

# Alliance of Former Presidents and Chancellors of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

July 1, 2013

Dear Mr. President,

We are a group of former presidents and chancellors of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), two of whom have served as chairman and others as members of the President's Board of Advisors for Historically Black Colleges and Universities under previous Presidential administrations. Respectfully, we commend you for your leadership of our country over the past four years. Now, we are writing to appeal to you for your personal involvement in the quest to make Historically Black Colleges and Universities comparable and competitive with Traditionally White Institutions (TWIs) in their attractiveness to students, faculty, and staff, regardless of race. We want to ensure that HBCUs have the same capacity for securing grants and contracts from state and federal agencies. Under these circumstances, they would be better able to raise funds from private individuals, foundations, and corporate entities. In making this appeal, we wish to bring clarity to the nature of the HBCU challenge and to advance a series of strategies for maximizing the enormous potential of these institutions. Increasing federal support to HBCUs would be consistent with your stated national educational goals. We believe that the nation cannot meet your stated goals for the year 2025 unless we significantly increase the number of graduates from the nation's HBCUs.

For all of the political punditry and controversy, there is no doubt that through your vision and related policies, programs, and priorities, you have fundamentally changed the course of history in this country. Your courageous stand on healthcare reform, equal pay for women, immigration, marriage equality, and voting rights, have all moved America—and by our example—other nations toward that more democratic and just society for which people around the globe yearn. We are exceedingly proud of you and believe that our sentiments are reflective of those of the larger Black community. We recognize, however, that much remains to be done, and addressing the plight of the HBCUs has to be among the highest priorities. These institutions are an indispensable part of the great mosaic of American higher education; their future is inextricably linked to any continuing efforts to address the “moral crisis” the late President John F. Kennedy spoke of 50 years ago. HBCUs have an extraordinary role to play, not only in manpower training and economic development, but also in providing broad educational access and institutional choice, promoting diversity in the workforce, and in upholding the dignity of this nation as an exemplar of racial tolerance and social justice.

Since their founding in the mid-1800s, Black institutions have been treated as outcasts of this country's higher education system, poorly funded and supported, and continuously marginalized and maligned. Corrective measures by the federal government in the form of executive orders, congressional statutes, and landmark judicial decisions have been issued only to have state governments design governance structures, academic program policies and procedures, funding mechanisms, and other strategies to circumvent rather than to comply with federal mandates. The most celebrated of federal initiatives include the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and its progeny, particularly the higher education standards set forth in the *Adams v. Richardson* and *Adams v. Califano* cases of 1973 and 1977, *United States v. Fordice* in 1992, and *Knight v. Alabama* in 1994. Likewise, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including Title VI prohibiting discrimination by race in any program receiving federal funds, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), including the very important Title III, Part B funding provision: "Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities". The U.S. Department of Education also took significant steps to enforce these judicial and congressional mandates in issuing, among other clarifications, its 1978 Revised Criteria Specifying the Ingredients of Acceptable Plans to Desegregate State Systems of Public Higher Education and its 1994 Notice of Application of Supreme Court Decision following *U.S. v. Fordice*. In harmony with all of these federal actions, the White House issued its 1992 Executive Order establishing the President's Advisory Board for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The significance of the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 cannot be overemphasized because of its provision empowering the federal government, through what is now the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Justice, to initiate enforcement action against states that have long been recalcitrant in complying with federal civil rights laws and which, in many instances, remain in violation of their federal desegregation and equal educational opportunity obligations. Some administrations have been more aggressive than others in the use of their enforcement power and in otherwise pursuing policies, programs, and initiatives for achieving parity between Historically Black Institutions and their White counterparts. The Clinton Administration was remarkably aggressive in pressuring states to move toward parity among their public colleges and universities. Under that administration, several partnership agreements between the states and the federal government were signed through which states elected to enhance HBCUs as opposed to having the federal government begin enforcement proceedings. There has since been little, if any, follow-up on those agreements despite complaints from HBCU advocates of blatant violations. The failure of the federal government to invoke sanctions is disappointing enough; however, it is made worse when states cite federal inaction as evidence of state compliance with applicable law.

The variation from one administration to another on Title VI enforcement closely correlates with the pattern of funding support for HBCUs in the form of grants and contracts, faculty research awards, and other designated program funding. Funding from federal agencies to HBCUs under the Clinton Administration was especially noteworthy. For example, funding to build infrastructure, launch unique and high demand academic programs, support research, and to recruit and retain quality students, faculty, and staff increased significantly from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Science Foundation, and the Departments of Energy, Defense, and Health and Human Services. Much of that funding increase disappeared in the administration that followed. Public records indicate that funding from federal agencies to HBCUs has dropped significantly since the end of the American Reinvestment Act and, if not corrected, that decline is sure to continue.

When coupled with the reluctance of the federal government to initiate enforcement activities, the rollercoaster approach to funding for HBCUs has compounded the effects of under-investment at the state level. It has served to widen the gap in comparability and competitiveness between HBCUs and TWIs, with the disparity now becoming more pronounced than ever before. HBCUs cannot address this widening gap with increases in tuition and fees as some of their peer TWIs might do because of the socioeconomic status of HBCU students nor can HBCUs offset the lack of sufficient state and federal dollars with funds from foundations, corporations, and private individuals given their limited contingent of programs, faculty, facilities, and foundational funding.

As studies consistently document the worsening condition of HBCUs, critics are attributing it to a lack of vision and competent institutional leadership. Such criticism is unfounded and belies both truth and reason. The community of HBCU presidents in reality is not significantly different from the general pool of college and university chief executive officers; a few are exceptional, many are good, and still others are simply not up to the task. The tragedy is that so many very competent and highly respected HBCU presidents, with otherwise promising careers, have never had an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership talents and skills. They simply have not had either the resources or political support to compete with their better funded peers. This is a grave injustice that must not be allowed to continue; it feeds the racially charged stereotype of HBCUs, Black college presidents, and the overall African-American community and prevents this nation from realizing the full benefit of its vast and richly diverse human talent pool. Moreover, perpetuation of the stereotype is disruptive and divisive, and threatens to undermine the very nature of our democratic society.

To be sure, the Congress and the courts must continue to play a vital role in addressing the plight of HBCUs; however, we are persuaded that your presidency represents the best opportunity in the last 176 years for bold and aggressive executive leadership in the resolution

of the issue. It is unlikely that there will be another such opportunity within the near future. Our concern is that you could leave office without having effected the necessary change in how the state and federal governments view, promote, support, and fund HBCUs. That would be, in our opinion, a tragedy of untold proportion. HBCUs have contributed immeasurably to the economic, political, cultural, scientific, and social welfare of this country; yet, they have only scratched the surface of their enormous potential. The timing for unleashing that potential could not be better than during your administration, and we respectfully offer the following ideas on how that might be accomplished.

- Return the Office of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities to the level of the White House. Historically Black Institutions are unique among four-year institutions of higher education because of the circumstances of their founding and the continuing effects on their present condition and future viability. Unlike other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), HBCUs are not mainstream like traditionally White institutions with competitive infrastructures and broad-base appeal. Any strategy to address the current condition of the HBCUs will require a well-coordinated, comprehensive, and aggressive effort on the part of the White House Initiative for Historically Black Colleges and Universities to enhance HBCU capacity and raise their profiles. Locating the White House Initiative within the U.S. Department of Education where it is currently, does not afford the office the necessary clout and political muscle to sufficiently influence decisions of other department secretaries, major directorates, and other agency heads as it relates to policies, programs, and funding for support of HBCUs. Nor does it signal to corporations, foundations, and other partners the importance this administration places on helping HBCUs to thrive. A shift of the office to one of the directorates within the White House would immediately send a message of the value this administration attaches to HBCUs, the investment the Executive Office will make in these campuses, and the investments it expects every legislative body, executive agency, corporation, and foundation to make in HBCUs during your second term.
- Use the bully pulpit of the Office of the President to encourage state governments, federal agencies, private foundations, the corporate community, and the general public to support the cause of the HBCUs, their students, and stakeholder communities. Organize a meeting of the HBCU presidents and senior administration officials at the White House, preferably during either the annual conference of the National Association for Equal Opportunity for Higher Education or at the annual Black College Week program sponsored by the White House Initiative. In speeches on the importance of science research and

innovation and the role of higher education in manpower training and economic development, it will be important to take care to emphasize the continuing value and potential contributions of HBCUs.

- Encourage White House staff and department secretaries through in-house directives and other forms to explore with HBCUs opportunities for upcoming grants, contracts, and other program support for expanding institutional capacity. Such an initiative should include an accountability system for determining a degree of compliance. Direct the White House Initiative on HBCUs to work with each federal agency in realizing numeric goals and a timetable for increasing their investments in HBCUs. Require progress toward the realization of the goals to be a criterion for every executive-level supervisor in the federal government. An annual progress report would be extremely valuable; however, no such report has been issued in the last three years.
- Raise the rank of the executive director of the White House Initiative to the equivalent of a deputy secretary to afford that individual the respect, access and/or influence required to achieve the goals and objectives of the office. Then move expeditiously to fill the existing vacancy with someone who understands the history and nature of the HBCU challenge and appreciates their accomplishments and promise. He or she should have a solid record of experience and credibility within the HBCU community. At one point, the office was occupied by a former ambassador, and on another occasion, the occupant was a former assistant secretary of higher education. The last person to occupy the position was a general schedule grade 15, the same grade as his staff. Under no circumstances should the classification be below the level of senior executive service.
- Reestablish the balance in membership on the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities such that it is comprised of a majority of HBCU presidents and other representatives of the HBCU community and a minority contingent of corporate, foundation, and other individuals. Such a configuration of the membership brings together the wisdom, creative energy, talent, and resolve of current and former presidents with individuals who can provide the margin of funding and other support to transform HBCUs in the fashion of mainstream higher education. Additionally, it provides an extraordinary opportunity for reshaping the thinking of potential funders and acculturating them to the potential return on their investments.
- Have the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice consider Title VI enforcement proceedings against states that are in violation of federal law and related desegregation agreements. It is

very difficult for public institutions to resist oppressive measures since their leadership must work under state supervision. Therefore, HBCUs have to rely heavily on the federal government for relief. Of the states under court order, several were prematurely released during the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush while several others remain under court order. A flurry of enforcement activity ensued during the Clinton Administration, ending in partnership agreements that promised, among many things, to remedy disparities existing between HBCUs and TWIs. Those enforcement activities ceased under the Bush II Administration and little, if any, action has been taken since. In lieu of federal enforcement, supporters of HBCUs are filing lawsuits in federal court seeking redress for the respective HBCU campuses and their students. These lawsuits are burdensome, time-consuming, and expensive and seldom does the aggrieved have the benefit of pro bono legal representation. There is no doubt that litigation tends to encourage more favorable treatment for HBCUs in the short term; yet, it is no substitute for aggressive Title VI enforcement. It is a last resort.

- Create a framework for institutionalizing the initiatives being proposed. Except for the harm of injustice and unfair treatment to HBCUs and their students, the greatest barrier to progress in resolving the HBCU dilemma is the variation from the White House Administration to another in its interpretation of civil rights law and its application of proven remedies. During the Clinton Administration, for example, significant progress was made toward the integration of HBCUs into the mainstream of American higher education. Several HBCUs achieved doctoral-granting, research university status and rivaled their white peers in the attracting, retaining, and graduating minorities in science and engineering at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral degree levels. One of our larger public HBCUs even trumped Harvard in attracting the highest number of African-American merit scholars. With the shift in policies, programs, and emphases of the succeeding administration, the impact upon the HBCUs is very much in evidence. The nature of the HBCU challenges requires that each administration build on the progress of the previous administration, with each administration moving closer to the goal of parity between traditionally White and Historically Black campuses.

Having enjoyed both the many successes and endured so much of the struggle of matriculation and/or longtime employment as faculty, staff, or chief executive officer at one of the Historically Black Institutions, we—more than anyone else—understand the nature of the HBCU challenge and are best positioned to speak candidly and objectively on the subject.

We are persuaded that the future success of this country is contingent upon the success of HBCUs. Our nation cannot realize your goal of increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality college degrees, certificates, or other credentials to 60 percent by 2025; having an excellent, diverse, and technologically prepared workforce; and making an America “built to last” without thriving HBCUs. It is our hope that our appeal to you will begin a very frank and robust dialogue that will put us on a clearly defined and irreversible path toward final redress of one of America’s greatest injustices.

Finally, Mr. President, should you think that these ideas have merit, we would welcome the opportunity for further discussion. We, therefore, request a meeting with you to discuss our concerns. The Alliance of Former Presidents and Chancellors may be reached through the President of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Ms. Lezli Baskerville, at 202- 552-3333.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Respectfully yours,



Earl S. Richardson  
Former President, Morgan State University

William DeLauder  
Former President, Delaware State University

Edward Fort  
Former President, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University

John Garland  
Former President, Central State University

Fred Humphries  
Former President, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

Joseph Johnson  
Former President, Grambling State University and Talladega College

Ivory Nelson  
Former President, Lincoln University Pennsylvania

Benjamin Payton

Former President, Benedict College and Tuskegee University

Delores Spikes

Former President, Southern University Baton Rouge; Chancellor of the Southern University System and Former President, University of Maryland Eastern Shore

Arthur Thomas

Former President, Central State University

Thelma Thompson

Former President, University of Maryland Eastern Shore