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-A Black Paper-

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History of HBCUs and Why They Should Exist*

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Are HBCUs a dying breed? Is there no longer a place for them in post segregation? Subtly these questions were being answered with ‘no’ after the 1964 Civil Rights Bill became law. But as we go into the 21st Century, a growing number of state legislatures have escalated the politics of education by pushing up funding to expand community colleges at an accelerated pace. Could this be a veiled strategy to displace HBCUs? Many legislatures in dealing with tight budgets and budget cuts are more apt to continue to support historically white colleges and universities probably on the rationale that a community does not need two or more institutions of higher learning; therefore, the HBCU becomes expendable.

Another tactic being used by these legislators to dismantle HBCUs is to make more stringent the criteria for African American students and their parents to qualify for student loans. This tactic is also coupled with making defunct many Black-owned and community-owned banks by taking away their ability to service minorities with student loans. Such loans were the bread and butter for these smaller banks. The bulk of these loans are now being handled by the big brand banks.

Still another tool is to go aggressively after these Black colleges with trumped up accreditation issues which stem not from academic concerns but from political concerns. Throughout America’s history, Black institutions from the elementary to collegiate levels have long had to contend with the lack of educational materials in spite of the allegedly “separate but equal” clause of which only the “separate” portion was enforced. And still these Black institutions were turning out some of the finest minds under such duress. If these institutions were producing then, why not now? In fact, they still do, but there are systemic legislative measures to step up the perception that they do not.
For the record among the many fine minds HBCUs have turned out are: Nikki Giovanni (Fisk), Alex Haley (Alcorn), Toni Morrison (Howard), Rev. Benjamin Hooks (LeMoyne-Owen), Sean “P. Diddy” Combs (Howard), Pam Oliver (Florida A&M), Erykah Badu (Grambling), A. Phillip Randolph (Bethune Cookman College), Anita Ward (Rust College), Rosa Parks (Alabama State), Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State), Congressman Bennie Thompson (Jackson State University)—and the list goes on.

Before we go further with this paper, let us put to rest the myth that Black Americans themselves did not play a vital role in founding these institutions, in keeping them financially afloat and in providing human resources from Black brick masons to self-taught Black teachers to first Black students who graduated from these institutions to go on to become the first generation of Black college professors. Too many times those who deem themselves as ‘liberal’ whites paint (either consciously or subconsciously) a paternalistic myth that African Americans were waiting for them to lead African Americans in establishing the HBCU. Hidden history tells otherwise.

However, ironically in post segregation, it is the African American who is aiding and abetting in the slow death of the HBCU. This has very little to do if a Black student chooses to attend an HBCU or a mainstream college but rather with the notion that if a college has the adjective ‘Black’ attached to it, it is inherently seen as inferior, useless—a relic of a Bad Experience (segregation) instead of as an investment in future economic stability. Unfortunately, the nation itself is viewing the HBCU in the same systemic negative vein and apparently is getting away with rendering the HBCU irrelevant because the outcry in the Black community is but a whimper.

These educational institutions should be enhanced in a nation that is quickly falling behind all other developed countries.

Why? At a time when a comprehensive immigration bill will likely pass and STEM students are sorely needed, federal and state policies should provide whatever is necessary to make the HBCU part of America’s economic global competition. Furthermore, HBCUs’ doors could and should be open to a new flood of immigrants as they, too, seek the American Dream. Government and state legislatures should follow the lead of what is happening to such HBCUs as Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Missouri) and Lane University (Jackson, Tennessee) where there is a flux of Caucasian students attending—not because these students are colorblind, but because they recognize “there is a college which provides excellent degrees, it is near me, and I want my education.”

Once the bastion of gifted sportmen, HBCUs have seen their ‘young, gifted, and black’ athletes courted by mainstream schools with higher NCAA credentials. Yet, if one really were to do a longitudinal study, one might find out how these Black athletes fared when their bodies were no longer useful to act as catalysts to raise millions for these historically white institutions.
It is not uncommon that a star Black athlete who made millions for his respective historically white college to end up jobless at the bottom of glory; whereas, a star white athlete would likely be taken care of with a job or career to see him through a post-athletic career. Granted it is not always the fault of the mainstream institution of higher learning when a Black athlete ends up not able to cope with life, but when many are given coursework on the level of basket weaving to qualify them to play in high stake tournaments, it doesn’t help. One has to only witness at press conferences these athletes who graduated from the finest historically white institutions not knowing how to place verbs such as ‘was’ and ‘were’ or ‘is’ and ‘are’—the cornerstone of the simple conjugation of the verb ‘to be’. Something went wrong.

Such treatment of its athletes was seldom if ever allowed at HBCUs which provided the total package then and now. One only has to look at such HBCU athletes as Jerry Rice, Wilma Rudolf, Walter Payton, Steve McNair, and Althea Gibson who went on to outstanding careers. This is because HBCUs have a history as quasi-parents. During America’s apartheid when a student was fortunate enough to go to college, his or her parents knew that HBCU professors would provide it all—from etiquette to studies. When students left these colleges, they had a pride and carried back this pride to their communities. Furthermore, they were taught by some of the strictest and most dedicated Black teachers who had worked their way from the fields to achieve academic success.

HBCUs have seen their ‘young, gifted, and black’ scholars flock to historically white colleges to have a better shot of sliding on to first base into Corporate America while holding dearly onto pedigree degrees from such blueblood colleges as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Bryn Mawr, Smith, Vassar, etc. rather than Howard, Morehouse, Fisk, Tuskegee, Spelman, Tennessee State University, Jackson State University, Bennett, Rust, Emory, LeMoyne-Owen, Bethune-Cookman, etc. This is not to say that Black students should not attend these Ivy League or semi-Ivy League institutions or other historically white institutions, but is this reason to drive HBCUs into oblivion using ‘integration’ as an excuse? Is this any reason for African Americans to tolerate the dismantling of their institutions when most ethnic groups would neither tolerate nor allow the removal of their institutions which served and still serve their communities?

We proceed with this limited discourse on the HBCU.

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities known as HBCUs have the distinction in America’s higher educational system of being uniquely founded and uniquely established solely on race.

Of all ethnic groups, only Black Americans by LAW were denied the right to learn to read and write. To teach a slave to read and write was a crime; therefore punishable. The legitimacy of this crime was woven into the fabric of that sacred carrier of justice called Rule of Law.
To drive home the above point: When the Italian American came, he was free to learn to read and write. When the German American came, he was free to learn to read and write. When the Irish American came, he was free to learn to read and write. These are facts. Outside of payment for his labor, the Black American was denied the second most important economic commodity in American capitalism: Education.

After the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments there still remained an apprehension in allowing Black Americans to learn and in allowing Black Americans and white Americans to learn together in the same classroom. Had it not been for the U.S. constitutional plank of “Separation of Church and State”, there might not have been a movement to create Black colleges. Predominantly white religious groups such as the Quakers, a formidable force in abolition, spearheaded the drive for Black colleges. Many of these colleges were founded first as elementary schools or to be more descriptive as one-room classes in church basements, shacks, or even under shade trees such as the famous Emancipation Tree at Hampton University. This tree is where Mary Smith Peake, one of the earliest Black teachers, taught Black children and where African Americans stood to hear the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. This tree still stands today.

To reiterate, Black Americans themselves played a pivotal role in founding and keeping alive these institutions.

According to the National Association of HBC, the first Black college was the African Institute, founded in February of 1837 and was renamed the Institute of Coloured Youth. Today the Institute is known as Cheyney State University (alma mater of the late CBS “60 Minutes” award-winning journalist Ed Bradley) located in Cheyney, Pennsylvania. It seemed only fitting that the college was founded by a Quaker, Richard Humphreys. Quakers, of course, played heavily in freeing slaves and in providing the ‘routes’ (safe houses) on the Underground Railroad. One must also remember that Black colleges were not founded as ‘colleges’ per se but rather as just a place for educating Black people who would in turn become teachers, the traditional objective of most Black colleges. Cheyney eventually evolved into an institute of higher learning in 1913 when it gave out its first formal degrees-- that is, something that was in writing to actually show that their students had indeed graduated.

Ironically, Berea College was founded as an ‘integrated’ institute at the height of slavery in the slave-holding state of Kentucky. Abolitionist John Gregg Fee founded the college in 1855 under the motto: “God has made of one blood all nations of men.” In 1859, the trailblazing rebellious Fee and other teachers were forced out of a church where only one room served as the entire school. Anti-black sentiments were running high and within two years the Civil War began. Still it is remarkable if not downright miraculous that Berea remained intact from 1855 to 1859.

In 1866, a year after the War Between the States, Berea continued to operate on an ‘integrated’ model, and according to records, it had a pupil population of 96 Blacks and 91 whites. In 1873, it distributed its first bachelor degrees, which of course included
those to Black graduates.

In 1901, Fee died; and in 1903 the Kentucky legislature passed what became known as the Day Law which brought down the ‘integrated’ model with a Supreme Court ‘blessing’ which sanctioned what the Kentucky legislature had done. It was not until 1950 when the ‘integration’ of colleges became legitimate (or at least on paper) that Berea again took up scholastic arms and began matriculating both Blacks and whites. This 1950 victory for Berea could be seen as a presage to the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education lawsuit. Both pieces of legislation set the model for the integration of America’s school system on both the elementary and higher learning levels in theory if not wholly in practice.

If the Berea College’s ‘integrated’ model for higher learning had remained intact and followed, there would be no need for the “Should Black Colleges Exist?” question that came about in full force after the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was signed, sealed and delivered.

Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill transformed the higher education institutions at the expense of endangering Black colleges and universities; thus, the reason why those who saw the endangerment then asked for and received federal legislation to preserve HBCUs. In 1965 legislation was passed not only to define what an HBCU was but to preserve them with some federal funding.

Title III of the Higher Learning Act of 1965 designated that any college founded before 1964 would be known as an HBCU. According to the National Association of HBC, there are only 105 Black colleges and universities left, and only a handful of these were founded either before the Civil War or shortly after the Civil War. Among this handful are: Cheyney (1837), Rust College (originally called Shaw University, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, 1866), Howard University (Washington, D.C., 1866), Shaw University (Raleigh, North Carolina, 1865), St. Augustine College (Raleigh, North Carolina, 1867), Lincoln University (founded by the Presbyterians in Pennsylvania in 1854), Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Missouri, 1866), Wilberforce (Ohio, 1856); and Harris-Stowe State University (1857).

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The founding history of Black colleges makes for dynamic American history because—to reiterate—what is usually left out is that Blacks themselves contributed financially and physically to these colleges. It must be remembered that these institutions were founded in the wretched humbleness of one-room shacks, basements, under trees, and in the fields—most under the auspices of white religious denominations. These ‘Negro’ or colored ‘schools’ began to take full root during Reconstruction with the onslaught of Freedmen Bureaus.
Yes, these were mainly white Northern abolitionists who descended on the South to teach newly freed slaves very much in the same spirit of the white northern Freedom Riders who descended a hundred years later to fight for desegregation in the South. But like in the mid-1960s, Black citizens in the mid-1860s took a gigantic role in freeing themselves by educating themselves in spite of Jim Crow living well in both South and North.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of founding Black colleges was to produce a teaching population that could in turn teach other Blacks, denoting that Blacks did not fully trust whites to see to educating Black children.

In his 1969 study entitled “The Evolution of the Negro College” (published by Arno Press and the New York Times), Dwight Oliver Wendell Holmes pointed out how newly freed slaves took it upon themselves the task of seeing that their own were educated by their own. Holmes says flat out that Blacks preferred that Blacks teach Blacks... “This was done partly due to the pride of the race in having their members elevated to positions which to them seemed important and influential, and partly to the feeling of the white southerner that since Negro schools were inevitable, Negro teachers were preferable to white teachers from the North.”

In a paper entitled “Why Black Colleges Must Continue to Exist” by this author’s late father, Professor W. B. Mitchell: “The best Black brains that can provide the kind of leadership for constructive progress are usually pushed’ out of the system in every respect before they finish high school. Black parents should always be aware of what is going on in the classrooms with their children, and what they are finding at the end of the bus route. Strange things are happening, indeed! So strange that Black colleges and other colleges and universities are receiving Black students less prepared from an academic standpoint than they were back in the [19]40’s and [19]50’s to pursue a college program in education. Why is this so? Here is what and how it is happening. The reasons are obvious: To retard Black education and progress and push Blacks out of the system along with some genocidal out migration policies against some Blacks (the expendable) in some areas.” These words, written in the late 1970’s might seem harsh by 21st Century standards but nevertheless, they represent an ongoing philosophical viewpoint on African Americans at one time entrusting Black students to Black teachers in HBCUs because in the Black community, education represented the one value – the one commodity upon which Blacks also defined its middle class. Unlike the white community which could literally afford to base its middle class on a monetary measurement, the Black community could not because it had no money upon to base it! Education represented one more blow against white suppression and a route upon to secure some type of symbolic measurement of wealth if not wealth itself.

From the HBCU developed yet another economic layer: African American fraternities and sororities. Outside of the Black church (which gave birth to many HBCUs), these fraternities and sororities also served as socio-economic guardians in Blacks helping Blacks. Long before any type of welfare system was in place to help impoverished African Americans, these organizations (along with the Black church) provided funds, food, shelter, and scholarships. Contrary to perception, these were not
snobbish organizations and to this date, they still have charities and do humanitarian works in Black communities.

These organizations and alumni groups are among the few entities which have been fervent in saving HBCUs.

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Black Civil War soldiers contributed to what would become HBCUs. The 62nd and 65th regiments raised $6,325 for Lincoln Institute which is known today as Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Out of HBCUs came some of the greatest post-Civil War military minds such as Col. Charles Young, Tuskegee Airmen, Buffalo soldiers, and others – many of whom defended America with a creativity in warfare art while being denied the same respect as white soldiers and white officers such as Patton, Eisenhower, and MacArthur.

Among Black church affiliates that maintained colleges were the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), and the Negro Baptist Conventions.

The original building for Talladega College (founded in 1867 in Talladega, Alabama) was erected by then slaves who had built it as an elitist school for white boys and was later used as a prison for Yankee soldiers.

Founded by two white women in 1881, Spelman College began in the basement of a Black church in Atlanta, Georgia. It was then known as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, and only after Sophia B. Packer, who founded the school along with Harriet Giles, met John D. Rockefeller was the school renamed Spelman in honor of Rockefeller’s wife, Laura Spelman, seeing that Rockefeller had made a more than generous donation to keep this African American school for women afloat. But what has seldom been noted in the Spelman history is the FACT that it was Blacks who forked over half of a $5,000 price sticker for the former Union barracks that would serve as a permanent location for Spelman. Black Baptists of Georgia put up $3,000; other Black citizens gave a total of $1,300, leaving Rockefeller to put up a mere balance of $700. Again, this more than indicates that African Americans took a vital interest in educating themselves and how facts can be twisted with the perception that Rockefeller was the lone savior in the establishment of Spelman.

It cannot be said enough times how much of a role the Black church played in the history of Black colleges. Howell writes in his study: “As a result of a survey of Negro Colleges made in 1926 and 1927 by the United States Bureau of Education, the Negro denominations were found to have done so well in the support of their institutions of higher learning as to be rated in this respect above the Northern white denominations maintaining colleges for Negroes.”
Even when white church affiliates pulled out or wanted to pull out, Black churches came to the rescue as in the case of Wilberforce University, which was established in Ohio in 1856. The school, named in honor of English abolitionist William Wilberforce, was about to shut its doors in 1863 when the Cincinnati Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church no longer felt a need for it. The church offered to sell it to the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) for $10,000. Under Bishop Daniel A. Payne, the church raised the money and Payne became president, serving 13 years.

In fact, the AME helped to found and maintain the operation of several Black colleges, among them Allen University (Columbia, South Carolina, 1870), Paul Quinn College (Waco, Texas, 1881), Edward Waters College (Jacksonville, Florida, 1883), Morris Brown College (Atlanta, GA, 1885) and Shorter College (Little Rock, Arkansas, 1886).

On a similar note, at a General Conference held in 1870 in Memphis, Tennessee, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) in America went about its task of seeing to Black education on a higher level. Among the colleges associated with the CME are: Lane College (Jackson, Tennessee, 1878), Paine College (Augusta, Georgia, 1882), Texas College (Tyler, Texas 1894), and Miles Memorial College (Birmingham, Alabama, 1902).

The aforementioned Lane College was founded as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Institute and Lane Institute.

According to Holmes: “By 1916 the Negro Baptist Conventions maintained 110 schools with 474 teachers… These schools were distributed among 13 states of the South and the District of Columbia.”

But no matter how these colleges were for Black students, most—almost close to 100 percent did not have Black presidents and that frustration erupted in student protest in the 1920’s.

W.E.B. DuBois lent his strong support to these students in their right to protest for Black college presidents. One of the most notable protests on campus was on the Fisk University (founded 1866) campus in Nashville, Tennessee. In his book, “The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s”, which documents these little known protests, Raymond Wolters recalls how Fisk students chanted DuBois’ name as they shut down classes to get their first African American president. Wolters depicts how Nashville African Americans came together: “The support given by members of the local Black community undoubtedly contributed to the effectiveness of the student strike. In a significant display of solidarity across generational lines, the Negro Board of Trade, composed of Nashville’s leading black businessmen, established a conciliation committee that tried to persuade [President Fayette Avery] McKenzie to grant the students’ demands.”

Not only did the Nashville Black community support the strikes but fellow Black college alumni clubs such as those from Hampton (founded 1868 in Hampton,
Virginia), the New York Fisk Club, Louisville Fisk Club, Chicago Fisk Club—among others joined in the protest.

Howard University (founded 1867) got its first Black president in the person of John M. Langston who became president upon the 1873 resignation of General Oliver O. Howard for whom the college was named. Langston had to give up the presidency because contributions dried up once he took office. Howard’s second Black president, Dr. Rev. Mordecai W. Johnson, did not take office until 1926, a year after the Fisk protest. Yet, it took Fisk until 1947 to get its first Black president, Charles Spurgeon Johnson, even though it was Fisk which was the catalyst in Black colleges getting Black presidents—a fact that deserves more acknowledgment.

Still it was a rarity to see a Black president heading a Black college all the way into 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Now that it is practically a norm, 21st century Black college presidents complain about how attracting funds has become harder and harder much as Howard’s Langston had in the 1870s.

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There too seems to be a trend—though unscientifically proven at this point—that Black students are returning to predominantly Black colleges. Numerous Black presidents are echoing the sentiments of LeMoyne-Owen (Memphis, TN, 1871) president Johnnie B. Watson, LL.D and Dr. George C. Wright, president of Prairie View A&M College (Prairie View, Texas, 1876), both of whom expressed the reason for this trend is because HBCUs provide smaller classroom size giving students more attention. In interviews with The Mid-South Tribune and the Black Information Highway, both men believe this focus on the individual student prepares him/her to go on to a larger university to pursue a Master’s Degree or Ph.D. “HBCUs lay the foundation,” Wright said.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who serves under President Barack Obama (America’s first African American president), made this assessment of HBCUs in a June 2010 speech at the HBCU Symposium at the North Carolina Central University Centennial:* “As you know, President Obama has set an ambitious goal for the nation. He wants America to again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. That goal is the North Star for all of our education efforts. Reaching it will require institutions of higher education to dramatically boost college completion—by the end of the decade, our national college degree attainment rate must rise from 40 percent to 60 percent... As I said last September, HBCUs will—and absolutely must—play a critical leadership role in meeting this challenge. This is not just about access—this is about attainment. It is true that HBCUs have been under-resourced for decades. And no one knows the obstacles confronting HBCUs better than you. At too many HBCUs, endowments are undercapitalized. Faculty salaries are too low. Financial aid is inadequate. Facilities are deteriorating. Sadly, far too few students arrive on campus ready for college coursework—and far too many students drop out without earning a degree. As Cordell Wynn, the former president of Stillman College, said of HBCUs, ‘no
other institution of higher learning has had to do so much, for so many, with so little’.”

Yet, the tide continues to turn against HBCUs in spite of Duncan’s encouraging speech. Such speeches as Duncan’s in the 21st Century lend more toward verbosity than substance on enhancing HBCUs and taking them seriously as major economic stimuli.

It continues to be up to African Americans regardless if they attended an HBCU or historically white colleges or no college at all to make sure that these Black institutions do not fall victim to the allusion that America is post-racial or that any institution having ‘Black’ attached to it has not earned the right to exist.

*This Black Paper is on the Black Paper, HBCU, Education, and Black History lanes on The Mid-South Tribune and the Black Information Highway at www.blackinformationhighway.com*. Also, see full text Arne Duncan speech on the Speech and HBCU lanes. Emails: MSTnews@prodigy.net and BlackInfoHwy@prodigy.net. Welcome, Travelers!