

STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S  
HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES  
AND UNIVERSITIES:

A CALL TO ACTION

By Charlie Nelms, Chancellor



NORTH  
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**By Charlie Nelms, Chancellor  
North Carolina Central University**

This call to action emanates from  
the NCCU Centennial Symposium  
*Setting the Agenda for  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities*  
June 2–4, 2010, in Durham, North Carolina.

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## INTRODUCTION

The American system of higher education is a diverse mosaic of more than 4,000 institutions offering broad access and a great deal of choice for students. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), defined by the Black College and University Act as those founded before 1964 to educate blacks, bring their own uniqueness to this diversity. The HBCUs' distinctive culture, social significance and educational utility assure their relevance in American higher education today. HBCUs stand ready to assume a greater leadership role in increasing the educational attainment of African-Americans in the changing society of the 21st century.

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The United States has fallen to 12th place in world rankings of the percentage of 25 to 34 year-olds with postsecondary degrees — 40.4 percent, as compared to first-place Canada with 55.8 percent.<sup>1</sup> To reverse this decline, President Obama launched the American Graduation Initiative with a stated goal of regaining world supremacy in per capita college graduates by 2020.

“That goal is the North Star for all of our education efforts,” said United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.<sup>2</sup> “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.”

One approach to help ensure the United States' return to world domination in education should be the strengthening of the historically black colleges and universities. Currently, 105 HBCUs confer degrees to African-Americans in disproportionate numbers. They enroll 11 percent of all African-American students,<sup>3</sup> but they are the source of 22

percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded to black graduates; 35 percent of astronomy, biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics graduates; half of all black teachers, and 24 percent of all black science and engineering graduates.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, one-third of all black Ph.D. holders in science and engineering received their baccalaureate degrees from an HBCU.<sup>5</sup>

Historically black colleges and universities have endured despite a plethora of laws, both state and federal, that pose continuous challenges to their survival. The highlight of the 20th century was the landmark Higher Education Act of 1965. Title III of the Act, called "Strengthening Developing Institutions," provided significant financial support to HBCUs "to assist in raising the academic quality of colleges which have the desire and potential to make a substantial contribution to the higher education resources of our Nation but which for financial and other reasons are struggling for survival and are isolated from the main currents of academic life."<sup>6</sup> Except for Title III, there has never been a major federal initiative with the objective of enhancing the HBCU sector.

Given President Obama's goal of increasing per capita degree holders to the highest in the world by 2020, efficacy should be the watchword in the assessment of colleges and universities. HBCUs welcome an analysis that compares actual to expected graduation rates given the profiles of their students. The difference "quantifies the impact of a school's culture and teachers and institutional support mechanisms."<sup>7</sup> According to research undertaken by the Southern Regional Education Board, although HBCUs admit high percentages of students who face economic and academic challenges, these universities often outperform similar institutions in graduating their students.<sup>8</sup>

President Obama's ambitious goal cannot be achieved without the active engagement of historically black colleges and universities. They are unequivocally consequential to the nation's well-being. That is why we call for the planning and implementation of a "National HBCU Reinvestment Act" to ensure that our HBCUs are operating at full capacity, efficiency and effectiveness.

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## REINVIGORATING THE HBCUs

While it is imperative that HBCUs remain true to their unique missions, it is strategically important for them to consider their role in a new American society. Historically black colleges and universities are not only critical to degree attainment, but also to America's maintenance of its global leadership role. In order to advance America's agenda, HBCUs must respond to the dynamic changes taking place in our society and demonstrate their continued relevance. To become a more competitive force, HBCUs must make critical changes in the following vital areas.

- **Infrastructure.** Historically black colleges and universities must build capacity to function as more robust, more vibrant enterprises. They need sustainable foundations upon which to develop distinction as institutions of higher learning. Infrastructure plays an integral role in supporting the development and enhancement of academic programs, research, and day-to-day operations. The environment at HBCUs must foster successful business and educational relationships with students, faculty, and staff. To do so, HBCUs must have facilities that are adequately equipped and maintained, and deferred maintenance problems must be eliminated. Moreover, HBCUs must make more effective use of technology in their administrative operations, fiscal and internal controls, instructional delivery, research programs, planning and assessment.

- **Curriculum.** Historically black colleges and universities must become more competitive and responsive in their curricular offerings. The trend toward online education requires that institutions explore more contemporary modes of instruction delivery, inter-institutional collaboration and research in emerging fields. The need for such a paradigm shift is critical to the HBCU sector.

Traditionally, HBCUs have not had the capacity to offer the number and kinds of doctoral programs that make them competitive with majority institutions. Doctoral degrees, for the most part, have been offered in education and in social and behavioral sciences. While some HBCUs have achieved noteworthy success in science and technology offerings, additional programs must be developed at a wider range of institutions.

Historically black colleges and universities must also diversify curricula to include more contemporary offerings reflective of the dynamic social, economic, national and international landscapes, and to include offerings in entrepreneurship, health disparities, environmental issues, mass communications and information management, just to name a few.

- **Research Capacity.** Teaching is enriched by complementary research, which also contributes to the acquisition of knowledge. HBCUs must create interdisciplinary research agendas in emerging fields and seek and secure funding. Moreover, HBCUs must support faculty who have active research agendas by modifying workload policies, constructing research facilities with state-of-the-art equipment, and offering more competitive salaries and incentives.

Historically black colleges and universities have demonstrated a solid ability to address a number of problems that confront society in general, and minority communities in particular. Based on their long-standing tradition of service, HBCU faculty possess the requisite experience and skills to assist low-wealth communities in addressing issues related to K–12 education. The magnitude of these problems calls for the establishment of consortia of HBCUs and majority institutions.

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- **Learning Styles.** Every student deserves the fullest commitment on the part of HBCUs to continue to place their highest priority on student learning and degree attainment. Research shows that millennial students learn differently. Faculty must better align their teaching, mentoring and advising to establish a partnership with these students that meets their needs. Since many faculty come to the academy with minimal training in the methods of teaching their disciplines, HBCUs must invest in professional development to provide opportunities to learn empirically tested techniques in pedagogy to ensure optimum student learning.

- **Student Retention.** Expectations for student success must be elevated to provide students a competitive edge. For

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more than three decades, the national focus has been on student access, with student success gaining momentum in more recent years. Many HBCUs have retention and graduation rates that are unacceptably low. Knowing that retention is a prerequisite for graduation, HBCUs must significantly increase support services in both undergraduate and graduate programs. HBCUs must raise the expectations for student graduation. Further, HBCUs must concentrate their efforts in putting all the necessary mechanisms in place to assure that students excel and graduate well prepared for their chosen careers.

- **Succession Planning.** Legacies are sustained by meaningful succession. HBCUs need to consider the future in two areas: the faculty and the administration. HBCUs must identify and retain talented faculty who are committed to the mission of their institutions and are willing to engage students through teaching and mentorship. HBCUs must attract executive leadership that seeks to advance these institutions in productive and inventive ways and secure recognition of HBCUs as critical within the national higher education community.
- **Globalization.** Current and projected demographics of the United States confirm ethnic population shifts. These changes are beginning to emerge in university enrollments across the country. For their benefit, HBCUs must expand inclusiveness to meet the needs of Latinos and other groups seeking degrees. A richer ethnic fabric will only enhance the HBCU experience and result in an expanded opportunity to serve. Students and faculty need opportunities to participate in international studies and to learn Chinese, Arabic and other critical languages. Globalization must be reflected throughout the curricula and not relegated to supplemental coursework or fragmented study-abroad activities.
- **Private Philanthropy.** Many HBCUs, especially private ones, are tuition dependent and rely heavily on private philanthropy. HBCUs must clarify philanthropic expectations for their key constituencies. HBCUs must become more strategic in cultivating annual and planned giving among alumni. They must be encouraged to view their contributions as investments in the institution rather than mere donations.



HBCUs must become more strategic in organizing student support, from the first day freshmen spend on campus through to graduation. Furthermore, HBCUs must articulate the need for commitment to and investment in the purpose and goals of the institution when hiring faculty and staff and more emphatically solicit giving on their part. Boards of trustees must be comprised of individuals who are wholly committed to the missions of the institutions and have the capacity to leverage resources to support these universities. A compelling and mutually beneficial case must be made to secure the support of foundations and corporations. Corporations are, in fact, primary beneficiaries of the talent pool produced by HBCUs.

- **Governance.** Boards of trustees play significant roles in HBCUs' governance structures. Trustees must abstain from engaging in managerial activities, but they also must hold the president or chancellor accountable for effective leadership. HBCUs must provide the necessary professional development opportunities to trustees, so that they may more successfully implement their role.

The future of historically black colleges and universities will be determined by their competitiveness, responsiveness and relevance. A commitment by public and private funding sources to underwrite HBCUs should be orchestrated as an essential part of a national strategy to develop American intellectual capital to assist in meeting the President's goal in the American Graduation Initiative and sustain our economy.

## A CALL TO ACTION

We see the establishment of the "National HBCU Reinvestment Act" as the result of a partnership of state and federal governments, major corporations and foundations. These entities must come together to coordinate the development of these historic institutions in the strategic areas delineated above. The time for action is now. Historically black colleges and universities have demonstrated capacity, resolve and results. America must embrace and empower these institutions to help ensure that the nation reclaims its place in the world. The magnitude of the issues confronting America is too great to leave any of the nation's talent pool untapped.

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