Benjamin E. Mays' Vision of Education

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Having spent my undergraduate career under the guidance and leadership of "Buck Benny," I am pleased to be asked to participate in this Symposium honoring his 100th birthday. Like many of you I am sure, I also had the opportunity to remain associated with Dr. Mays for several years after my graduation. I last saw him, perhaps a year or so before he died, in Chicago at a small dinner. He maintained his quick wit, the ready smile and the jaunty, debonair manner that he always had. He was really an inspiration to all of us.

This Symposium is very timely in a number of ways. It is an occasion for us to think through again the role of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to reflect on what they have contributed in the past, but perhaps more important, to begin to plan for the role they will play in the United States in the future. That role may be somewhat different from the one that they have played in the past. Certainly, the nation's changing attitudes towards race, gender and affirmative action at this time provides a certain urgency to the task of establishing the future role of black colleges and universities.

These prospective changes in the public's attitudes toward affirmative action and race-based programs generally are felt quite acutely in California. Although this issue is now discussed nationwide, it's more visible manifestation began in California, as many things do, good and bad. California may be the first state to have a public referendum on whether or not

programs established over the last 30 years to remove discrimination and enhance the prospects for underrepresented groups will be deemed and declared invalid and no longer necessary.

The debate on these issues is not divided purely along racial grounds. Blacks are on both sides. On March 24, the House Subcommittee on Employer-Employee Relations (Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities) heard testimony on affirmative action in education and employment areas. At least three of the witnesses speaking in favor of ending affirmative action programs were very prominent black persons. Also, polls indicate that a significant number of African Americans, more than a third, agree that affirmative action programs should be ended.

I do not intend to speak on the pros and cons of affirmative action today. I want to stress another point: that the progress African Americans have made over the past 30 years, although very impressive in many areas, is not so ingrained into the consciousness and fabric of the country that its continuation can be taken for granted.

Some would argue that the clock cannot be turned back. We have sacrificed too much, they would say. Attitudes have changed permanently, and the gains have been so firmly implanted that they would be impossible to erase. I certainly hope this is the case. However, in re-reading Benjamin Mays' autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, I am reminded just how fragile some of these gains may be and how recently they have been achieved in the context of the entire history of the United States.

The last twenty years have produced more black elected officials, both statewide and nationally, than at any time since Reconstruction, the period following the Civil War. As Dr. Mays points out in his autobiography, the period from 1870 to 1902 was one of the most fertile and progressive periods for black Americans in the history of the United States, including today. During this era, practically every southern state had black representatives both in the Senate and House of Representatives. There was also broad black representation in local and state government. South Carolina sent eight blacks to the House of Representatives. Mississippi produced the first black Senator and was (and is) the only state to have produced two black Senators. The Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana was black, which has not been replicated even to this date.

Furthermore, Jim Crow had not reared his ugly head. There was no segregation on public transportation, and laws enforced by the federal gov-

ernment prohibited segregation in many other aspects of life, including employment. Things began to change around the turn of the century. A seminal event, as you will recall, was Plessy v. Ferguson, where the Supreme Court upheld the Jim Crow public transportation laws enacted by the Louisiana legislature. Between 1900 and 1910, every southern state passed laws disenfranchising blacks, not only of the right to vote, but of their right to unsegregated public transportation, their right for job opportunities, and in general, reconfined them in every aspect of their lives to a segregated, second class citizenship.

The disenfranchisement was **not benign**. A leading Virginia legislator said (John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*), "I was elected to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the federal Constitution with a view to the elimination of every Negro voter who can be gotten rid of legally." The disenfranchisement did not distinguish between class, on the basis of education, pedigree or any other level of achievement. Senator Vardanion of Mississippi said, "I am just as opposed to Booker T. Washington as a voter with all his Anglo-Saxon reinforcements as I am to the coconut-headed, chocolate-covered typical little coon.... Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship."

I refer to this period simply to remind ourselves that things have changed. One should never assume that progress is always upward, and vigilance and commitment can never be abandoned. Thirty years is a very brief period in the history of this country. When those of my class arrived in Atlanta in the 50s, we arrived on segregated trains, to ride on segregated buses from the train station to the campus, to attend movies at the Fox Theater, in the segregated "Crow's Nest," so high up at the top of the building that you could get a nose bleed if you were not in good shape—and everything we were subjected to was legal, the law of the land.

The black colleges were the fountainheads and nurturing environments for those who fought the battle to change those laws and who are responsible for this generation, our children, being able to live, work and be educated in a much different environment. There are some who would argue that the national environment is so changed that the historic role the black colleges have played is no longer necessary, and these colleges may be institutions whose time has passed—relics of another era.

I believe such arguments are seriously flawed. It is still extremely important to have healthy, vital black colleges and universities. Let me

review some of the roles that I believe these institutions have performed so well and that are still important, and indicate two areas where I believe it will be even more important for us to strengthen our activities and improve for the future.

Of the approximately 1.4 million black men and women in higher education today, about 84% are in majority white institutions and 16% in historically black colleges and universities. However, among those who are not in the historically black institutions, about 52% are in two-year colleges. Therefore about one half of all black students in four-year colleges are still attending HBCUs. Simply in terms of serving a growing number of black high school graduates, these institutions still play a seminal role.

However, beyond simply providing a place to accommodate the growing numbers of black high school graduates, these institutions have traditionally played another role, which is still very important: That role has been to take youngsters who have not yet proven themselves academically and provide them with a strong supportive, nurturing environment that allows them to realize their full potential. This is extremely difficult for majority white institutions to do, although some do it very well, and many put a great deal of effort in this regard. However, to provide this kind of nurturing and supportive environment in a predominantly white institution, it is often necessary to create a semi-segregated situation on the campus, through the establishment of such things as ethnic theme houses, separate ceremonies and functions, and minority enclaves within the majority institution. These efforts sometimes work, but quite often their effects are simply not positive.

I have often told people that when I came to Morehouse, I was ignorant, but not unintelligent. I knew I was ignorant, in the sense that there were many things that I did not know. I had not had the best education coming from a small school in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I did not know how uninformed I was, and I certainly did not have any idea of how intelligent and educated I could become. The professors, faculty, deans and my fellow students throughout the Atlanta University system created an atmosphere and provided the role models and motivation that allowed me, and most of us who went through this institution, to develop to a level that we probably never would have had we attended some other kind of institution. Providing this kind of opportunity is still a necessary and very important role for black institutions.

These institutions are also important for another role they play— producing leaders, individuals who have not only developed their intellectual potential, but who are able to exercise and develop the full range of human potential. Leadership opportunities in student government, campus organizations and other areas are very important for the growth of an individual's full range of capabilities. These opportunities are there in majority institutions, now more and more, but the ease with which this happens, and the expectation that it will happen is certainly more a part of the environment in the historically black colleges. Also, the sheer experience of for once being a non-minority is probably in and of itself a positive growth experience.

A third and very important role that these institutions can play is to set a separate standard and benchmark for what can be achieved by black youngsters. Speaking as one who has spent all of his professional life in majority institutions, it has always been helpful to be able to refer to a Morehouse or a Spelman, Clark-Atlanta, Howard, or North Carolina A & T, to show that it is not impossible for blacks to succeed in any fields they pursue—from mathematics and physics, to philosophy and the arts. The continuing success of these institutions provides examples for majority institutions to emulate.

The argument that there are no black students who are capable of attending our graduate schools in chemistry or computer science becomes undermined when one can point to excellent students graduating in those fields from the traditionally black colleges.

I recognize that one might counter this argument by saying that there are sufficient numbers of black students in predominantly white institutions that such benchmarks can be made within that group of institutions. True, somewhat. At the University of California, we compare our graduation rates, persistence rates and all other data for all our students to our comparison institutions: Harvard, MIT, Virginia, Illinois, Michigan. We watch these figures carefully. But I still submit that having a different benchmark provided by HBCUs can be a powerful motivating factor for the improvement of programs in historically white institutions.

However, I must in all honesty say that this "benchmark" and standard is not as positive or noteworthy as it ought to be. Graduation rates, persistance rates and other measures are on the whole higher at historically white institutions than they are at HBCUs. There is much room for improvement here and the leadership of HBCUs should give a high prior-

ity to making such improvements.

There are two other roles where I believe that black institutions can **improve and should improve, and invest for the future**. These have to do with: a) public service to their communities and b) the support of scholarship and research by black faculty. The historic contributions of the predominantly black universities to the community is an important feature of their legacy; however, the need for involvement in major public issues affecting the African American community today is probably greater than at any time in recent history. The state of our public schools, our neighborhoods, the disintegration of the black family, and the growing problem of crime among teenagers are conditions that will need to be addressed no matter what this nation decides to do with respect to affirmative action programs or welfare programs. This Congress certainly seems to be on a path to making drastic cutbacks in such programs. But these are problems that will need to addressed by the black community itself more and more. Just as the HBCUs provided the leadership and intellectual base for the destruction of Jim Crow laws and the establishment of civil rights and equal opportunity in the 60s and 70s, it is now necessary for these institutions to provide the leadership role and intellectual base to tackle the problems that the African American community now faces, problems that are in many ways as destructive to the community as were the segregation laws of the past.

Even under segregation, or some would argue because of segregation, the quality of public schools for many blacks was much better then than the quality of schools our youngsters have to attend now. The extended family and the support it gave certainly seems to have been more prevalent and healthy then than now.

The second area where I believe HBCUs need improvement for the future is in providing a more supportive atmosphere and more resources to nurture black faculty as scholars and researchers. Just as it is important to have these institutions set standards for their success with students, it is equally important both for the HBCU institutions and for the nation, to have challenging standards set for and by their faculty. I realize that not all the faculty members at these institutions are black, but the majority of the faculty have always been and are still now African American. Therefore, the opportunity and the necessity to set high standards in scholarship and research for such faculty is very important.

This particular time may also provide an opportunity for this to hap-

pen. Certainly, the current job market has put many very bright young African American scholars and researchers in positions where they are seeking employment, and employment at historically black institutions could provide a welcoming opportunity. Most of these institutions are colleges, not research universities, and I am not arguing that they should try to become research universities. But the best of the nation's liberal arts colleges provide the environment and encouragement and have the expectation that a significant number of their faculty will be actively engaged in scholarship and research. This should be no less true for HBCUs.

One final challenge I would issue is to the alumni of these institutions and to the African American community at large—a challenge to increase substantially the financial support that we give to these institutions. This support will be even more important in the future because if many of the changes in programs now being discussed in Congress are implemented, the support that we have received through government agencies will diminish considerably, making it critical that we support the institutions ourselves. I do not confine this challenge to the alumni of these institutions, but to the black community at large, because even though many successful African Americans may not have attended historically black colleges and universities, most likely their parents did, if they attended college at all, and it is highly probable that many of their children and grandchildren will want to attend these institutions in the future. They need to be here and be healthy.

All my life the race problem had been as close as the beating of my heart, circumscribing my thoughts, my actions, my feelings. A black man must not only meet the problem publicly, but invariably when Negroes are by themselves the conversation drifts to some phase of Negro-white relations. It is omnipresent; it creates a physical and spiritual climate from which there is no escape. I thought that for three and a half months, as I traveled around the world, I would be able to forget color, race, and prejudice; that I could be just a man among other men; that I would have a brief respite from thinking and talking about the race problem. I was mistaken. I did find, however, that it works both ways. The Negro dominates the thinking of white people as inescapably as whites are an inextricable part of the thinking of Negroes. There is no eluding the race problem anywhere on this earth.

from **Born to Rebel**