of College and Beyond schools that Fryer and Greenstone compared to HBCUs. If you look at that list, you will see that those 28 colleges and universities have had endowments that are a combined 119 times larger than all HBCU endowments combined.

And the '80s and '90s is when those endowments surged the most.

- Of the 13 private universities in that database, not a single one has been without

- an endowment that was at some point larger than all HBCUs combined. Not one.
- You combine the endowments of the seven liberal arts institutions on the list and that total is triple all HBCUs combined.
 - Even the collective endowments of the four women's colleges is twice that of all HBCUs combined.
 - And the four public university endowments combine to exceed all collective HBCU endowments by an order of magnitude – or ten times.

My point is simple: On one of the most critical comparisons of capacity, Fryer and Greenstone juxtapose a limited number of HBCUs to a list of privileged institutions to help prove their point about a wage penalty. Yet, the wage surge they highlight was basically simultaneous with a substantial endowment surge, and, to me, to the degree that there was a wage swing, the news is that the swing should have been even larger than what they claim it was.

So, it is about time that one or a few of our HBCUs dares to use that research to tell some wealthy folk – if you invest in us, even modestly, we will reverse that alleged post-college wage swing.

It is about time that we find a set of new perspectives and responses to the undignified publicity that rears its ugly head so often.

IV. IT IS OUR TIME!

So, that brings me to my final point...I have told you it is a bad time and it is about time, but now I say: it is our time.

The Jones report was generated in 1917. That means in six years we will be at the 100th anniversary of undignified publicity for HBCUs..

The best way to counteract undignified publicity is to more effectively point to what's happening on our campuses that is truly worthy of dignified publicity.

THE VALUE

While growing up, I often heard some of the Muslims in North Philadelphia say, “the best way to show that a glass is dirty is to hold a clean one up next to it.”

I believe it is out time to hold up the clean glasses in the HBCU world.

You know, I was not in this position long before I put out a call to all HBCU presidents to send me your strengths. I said we are generating a strengths inventory – a collection of some of the best research and academic initiatives on your campuses – that which would be the stuff of a major capital campaign. I said we want to help let the world know the best things about our HBCUs, so send us your strengths.

We heard from just 30 of the 105 HBCUs – half private, half public. But we gathered enough to begin to shape a noteworthy preliminary inventory.

That is part of why I am glad Jason Riley has joined this gathering. I want him to shake hands with a few of the presidents we heard from, and who are here right now. Shake hands with:

- Dr. Harry Williams from Delaware State University, and learn about his world-class optics program;
- Dr. Chris Brown of Alcorn State University and learn about their Center for Biotechnology and Genomics;
- Dr. Carolyn B. Meyers of Jackson State University and learn about their Nanotoxicity Center;
- Dr. Thelma Thompson of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and ask about her new solar farm that will revolutionize energy production down on Maryland's eastern shore. By the way, you can shake her hand and congratulate her, as she steps down after a wonderful tenure there.

I believe it is out time to tell a better story about how we are truly integral to the future of this great nation.

It is all about our value proposition.

Clarifying our HBCU value proposition is the best way to reduce the carbon emissions that come from both the press and from our campuses.

And figuring out our value proposition is precisely what will begin to help us to meet that other big challenge we call capital impairment. These are the two priorities of the Obama White House Initiative – value proposition and capital impairment.

HBCUs have been around for 100-plus years and not a single one of them has a first-rate capital base...not one.⁷

Well, this is our time to fix that. So, let me end with an indication of why this is so urgent now.

THE OPPORTUNITY

As a fundraiser at MIT, I came to firmly believe and tell people endlessly that there is more money out there than there are good ideas to attract it. And that is still true.

- \$304B in charitable giving in this country in 2009.
- \$40B of it to education.

- \$28B of that to higher education. And,
- HBCUs attracted less than 0.3% of the higher education total.

If we reduce our carbon emissions as we enhance our value proposition, we can improve that.

Fifty-seven of this nation's 400 Billionaires have joined the Buffett/Gates giving pledge, an effort that will add at least an extra \$125B in American Philanthropy over the next several years.

If we reduce our carbon emissions as we enhance our value proposition, we can tap that.

But there is money from within too: African Americans are approaching \$1 trillion in annual spending power. Eugene Robinson just wrote a book citing four kinds of African Americans. One group he calls "transcendents." – or African Americans with extreme wealth and influence. Well, how is it that we have transcendent African Americans, and not a single transcendent HBCU?

If we reduce our carbon emissions as we enhance our value proposition, we can remedy that.

For nearly a century, HBCUs have faced a steady flow of undignified publicity.

- It is a bad time to have to face it now.
- It is about time that we faced it more productively.
- And... it is our time for giving all real and potential supporters a new set of more dignified reasons to heavily invest in HBCUs.

And that can only be a positive development, because the Jason Rileys of the world need to know that there is a much more dignified way to call for change.

Thank you.