The 2011 Charles H. Thompson Lecture-Colloquium Presentation

The Declining Significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Relevance, Reputation, and Reality in Obamamerica

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Historically Black colleges and universities are a unique institutional cohort in American higher education. These colleges have been celebrated for their achievements and critiqued for their composition at differing points during their collective history. This article addresses contemporary ebbs and flows of their relevance and reputation in the national discourse. Particular attention is given to real or perceived changes in the status and place of these institutions since the election of President Barack Obama and the new imperative for maintaining institutional significance.

Keywords: *Black colleges, institutional mission, postsecondary education, public policy*

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."
Jeremiah 8:20, KJV

INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2008, the United States of America held its 56th quadrennial presidential election. The ballots were led by six names—Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, Chuck Baldwin of Florida, Bob Barr of Georgia, Ralph Nader of Connecticut, John McCain of Arizona, and Barack Obama of Illinois. When the night concluded with reports from the far East in Nashua, New Hampshire and the far West in Waikoloa, Hawaii the two lead vote getters were Barack Obama and John McCain. Their popular votes were 69,456,897 and 59,934,814, respectively. Barack Obama was elected the 44th President of the United States with a lead of more than 9,522,083 votes (this would translate to 365 electoral votes over John McCain's 173).

On the morning of November 5, 2008, many media outlets in print, radio, and television began to engage a conceptualization of America as post-racial. Take as emblematic, Shelby Steele's (2008) article on that morning in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "Obama's Postracial Promise" declaring,

> For the first time in human history, a largely White nation has elected a Black man to be its paramount leader. And the cultural meaning of this unprecedented convergence of dark skin and ultimate power will likely become—at least for a time—a national obsession. In fact, the Obama presidency will always be read as an allegory. Already we are as curious about the cultural significance of his victory as we are about its political significance. (p. 11)

Even more at a major international summit Mazrui and Luthuli (2008) in the article *"Is This the Dawn of a Post-racial Age? From Othello to Obama"* posited that President Obama was the manifestation of the prophetic admonition of the sociologist William Julius Wilson a quarter century earlier. In 1978, Wilson published his seminal corpus, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. In this classic text he explored the conflict and confluence of race and class in American life, particularly for persons of African descent. Wilson examined the "statistical significance" of race and class on the interplay of variables and constructs incident to education, housing, employment, and public policy. Therefore, he explored the permanence of race in society not as important or meaningful, but as a pattern of consistent effects that is greater than an occurrence of chance; also known as the *p*-value (Fisher, 1925). Many casual readers errantly construe his title as a declamation on the diminishing importance of race in American institutions. As proof of the above, Princeton University published the volume *Racial Justice in the Age of Obama* by Roy Brooks (2009) asserting that President Obama's election confirmed a national decline in the primacy and importance of race.

Wilson's (1978) book, more accurately understood, is a treatise on the pervasive persistence of race even at the intersection of class and social structure, not an apologia on the decreased import of race. This article employs the

same utility as Wilson's epistemological posture. The pages that follow will explore the relevance of historically Black colleges and universities, their shifting reputation across higher education contexts, and the complex reality of this cohort of institutions in relation to the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States. This analysis requires us to conduct a careful analysis of the state and place of these institutions at this particular moment in history. Even more, it provides a context and data from which to historically Black colleges and universities can gauge the institutional responsibility to clarify their missions and identify their niches in advance of a second term of the Obama administration.

Cornel West (2004) reminds us that the critique of American practice is central to the democratic ideal. West asserted that the inexorable identification of national policies with disparate impact is not treasonous, but patriotic in its most decorated manner. Hence it is important not to view the data that follows as a critique of any President, but rather as an exploration of the changing landscape of historically Black colleges and universities in America. Additionally, the intent of this analysis is to make central the responsibility that historically Black colleges and universities have to maintaining their public space in various stakeholder communities.

There are two fundamental truths that frame this discussion. First, there is a significant shift in the college going patterns of African American students (Bennett & Xie, 2003). With fewer African Americans choosing historically Black colleges as a percentage of the college going population, it may well be the case that the historic talent pools have shifted. Second, seismic shifts in the historic racial terrain make the former symbols of primacy and place irrelevant (Mills, 1997). In contemporary society, the ideological predispositions of American citizens have limited congruence to the communal racial monoliths of the twentieth century. It can be asserted with confidence that the world has changed and therefore so has the world of historically Black institutions of higher education. The national mandates for accountability, performance, and excellence are the new order of the day for all postsecondary institutions.

Historically Black colleges and universities are among the most commented about institutions in the academic literature; however, they remain among the least empirically examined (Brown & Freeman, 2004). A bulk of the research is heavily colloquial and anecdotal, thereby leaving a void in the academic literature. Brown and Freeman (2004) suggested that because this absence exists, Black colleges continue to be inaccurately described and assessed. The available information on historically Black institutions traditionally falls under the guise of complimentary or controversial assertions. The complimentary research depicts Black colleges as nurturing and supportive environments and as unique institutions critical to the achievement of African American students (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Brown, Ricard, & Donahoo, 2004; Browning & Williams, 1978; Davis, 1998; Fleming, 1984; Freeman, 1998; Garibaldi, 1984, Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). The controversial assertions refer to Black colleges as academic wastelands and suggest that they are cheap and inferior institutions in comparison to traditional or mainstream higher education (Jencks & Riesman, 1967; Wenglinsky, 1996). Despite a growing volume of research on Black colleges (Gasman & Tudico, 2008; Lee, 2011; Minor, 2004; Ricard & Brown, 2008), there remain different conceptions of why these institutions exist and from whence they emerged.

A History of Institutional Relevance: The HBCU is Born

American higher education is an epigenetic history of development, expansion, and transformation. Since the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the rise of mass, asynchronous, virtual campuses like The Pennsylvania State University World Campus, postsecondary institutions has evolved to accommodate the emergent demands to educate new groups of students (Geiger, 1999; Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2004; Veysey, 1965). At the center of this history are issues of access and education opportunity (Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen, 1998; Hartley, 2002; Stark & Lattuca, 1997; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). Despite an array of institutional types, one of the most remarkable academic forms is the historically Black college and university.

The amended Higher Education Act of 1965 defines historically Black colleges and universities (commonly referred to as HBCUs) as any accredited institution of higher education founded prior to 1964 whose primary mission was, and continues to be, the education of Black Americans (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Garibaldi, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Williams, 1988). The year 1964 is significant because it marked the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin regarding federally assisted programs and activities (Hendrickson, 1991; Williams, 1988). There are 103 federally designated public, private, four-year, and two-year historically Black colleges and universities in the continental United States. The 103 HBCUs cluster primarily in nineteen southern and border states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia), with few exceptions—

Michigan, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories (Brown, 1999). Table 1 lists HBCUs by state, character, type, and date of founding.

Table 1

Historically Black Colleges and Universities by State, Character, Type and Date of Founding

State **Historically Black College and University**	**Character**	**Type**	**Date of Founding**
Alabama			
Alabama A & M University	Public	4-year	1875
Alabama State	Public	4-year	1874
Bishop State Community College	Public	2-year	1927
C. A. Fredd State Technical College	Public	2-year	1965
Concordia College	Private	2-year	1922
J. F. Drake Technical College	Public	2-year	1961
Lawson State Community College	Public	2-year	1965
Miles College	Private	4-year	1905
Oakwood College	Private	4-year	1896
Selma University	Private	4-year	1878
Stillman College	Private	4-year	1876
Talladega College	Private	4-year	1867
Trenholm State Technical College	Public	2-year	1963
Tuskegee University	Private	2-year	1881
Arkansas			
Arkansas Baptist College	Private	2-year	1884
Philander Smith College	Private	4-year	1877
Shorter College	Private	2-year	1886
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	Public	4-year	1873
Delaware			
Delaware State University	Public	4-year	1891
District of Columbia			
Howard University	Mixed	4-year	1867
University of the District of Columbia	Private	4-year	1851
Florida			
Bethune-Cookman College	Private	4-year	1904
Edward Waters College	Private	4-year	1866
Florida A & M University	Public	4-year	1877
Florida Memorial College	Private	4-year	1879
Georgia			
Albany State College	Public	4-year	1903
Clark Atlanta University	Private	4-year	1989
Fort Valley State College	Public	4-year	1895
Interdenominational Theological Center	Private	4-year	1958
Morehouse College	Private	4-year	1867
Morehouse School of Medicine	Private	4-year	1975
Morris Brown College	Private	4-year	1881
Paine College	Private	4-year	1882
Savannah State College	Public	4-year	1890
Spelman College	Private	4-year	1881
Kentucky			
Kentucky State University	Public	4-year	1886
Louisiana			
Dillard University	Private	4-year	1869
Grambling State University	Public	4-year	1901
Southern University A & M College	Public	4-year	1880
Southern University at New Orleans	Public	4-year	1959
Southern University at Shreveport-Bossier City	Public	2-year	1964
Xavier University	Private	4-year	1915

Maryland			
Bowie State University	Public	4-year	1865
Coppin State University	Public	4-year	1900
Morgan State University	Public	4-year	1867
University of Maryland-Eastern Shore	Public	4-year	1886
Michigan			
Lewis College of Business	Private	2-year	1874
Mississippi			
Alcorn State University	Public	4-year	1871
Coahoma Community College	Public	2-year	1949
Hinds Community College	Public	2-year	1954
Jackson State University	Public	4-year	1877
Mary Holmes College	Private	2-year	1892
Mississippi Valley State University	Public	4-year	1946
Rust College	Private	4-year	1866
Tougaloo College	Private	4-year	1869
*Missour*i			
Harris-Stowe State College	Public	4-year	1857
Lincoln University	Public	4-year	1866
North Carolina			
Barber-Scotia College	Private	4-year	1867
Bennett College	Private	4-year	1873
Elizabeth City State University	Public	4-year	1891
Fayetteville State University	Public	4-year	1877
Johnson C. Smith University	Private	4-year	1867
Livingstone College	Private	4-year	1879
North Carolina A & T State University	Public	4-year	1891
North Carolina Central University	Public	4-year	1910
St. Augustine's College	Private	4-year	1867
Shaw University	Private	4-year	1865
Winston-Salem State University	Public	4-year	1862
Ohio			
Central State University	Public	4-year	1887
Wilberforce University	Public	4-year	1856
*Oklahom*a			
Langston University	Public	4-year	1897
Pennsylvania			
Cheyney State University	Public	4-year	1837
Lincoln University	Public	4-year	1854
South Carolina			
Allen University	Private	4-year	1870
Benedict College	Private	4-year	1870
Claflin College	Private	4-year	1869
Clinton Junior College	Private	2-year	1894
Denmark Technical College	Public	2-year	1948
Morris College	Private	4-year	1908
South Carolina State University	Public	4-year	1896
Voorhees College	Private	4-year	1897
Tennessee			
Fisk University	Private	4-year	1867
Knoxville College	Private	4-year	1875
Lane College	Private	4-year	1882
LeMoyne-Owen College	Private	4-year	1862
Meharry Medical College	Private	4-year	1876
Tennessee State University	Public	4-year	1912
Texas			
Huston-Tillotson College	Private	4-year	1876
Jarvis Christian College	Private	4-year	1912
Paul Quinn College	Private	4-year	1872

Prairie View A & M University	Public	4-year	1876
Saint Phillips's College	Public	2-year	1927
Southwestern Christian College	Private	4-year	1949
Texas College	Private	4-year	1894
Texas Southern University	Public	4-year	1947
Wiley College	Private	4-year	1873
Virginia			
Hampton University	Private	4-year	1868
Norfolk State University	Public	4-year	1935
Saint Paul's College	Private	4-year	1888
Virginia State University	Public	4-year	1882
Virginia Union University	Private	4-year	1865
West Virginia			
Bluefield State College	Public	4-year	1895
West Virginia State University	Public	4-year	1891

Similarly to other American postsecondary institutions, HBCUs vary in size, curriculum specializations, and other characteristics. One commonality across HBCUs is their historic responsibility as the primary providers of postsecondary education for Black Americans in a social environment of racial discrimination. Walters (1991) identified six specific goals particular to HBCUs: (a) Maintaining the Black historical and cultural tradition (and cultural influences emanating from the Black community); (b) Providing leadership for the Black community through the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs; (c) Providing an economic center in the Black community (for example, HBCUs often have the largest institutional budget in the Black community); (d) Providing Black role models who interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact Black people; (e) Providing college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority and majority population; and (f) Producing Black graduates for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities. Despite this clearly defined cohort, Garibaldi (1984) declared:

> Black colleges are not monolithic. Although they are similar to predominantly White institutions in many ways, their historical traditions and their levels and types of support make them distinct. Like many other institutions of higher learning, Black colleges reflect the diversity that is so characteristic of the United States' postsecondary education system. This diversity should always be remembered when considering their past, their current conditions, and their future roles in higher education. (p. 6)

Prior to the Civil War, the combination of slavery and segregation restricted educational access and opportunity for Black Americans. While there were a few exceptions such as Oberlin College in Ohio and Bowdoin College in Maine, African American students were summarily denied entry to institutions of higher learning. There were abolitionists, missionaries, and progressive citizens who worked to resolve this established pattern of discrimination. Some worked quietly in their given areas or charges, while others ventured into territories captured by Union armies during the war. The universal aim was to establish churches and schools that would indoctrinate and educate the former slaves and their progeny. This aim was the motivation for the creation of the cohort of institutions defined as historically Black colleges and universities (Brown & Freeman, 2004). Many historically Black colleges (particularly the private Black colleges) emerged from the schools and training institutions founded by missionaries and funded by liberal philanthropic entities.

Three institutions lay hold to the claim of the nation's first HBCU—Cheyney State, Lincoln, and Wilberforce universities. Cheyney State University uses 1832 as its date of inception, but in 1832, Cheyney was primarily a preparatory school rather than a college, and did not begin offering collegiate-level instruction until the early 1900s. Unlike Cheyney State, both Lincoln and Wilberforce were founded with the goal of providing collegiate level instruction. Lincoln was chartered in 1854, but it did not open its doors until 1856. Wilberforce, however, was incorporated in 1856 and opened its doors in the same year. Additionally, Wilberforce is certainly the oldest Black-controlled HBCU in the nation, since many Black institutions (including Lincoln and Cheyney State) had White presidents, administrators, faculty, and boards of trustees for many years.

The aftermath of the Civil War led to a proliferation of historically Black colleges and universities with more than 200 being founded prior to 1890. In addition to the philanthropic associations, churches, local communities, missionaries, and private donors, the end of the Civil War brought a new founder and funder of HBCUs—state governments. Southern states were required by law to respond to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth

Amendments by providing public education for former slaves and other Black Americans. Supplementary public support came with the passage of the Morrill Act of 1890. While the Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant College Act, provided federal support for state education, particularly in agriculture, education, and military sciences, the Morrill Act of 1890 mandated that those funds be extended to institutions that enrolled Black Americans. Because of the stronghold of segregation in the South, many states established separate public HBCUs for the sole purpose of having a legal beneficiary for the federal support. These public HBCUs are often referred to as the "1890 schools".

Although unintentional, the Morrill Act of 1890 cemented the prevailing doctrine of segregation. It formalized the manifestation of separate but unequal in higher education. The patterns of underfunding persist even today. Research data indicate that faculty salaries at HBCUs remain lower than those at predominately White institutions. Furthermore, expenditures at public HBCUs are lower than those at other public institutions. Despite increases in enrollments across public and private HBCUs, they continue to be disproportionately worst off fiscally.

In 1956, the Supreme Court heard a case titled *Florida ex rel Hawkins v. Board of Control of Florida*. The case applied the desegregation guidance of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) to higher education. The Supreme Court responded to the specific claims of the plaintiffs, but left the issue of equal educational opportunity in collegiate environments unresolved. The efforts for greater equity in higher education were advanced with the inclusion of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This law became the linchpin in the on-going efforts of HBCUs to resolve disparities between them and historically White institutions. The *Adams* (1972) and *Fordice* (1992) cases are central to this quest.

The *Adams v. Richardson* (1972) case was a twenty-year, legal campaign to have the federal government oversee the desegregation of southern higher education. The case was dismissed because of a legal technicality regarding who could file suit against the federal government. *United States v. Fordice* (1992) is the first case to reach the Supreme Court since the suit in Florida. The *Fordice* case is the primary legal guidance for resolving the continuing effects of legal segregation in the states with public HBCUs. *Fordice* brought many of the issues surrounding HBCUs to the forefront (e.g., facilities, maintenance, salaries, technology, closure, and mission).

On June 26, 1992, the Supreme Court reversed and remanded the ruling of the Court of Appeals, declaring that Mississippi had not desegregated its dual system of higher education. The Court also stated that the legal standard applied in the lower level was incorrect, that is, although the state university system appeared unbiased, noticeable factors governed an individual's choice of institution, particularly if that individual was African American. The Court went on to say that Mississippi's eight public institutions remained racially identifiable. Therefore, the principle requirement of the state was to eradicate all remnants and vestiges of *de jure* segregation which were not 'educationally justifiable' and could be 'practically eliminated' (Brown & Hendrickson, 1997).

Brown and Davis (2001) reified the status of historically Black colleges and universities as "the tangible manifestation of America's social contract with free African Americans immediately following the Civil War" (p. 34). Even now, two decades after the *United States v. Fordice* ruling collegiate desegregation remains a critically important, and as yet, unfinished issue to historically Black colleges. In 1973, Thompson posited a statement about the Black college that remains relevant forty years later: "after a century of constant struggle to provide higher education for [African Americans] . . . Black colleges have come upon a critical crossroads in their development" (p. 4).

THE REPUTATION OF HBCUS: THE CROSSROAD OF CULTURE AND PUBLIC OPINION

The reputation of historically Black colleges or any group of institutions is therefore a complicated cross-section of culture and public opinion. Reputation is a ubiquitous and amorphous amalgamation of facts and fiction, ambition and reality, ignorance and relationships, as well as social distance or proximal placement. It can be argued that reputation is an intangible instrument of defined constructs employed to promote or delimit power, prestige, or public perception. Slovic (2000) suggested that public perception exists somewhere between truth and belief. He further argued that public perception is shaped by three primary forces; (a) popular opinion, (b) public media, and (c) individual or institutional reputation.

In the past decade, higher education researchers have repeatedly engaged the metaphor of historically Black colleges and universities at "the" or "a" crossroad of academic and postmodern history (Brown, 1995; Brown, 1999; Brown & Hendrickson, 1997; Ricard & Brown, 2008). Jencks and Reisman (1967) declaring these institutions "academic disaster areas" proffered a watermark for the perennial rendering of Black colleges as battering rams and sacrificial lambs in higher education discourse (Gasman & Tudico, 2008). Even really, Jason Riley (2010) of the *Wall Street Journal* penned *"Black Colleges Need a New Mission: Once an Essential Response to Racism, They are Now Academically Inferior."* Nearly 200 years into their existence, questions persist regarding the reputational

worth of historically Black colleges and universities (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Brown & Freeman, 2002; Browning & Williams, 1978; Cohen, 1998; Drewry & Doermann, 2001; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

In an address to the Thurgood Marshall College Fund Member Universities Professional Institute Conference, John Silvanus Wilson (2011), the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, spoke on HBCUs and the "albatross of undignified publicity." Wilson declared "there is no question that [undignified publicity] set an unfortunate tone that has only persisted and worsened over time." Consider the questions: Why do Black colleges continue to exist? Are Black colleges necessary? What is the purpose of Black colleges?

To this end, June (2003) identified Black colleges as *endangered institutions*—suggesting that Black colleges were on the verge of extinction. The article details the condition of Morris Brown College, a small, liberal arts historically Black college located in Atlanta, Georgia that recently garnered national headlines due to troubles concerning fiscal mismanagement. The institution later lost accreditation and now, the status of Morris Brown College as a viable higher education institution remains uncertain. The plight of Morris Brown College, in particular, is not an isolated incident as other Black colleges have struggled to remain open due to myriad reasons. The challenge, however, is that when problems plague one Black institution, serious implications emerge for *all* historically Black colleges and universities (June, 2003).

Disproportionately, Black colleges face the task of having to justify their relevance within the larger higher education system. Black colleges are incessantly misunderstood and the benefits of attending them often go unnoticed by the general public (Willie, 1994). Benjamin E. Mays (1978), former president of Morehouse College wrote that

> No one has ever said that Catholic colleges should be abolished because they are Catholic. Nobody says that Brandeis and Albert Einstein must die because they are Jewish. Nobody says that Lutheran and Episcopalian schools should go because they are Lutheran or Episcopalian. Why should Howard University be abolished because it is known as a black university? Why pick out Negro colleges and say they must die? (p. 27)

Historically Black colleges and universities disproportionately carry the burden of having to justify their role in academe more so than other special mission institutions. While a panoply of diverse institutional types are recognized for their unique missions or niches in the education of differing groups of students, a contentious and inconsistent reputation for Black colleges persists (Brown & Freeman, 2002; Brown, Ricard, & Donahoo, 2004; Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 1991).

In 2002, Brown and Freeman guest edited a special issue of *The Review of Higher Education* that focused on empirical research on historically Black colleges. They concluded their introduction with these words:

> It is apparent that the history, contributions, and contexts of historically Black colleges and universities must be documented. Researchers and policy makers in higher education must begin to pay more attention to this unique cohort of institutions. Historically Black colleges evince objectives, populations, philosophies, and environments which are worthy of scholarly investigation. The challenge is for the research to become so common-place that a special issue will no longer be required. (p. 368)

A decade later, the clarion call for research on the relevance and reputation of historically Black colleges and universities persists. Even more, the research must now respond to the threshold of institutional quality etched into public perception.

There are three primary quotes that stand as beacons of light capable of illuminating the research request of the reputation of HBCUs. First, Brown and Davis (2001) asserted "Historically Black colleges and universities participate in a social contract, purvey social capital, and promote social equality. Additionally, Black colleges enrich the academy, add to the national scholarship, and create atmospheres which epitomize the best of society" (p. 46). Second, Redd (1998) posited

> HBCUs have made great strides in providing educational opportunities for African Americans. From their humble beginning in the early 1800s, these institutions have grown to make significant contributions to American society and to provide educational opportunities for low-income and academically disadvantaged students who would have otherwise been denied a higher education. HBCUs have achieved this success despite discrimination from state and federal governments, severely inadequate funding, economic and enrollment downturns, and lack of support from most political leaders and the general public. (p. 33)

Finally, of particular note is Supreme Court jurist Clarence Thomas' concurring opinion in the *United States v. Fordice* (1992) declaring "There exists sound educational justification for maintaining historically black colleges."

The empirical research is clear—historically Black universities are the premier agency of African American educational attainment (Allen, 1992; Brown, 1999; Brown and Freeman, 2004; Fleming, 1984; Freeman, 1998; Garibaldi, 1984; Merisotis and O'Brien, 1998; Thomas, 1981; U.S. Department of Education, 1996; Willie, Reed, & Garibaldi, 1991). Furthermore, cultural exposure and social networks are key justifications for the existence, maintenance, and continuation of historically Black colleges (Brown & Davis, 2001). Black colleges are purveyors of social capital providing the content knowledge, demonstrated accomplishments, and formal and informal dispositions through which many individuals may gain entry and secure a position in particular socials circles, professions or organizations. Thompson (1986) confirmed that historically Black colleges possess a unique capacity to promote cultural and social learning irrespective of whether the knowledge involved is perceived to be the domain of the 'ruling class.'

HBCUs have historically assumed a greater responsibility for educating African American students and granting a disproportionate number of college degrees to African Americans in the country (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Garibaldi, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). In Roebuck and Murty's (1993) book, *Historically Black Colleges Universities*, Vernon Jordan stated that the historically Black college is the undergraduate home of "75 percent of all Black Ph.Ds., 75 percent of all black army officers, 80 percent of all black federal judges, and 85 percent of all black doctors" (p. 13). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2004), although the nation's 103 historically Black colleges represent just three percent of the country's institutions of higher learning, they collectively graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees. A close review of the data reveal that historically Black colleges also produce more than one-third of all African American baccalaureate degrees in mathematics, more than two-fifths of African American degrees in the natural science, produce more than 50 percent of all African American public educators, 70 percent of the nation's African American dentists, and nearly 50 percent of all African Americans who pursue graduate or professional education.

Historically, the above professionals have served as public paragons in both their local community spaces and within the nationally racialized landscape (Graham, 1999). The shifting enrollment patterns of African American college-goers now requires historically Black colleges to share space with highly selective postsecondary institutions in the production of African American alumni in specific, and the propagation of African American leaders for society in general (Bennett & Xie, 2003). To date, President Obama has made a significant number of African American appointees throughout the various agencies of the Executive Branch. In fact, a number of the high profile appointments are alumni of historically Black colleges and universities, for example, the Surgeon General – Dr. Regina Benjamin – who is a graduate of Xavier University in Louisiana. Further, an African American has been appointed to a cabinet-level post along with three other African Americans who serve as cabinet-level staff. In each case the credentials and competencies of the appointees are both appropriate and meritorious. However, it is imperative for historically Black college and university administrators, researchers, and stakeholders to query the significance (if any) of the institutional profiles and backgrounds of presidential cabinet appointees – persons who can inspire future enrollment and highlight the quality of educational preparation in these institutions.

THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL REALITY: HBCUS IN OBAMAMERICA

Article Two, Section Two of the U.S. Constitution states that the President "shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the Supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law: but the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments". In *The Cabinet and Federal Agencies*, Horn (2003) explained and explored the role of presidential cabinets in directing governmental policy and influencing federal legislation. The primary role of the "cabinet" is to proffer advice and opinion to the President of the United States in order to inform his (or her) decision-making.

The size and structure of the presidential cabinet and adjoining cabinet-level appointees varies by administration. Despite the shifting dimension, the proximal power and their intellectual influence is unparalleled in the nation-state. On February 15, 2009, Bernac published an *USA Today* published an editorial headlined, "In Obama's West Wing, proximity equals power." While the editorial centers on literal office space and distance from the Oval Office, there is no question that the voices of the personnel closest to the President are typically heard the loudest pursuant to policy and directional guidance. In fact, it is common practice for Cabinet members to sit and surround the President at the Cabinet table based on hierarchy and succession (Horn, 2003).

According to *African American Almanac* (Bracks, 2012), the first African American appointed to a presidential cabinet was Robert C. Weaver. A three-time Harvard University alumnus, Dr. Weaver was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966 to serve as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. The second African American cabinet official, William Thaddeus Coleman, was an undergraduate alumnus of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University Law School. Attorney Coleman was appointed Secretary of Transportation by Gerald Ford in 1975. Most importantly, the first alumnus of a historically Black college and university was Patricia Roberts Harris. Secretary Harris was a 1945 *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa undergraduate of Howard University. While she took several postgraduate courses, she earned her Juris Doctor in 1960 from George Washington University National Law Center and ranked number one out of 94 graduates. Attorney Harris was appointed Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in 1977, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in 1979, and later in 1979 she was Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare all by President Jimmy Carter. Since her appointments there have been 15 other African Americans appointed as Presidential Secretaries (See Table 2).

Table 2

African American Appointments to Secretarial Cabinet Positions, 1981-Present

Year	Appointee	Appointment	President
1981	Samuel Pierce	Housing and Urban Development	Ronald Reagan
1989	Louis W. Sullivan	Health and Human Services	George H. W. Bush
1993	Jesse Brown	Veterans Affairs	Bill Clinton
1993	Ron Brown	Commerce	Bill Clinton
1993	Mike Espy	Agriculture	Bill Clinton
1993	Hazel R. O'Leary	Energy	Bill Clinton
1997	Alexis Herman	Labor	Bill Clinton
1997	Rodney E. Slater	Transportation	Bill Clinton
1998	Togo West	Veterans Affairs	Bill Clinton
2001	Eric Holder	Attorney General (acting)	George W. Bush
2001	Rod Paige	Education	George W. Bush
2001	Colin Powell	State	George W. Bush
2004	Alphonso Jackson	Housing and Urban Development	George W. Bush
2005	Condoleezza Rice	State	George W. Bush
2009	Eric Holder	Attorney General	Barack Obama

These data confirm that African Americans were largely absent from United States Presidential cabinets until William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton was elected president in 1992. In fact, since the founding of our nation only eighteen African Americans have been appointed to cabinet "Secretary" posts. Seven of the 18 (or more than one-third) African American Cabinet Secretaries were appointed by President Bill Clinton, another five (or more than one-fourth) by President George W. Bush, and one has been appointed by President Barack Obama. Both Presidents Clinton and Bush II enjoyed two terms in office or a total of eight years giving them sufficient time to grow their corpus of appointees. President Obama will also have eight years to complete the numeracy and import of his appointments.

The Clinton and Bush appointments are significant since they account for 16 years of modern American history and account for all but six of the African American Cabinet Secretaries. In sum, two-thirds of all African American Cabinet Secretaries have been graduates of historically Black colleges and universities. It is important to note that 12 of those 13 Secretaries were appointed during the nearly two decades of Presidents Clinton and Bush II. These data exclude the Surgeon General who is not a member of the Cabinet. Like President Obama's Surgeon General—Dr. Benjamin, President Clinton also appointed two HBCU alums—Jocelyn Elders and David Satcher.

President Bill Clinton appointed more African Americans who graduated from historically Black colleges and universities than any other U.S. President. A quick recollection of the main appointments included: Mike Espy (Agriculture)—Howard University; Alexis Herman (Labor)—Xavier University; Hazel O'Leary (Energy)—Fisk University; and Togo West (Veterans Affairs)—Howard University. Additionally, President Clinton also appointed nine Blacks as assistants to the president—the highest rank in the White House. Among those appointments were J. Terry Edmonds (Director of Speech Writing) who graduated from Morgan State University, and Bob Nash (Director of Personnel) who graduated from Howard University. Conversely, more than a dozen of President Clinton's

appointees did not attend historically Black colleges; such as, Ron Brown (Commerce), Rodney Slater (Transportation), Jesse Brown (Veterans Affairs), and Maggie Williams (First Lady's Chief of Staff) among others.

In parallel time, the proximal prominence of African American alumni giving voice to inform and influence national discourse on and about historically Black colleges and universities loomed large during the years that Clinton served as president. The Clinton era benefited from "significant" positive depictions of historically Black colleges and universities in public media and cinematic perceptions. Discourse regarding relevance and reputation of the nation's historically Black colleges found a home in popular media outlets (e.g., *School Daze*, *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show*). There was also national publicity given to the successful capital campaigns at or for private Black colleges (e.g., Spelman College, Hampton University, and College Fund/United Negro College Fund). Concomitantly, there was a national rise in historically Black college and university enrollments (Brown & Bartee, 2007).

The shifting ground of historically Black college and university significance within the national space, place these institutions with limited platforms to trumpet their productivity and performance, thus potentially diminishing their alumni presence in the current administration. The compound reality of declining market share in degree production (Bennett & Xie, 2003) and differences in career patterns (Byars-Winston, 2006), suggest that historically Black colleges and universities will have reform their brand in the national space. Such a revival will require a revival of the historic commitment to academic excellence (Brown, Ricard, & Donahoo, 2004). President Obama's major cabinet appointment is Attorney General Eric Holder, who is a two-time graduate of Columbia University. His Senior Advisor, Valerie Jarrett, is a graduate of Stanford University and the University of Michigan. Susan Rice, the U.N. Ambassador, is a graduate of Harvard University and Oxford University in England. Melody Barnes, Domestic Policy Council head, is a graduate of the Universities of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Michigan. Lisa Jackson of the Environmental Protection Agency is a graduate of Tulane and Princeton Universities. Historically Black colleges and universities must regain their historic levels of production in producing highly qualified graduates who can both compete and best their peers in competency and other forms of capital (Bartee & Brown, 2007).

In his book *What's Wrong With Obamamania?: Black America, Political Leadership, and the Death of Political Imagination*, Jones (2009) introduced potential implications that the presence of an African American president could have on the national landscape. Based on his constructs of politics, paranoia, and visibility, I assert that the pseudo-postracial hegemony bounding contemporary reality have created an "Obamamerica"—where everything in the national space is now being defined and examined in light of President Obama's presence. The key query is what are the implications of Obamamerica for historically Black colleges and universities?

HBCUs must now assess their mission and actions in light of a new national focus on the race of President Obama and his ability to usher the nation into an era of inclusion and/or post-racialism. Now more than ever, historically Black colleges must be prepared to move beyond defending their existence toward demonstrating their utility. This contention that Obamamerica has birthed a public fantasy in which perceived loss of White privilege, especially in employment and education will continue to portend a social and political context in which historically Black colleges and universities are assessed, as well as in which diversity and affirmative action are re-examined. Consequently without careful attention to institutional productivity, academic performance, and positive publicity, the relevance and reputation gained by HBCUs over the past decades can potentially be dismissed and their respect may "significantly" decline.

In *Respect and Rights: Class, Race, and Gender*, Miller and Savoie (2002) confirm the comfort and ease with which polities and powers "(diss)respect" African Americans. Of late and with reckless abandon, historically Black colleges and universities face scathing questions regarding their impact and quality of education, despite graduating large numbers of African American students who enter the nation's graduate schools and subsequently successful careers (Ricard & Brown, 2008). Historically Black colleges and universities must reform—improve, reorganize, restructure, modify, change, develop, and expand. In the American classic, *Invisible Man*, Ellison (1952) wrote,

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me . . . The invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (p. 3)

When Ellison penned these words, he described the inherited consciousness of African Americans in America, and the contemporary reality of historically Black colleges and universities in Obamamerica.

AN UNFINISHED CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MISSION METAMORPHOSIS

The 21st century has begun as a paradox for historically Black colleges and universities—it is the best of times and the worst of times. Institutional enrollments at many Black colleges are attaining record highs, while fiscal revenues and federal support as a percentage of their institutional operational budgets are approaching record lows. This paradigmatic and phenomenological reality is not occurring in a vacuum. The present institutional realities for historically Black colleges and universities are part of a larger social context of Obamamerica.

HBCUs, like all institutions of higher education, must engage the shifting terrain of student enrollment, faculty composition, geographic realities, and political climates on the academic landscape. As the demands of globalization and universal access becomes more pronounced in society, colleges and universities are faced with the imperative to adapt, change, and reconsider. Greenwood and Hinings (1996) called this "new institutionalism." They posited that new institutionalism (i.e., neo-institutional theory) will mandate organizational change and modification in order to account for the technological, political, and regulatory realities that are relevant to our institutional contexts. As a result, the normative contexts within colleges and universities will be forced to engage in a metamorphosis.

The term "metamorphosis" means to change or modify form. It is derived from the Greek etymology that denotes the process in which an entity develops and matures by altering its structure through some manner of differentiation. Daft (2010) married this biological concept to the organizational life cycle. Asserting that organizations must continue to develop in response to changing realities, Daft posited organizational survival is contingent on a willingness to choose institutional renewal and revitalization rather than institutional death and decline. Daft's principles for the organizational life cycle are an appropriate analog to the birth, growth, and maturity of historically Black colleges. Extrapolating these principles to HBCUs proffers behaviors and logic systems that lead to organizational decline and even institutional death.

Similarly to all institutions of higher education, historically Black colleges and universities must reconsider what constitutes their institutional boundaries, redefine the parameters of their mission, market their unique niches, and make clear their intentions for innovative participation in the new millennia. While it is important to acknowledge their historic roots and evolution (Brown, 1999; Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Browning & Williams, 1978; Davis, 1998; Drewry & Doermann, 2001; Roebuck & Murty, 1993), it is critical that historically Black colleges are transformed from monolithic monuments to yesterday and emerge as epigenetic manifestations of multi-layered campuses that are relevant academic enterprises.

In order for historically Black colleges and universities to respond to shifting paradigms (Simsek & Louis, 1994), it will be necessary for these institutions to shift from their collegiate origins to a new organizational reality that both considers and captures the contributions and contexts endemic to its constituents, stakeholders, and communities. Historically Black colleges and universities exist in an environment where they are both bounded and unbounded within contexts of structural, political, and symbolic significance (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Mission metamorphosis at HBCUs involves rearticulating the purpose, role, and function of the institutions in a manner that responds to dynamic contexts and forestalls institutional decline or death, particularly in Obamamerica. Historically Black colleges and universities must be researched and respected for their continuing relevance and classic reputation amassed as a result of more than 200 years of measurable and meaningful results.

HBCUs are an indispensable part of the national higher education landscape. Despite all of the positive evidence relating to their successes and achievements, negative misconceptions and erroneous information continue to impact the image of historically Black colleges and universities. A clarion opportunity exists for higher education researchers to document, describe, and detail these unique institutions. HBCUs educate, employ, and empower a diverse population of students and citizens. Although historically Black colleges and universities were created primarily for the education of African Americans, they have been successful in making collegiate participation more accessible for all. Higher education must re-focus, re-engage, and reify the importance of historically Black colleges and universities on the national stage.

Ricard and Brown (2008), include an epigraph from William H. Gray, former President of the United Negro College Fund in their book, *in which* Gray stated:

> Historically Black colleges and universities play a critical role in American higher education. They produce a disproportionate number of African American baccalaureate recipients, and are the undergraduate degree-of-origin for a disproportionate share of Ph.D.'s to Blacks. These institutions perform miracles in elevating disadvantaged youth to productive citizenship. *If they did not exist, we would have to invent them.*

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