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Should HBCUs Pursue High-Capacity Fundraising Presidents?

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In November of 2012, Dr. John Silvanus Wilson Jr., then executive director for the White House Initiatives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and now President of Morehouse College, pondered the outcomes of re-introducing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to the wealthiest Americans in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Dr. Wilson began the article highlighting the speech Booker T. Washington delivered to a crowd of extremely wealthy Americans on behalf of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) and similar institutions in the early 20th century, a crowd that included Andrew Carnegie and George Foster Peabody. Washington's speech fostered a \$600,000 endowment for Tuskegee from Mr. Carnegie. Adjusting for GDP and inflation, Dr. Wilson noted that \$600,000 donation amounts to \$350-million today. Dr. Wilson then asked readers to imagine Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and a host of other wealthy individuals gathered in one room to hear a 21st century HBCU president advocate for their institution and other HBCUs.

It was the second question posed by Dr. Wilson that struck a chord with me. He asked, "What are the prospects for recovering the substantial relationship between HBCU[s] and America's highest-capacity philanthropists?" Unfortunately, the current situation is dismal. HBCUs have been in existence since 1837; however, there are a substantial number of wealthy Americans—or any Americans for that matter—that have at best limited knowledge of HBCUs. Consequently, many high-capacity philanthropists do not know the role HBCUs have played in the advancement of higher education in the United States. The wealthiest Americans who do know of HBCUs have been "modest" with their cash donations. Oprah Winfrey's \$5-million gift to Morehouse College in 2004 is the largest cash gift received by an HBCU during the 21st century (not including gifts from organizations/endowments).

The question I pose is, "Should HBCU boards pursue high-capacity philanthropists—who are capable of high-capacity fundraising—as presidential candidates?" Absolutely. For instance, imagine Oprah Winfrey as president of any one

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of the HBCUs across the nation. I suspect Oprah Winfrey would be able to use her business and entrepreneurial expertise to successfully lead an HBCU, fostering financial stability and solid accreditation reviews. Her name alone would increase financial donations; improve campus and alumni engagement; boost enrollment; and draw the attention of other wealthy Americans. In addition, using this practice, name recognition and social networks are additive options to net worth, which expands the pool of potential presidents. This practice could lead to several high-capacity philanthropists advocating for HBCUs in several different rooms rather than one.

I imagine the chief argument against this practice would be, “Oprah does not hold an academic doctoral degree.” I can imagine skeptical board members, faculty, alumni, staff, legislators, and accrediting agencies leading the argument. I would respond, “Do you know Eddie Moore?” Eddie Moore did not have an academic doctoral degree and he successfully revived a struggling Virginia State University, raising their endowment from \$2.5-million to almost \$24-million during his tenure. He also came out of retirement and raised nearly \$5-million for a cash-strapped St. Paul’s College in just six months. I would respond, “Do you know John Broderick?” Old Dominion University faculty voted no confidence in the two finalists—who both held PhDs—for president in 2008 and backed their current president, John Broderick. His highest academic degree is a master’s, but his recent contract extension until 2017 speaks volumes of his success.

While I support a move toward high-impact philanthropic presidents, it is important for the president to appoint competent cabinet members. For example, Dr. Walter Kimbrough (Dillard University), Dr. Dianne Suber (St. Augustine’s College), Dr. Loren Blanchard (Xavier University of Louisiana), Dr. Dorothy Yancy (Shaw University), Dr. M. Christopher Brown II (Alcorn State University), and any budding leaders with fresh perspectives, could serve as provosts, executive vice presidents, or co-presidents, handling the day-to-day operations. I am not advocating for demotions or reassignments for the HBCU presidents on this list; I just admire the fresh perspectives they bring to the 21st century HBCU, and they would be ideal candidates using the proposed model. Just think, Dr. Kimbrough working alongside Oprah Winfrey, or Dr. George T. French (Miles College) working alongside Dr. Shaquille O’Neal. Either option would do wonders for any HBCU.

I consider Dr. Bill Harvey (Hampton University) and Dr. John Silvanus Wilson Jr. prototypes of the fundraising president. Dr. Harvey has left an indelible mark on Hampton University and the HBCU community; I expect Dr. Wilson to do the same at Morehouse College given his government connections as past executive director for the White House Initiatives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and fundraising experience at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Still, the HBCU community needs 100+ dynamic fundraisers at the helm of these historic institutions. Every few years the HBCU family loses an HBCU because of financial issues (St. Paul’s College most recently). Consequently, many HBCUs need to shift their administrative and operational models for revitalization.

Oprah Winfrey, Dr. Shaquille O’Neal, Dr. Bill Cosby, and Hill Harper: if you read this note, submit your applications for the next HBCU presidential search. At this point, some HBCUs have nothing to lose, but if this model proves successful, America

has so much to gain. HBCUs *will* play a critical role in President Barack Obama's 2020 goal and the economic advancement of the United States in the 21st century. HBCU scholars and administrators just need to document and implement creative practices to expand their presence. I have documented this practice as a consideration. Who is bold enough to answer the call?