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Courage and Change in Higher Education

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I am happy to be here today because as a scholar for 35 years, I have also been directly engaged in the many of the cutting edge issues of our time, where I have had the opportunity and the responsibility to utilize intellectual productivity in the cause of the social advancement of African Americans and other disadvantaged peoples. And now that you have, I know, had the data and expert analyses presented to you, I merely came here to remind you of the a key characteristic of leadership that it takes to implement them. We are facing a serious crisis in Higher Education (HE) that threatens to rob the civil rights movement's application to HE of its ability focus America upon the task of educating all of one nation, by providing the special experiences and programs that are necessary to make up for centuries of exclusion and subordination and misinformation and inferiorization of the intellect of Blacks. The other day I talked with the distinguished Historian Dr. John Hope Franklin who had just come from City University of New York defending its programs on the Black male. CUNY is being sued for maintaining such a program by a conservative legal organization, and the *Chronicle of Education* tells us that in the past few years nearly 100 programs have been eliminated by such educational terrorism. We face a crisis that in fact, must be faced down.

1. The Challenge of Environment

We must act because we live today in a time when the problems of access for Blacks and Hispanics especially, to selective institutions grows even more difficult even as the absolute numbers of those enrolled increase. And recent cuts in higher education programs in just the current fiscal cycle continue illustrate the lack of the will to expand education for all and an understanding that the social environment plays a vital role in this process.

Studies by Gary Orfield at the Harvard Civil Rights Institute have conclusively demonstrated that the low economic status of blacks and Hispanics plays a role in their high school attendance and performance and access to higher education. So why is it that the tenuous hold of Blacks and Hispanics to higher education enrollment is all predicated on the intellectual fit, rather being complimented by the lack of economic fit which is probably even more devastating.

That economic environment plays a critical role is seen in the current enrollment figures illustrate the decline of black students in professional schools, including law and medicine....and flat enrollment in Ph. D. Programs, suggesting that students from low income families are refusing increasingly to take on higher levels of debt to finance their education.

By all accounts, educational access, especially for those who have been left behind, is becoming an urgent resources ion the context of our times. Indeed, I accepted this invitation to be with you at a time that I have recently served as the chairman of the Committee that would write the summary of the National Black Economic Summit, held in Gary, Indiana last month. Our deliberations revealed that the economic crisis of the black community was deepening, although the national economy appeared to flourish, and the administration said that 5 million jobs were generated and unemployment was generally at 4.7%, in this age, we had to ask who were the recipients of these economic benefits, since they belie the condition of our community. Some indices come to mind:

- A study by The Community Service Society of New York City revealed that half of all black males in the city were unemployed, a status characteristic of several other cities;
- The International Institute of Economics said that the tax cuts affected by the administration influenced the downward wage spiral, because Congressional appropriators had reduced benefit levels in a number of vital programs to accommodate lower government revenues;
- Industrial jobs declined by 2.7 million since 2001, in categories where blacks made up 25% of all workers;
- Home ownership increased from 43% to 48% since 2001, but studies by The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston also found that debt levels increased disproportionately among blacks compared to whites because homes were financed by sub-prime loans with much higher interest rates;
- Low wage workers expanded, crowding out blacks in some categories of labor, in a study by the National Urban League's "State of Black America," complicating the ability to secure a place on the ladder of economic mobility.
- Globalization creates a situation where American workers are the subject of employment pressure due to the outsourcing of jobs and the internal competition for jobs from immigrants, both documented and undocumented.

With regard to the latter issue, for the past year, I have served on a Commission on the Black Male, sponsored by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. In that work, I have made more sensitive to the problems of young black males and the pipeline that either does or does not result in their entrance into higher education. These problems span the now well-known gamut from poverty, to poor secondary education, wildly disproportionate incarceration and many related issues. But pressure on low-wage employment for both declining wages and access to jobs, is certainly one, and I have been mystified by the lack of consensus among economists relative to the effect that immigration (from both documented and undocumented sources) has on black males. My view is the impact is certainly there, although I would agree that it is difficult to determine with precision how much immigration accounts for. In any case, all of these trends place inordinate pressure on American youth to secure the kind of preparation to compete in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

2. Interracial Courage: Building a Mutual Investment in a Positive Future

In a paper on "democratic leadership," I utilize the allegory of the cave to symbolize the context of American race relations, as originally expressed by Socrates in his Second Republic and embellished upon by Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois. In both accounts there are two dimensions, where those within the cave aspire to freedom and liberation and must depend to an inordinate extent upon those outside to assist them in that effort.

The state of race in higher education is much like that paradigm, inasmuch as those inside the cave must prepare themselves to be liberated through education and those outside must receive them and therefore, help to provide the requisite opportunities for it to occur on a satisfactory level.

In 2004, I was involved in a number of re-assessments of *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court and I revisited the certain knowledge that even as the implementation of the *Brown* decision touched off a Massive Resistance movement among many whites in the South, the courage of some white leaders who stood against the tide in cities like Atlanta, Memphis and many other places is legend. Without their courage the South would not have led the nation in desegregating its schools after 1954.

The Civil Rights era was, therefore, one that required uncommon courage from all involved to meet the requirement for historical change that was being forced on the nation by the urgency of the black movement. In a discussion with Robert Caro, on his most recent issue of the autobiography President Lyndon Baines Johnson this year, I remarked to him that I thought that Johnson was not considered one of our greatest presidents because of his involvement with civil rights and the war in Vietnam. But it is without question that he exhibited raw courage when, time after time, he fought against the racial politics of his own class of Southern politicians and succeeded in disciplining them to the cause of social justice and a project in the interest of the nation.

Therefore, in the study of leadership, I have come to believe with Winston Churchill that, "Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all the others." In this truth, courage will be needed to face many of the challenges before us.

3. Some manifestations of that culture:

A central problem that I tried to describe in a recent book has been the arrival of a strong Conservative virus in this era that has infected the political culture of every major political institution and rendered gravely ill the progressive advance of public policies advocating racial integration and equality.

The notion of Affirmative Action has been severely weakened by the courts, by a long winding trail that began with the Bakke Case of 1978, through Proposition 209 in California and in Washington State, as well as the Hopwood case which led to the imposition of Percentage enrollment Plans in Texas and Florida.

Stopping at the Grutter decision, we have arrived at a notion of "Diversity" that is not based on the idea of compensatory justice that was presented by President Lyndon Johnson in his commencement speech at Howard University in June of 1964, but a vague notion that institutions of HE should be allowed to pursue diverse construction of their institution as a principle valuable in the process of education.

At Howard, although President Johnson uttered the thought now etched in the culture of civil rights, that rejected the notion of bringing someone to the starting line of opportunity hobbled by slavery and expect them to manage opportunity equally with others, then pretend that you have been completely fair. But he also said on that occasion:

"...equal opportunity is essential, but not enough, not enough. Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in--by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man."

In fact, the University of Michigan legal team prevented the LDF as an "intervenor" from introducing to the court the idea of both the past history of disadvantage experienced by blacks and how that has configured present circumstances because it perceived a Court hostile to the notion of compensatory justice. Indeed, public policy in this instance should have yielded to the reality of that fact, as well as a coequal fact that which finds whites in the dominant majority of most of the institutions of HE and that AA is a modest remedy that purports to find a way to include a minority of minorities into those institutions. Rather, the social context of recent High CT decisions privileges a notion strong individual evaluation of each entrant that infers an equality of history, condition, and even numbers that distorts the table of justice in this field.

Moreover, conservative legal organizations have threatened HE institutions with suit over specialized minority programs that have focused on supplementing skills weakened or absent due to the attendance of minority youth at substandard high schools. Utilizing a corrupted definition of "Discrimination" - that references consideration of race in

any context – they have intimidated such institutions into behaving as though Affirmative Action no longer exists and that these relatively small programs somehow threaten the rights and privileges of white students. As a result, in both cases, the cruel secret is that the resulting regime of strong individualism both strikes at the original logic of the 14th amendment to the Supreme Court and privileges whites as a group.

The social objective of such threats, very often with inferred support from the Civil Rights Office of the Department of Education, appears to be to reduce the presence of African American students in such institutions, an outcome that cannot be justified according to the place of such students in a knowledge based economy, the constitution of the social membership of the institutions, the needs of the nation for trained manpower and womanpower, nor the leadership structure of society as a whole.

Crisis may be heightened by a tight enrollment environment.

We recently have received the news American universities are becoming more selective as their application rates have soared between 5-26%. *USAToday* (Feb. 13, 2006) says that institutions such as: U Penn, Hamilton College, U Denver, Northwestern, Vassar, Brown, George Washington U, U St. Louis, Wesleyan and others have all experienced a boom in applications, while they all accepted a lower percentage of applicants for the entering Freshman classes.

It appears somewhat contradictory for the White House to create an initiative in Math and Science, and in the full knowledge that the country is becoming more multi-cultural (states such as Texas, California, Florida and New York becoming minority majority – driven by a the dynamic growth of a youthful population) and yet, allow the Civil Rights division of the DOE to participate in limiting special programs that provide enrichment for minority youth — many from underprivileged high schools – to attend summer programs before entering college? This is even more puzzling since 15 business groups in 2005 issued a joint statement warning that America's scientific and technical capability is beginning to atrophy, threatening to undermine standards of living at home and our leadership in the world." Instead, the White House should encourage such initiatives.

4. So, what can be recommended as a correctives:

First, let us suffuse in the Concept of "Diversity" with the compensatory justice objective implied in the original purpose of Affirmative Action uttered by Lyndon Johnson. What remains of the remedial purpose of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that has not been vitiated or severely weakened by the Court is Title VI.

During the debate on the passage of Title VI in 1964, Rep. Emanuel Celler, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee said:

"[The bill] would assure Negroes the benefits now accorded only white students in programs of higher education financed by Federal funds. It would, in short, assure the existing right to equal treatment in the enjoyment of Federal funds. It would not destroy any rights of private property or freedom of association." (110 Cong. Rec. 1519: 1964) Then Sen. Hubert Humphrey said as well, that the purpose of Title VI was "to insure that Federal funds are spent in accordance with the Constitution and the moral sense of the Nation." (at 6544) To my knowledge, Title VI has not been repealed by Grutter, but it has been sorely misinterpreted by Right wing ideologues to weaken the Diversity regime.

Second, university officials should find the courage to challenge conservative myths, which assert that black students do not belong in selective institutions; that their self-esteem will be damaged by failure in such institutions. These rationales are often not substantiated by any verifiable cultural data, but exist as pretext for the further reduction of the presence of minority students.

Third, university officials expand the resources of diversity by interacting more vigorously with HBCUs, Spanish-speaking Institution and Native American institutions which have a special cultural significance both as educational institutions, repositories of culture, and organizations central to the social life of those communities. Such interaction might rebuild "feeder" relationships, assist in skill development, change the paradigm of interracial educational cooperation, and thereby blunt the edge of threatening law suits based on the establishment of much smaller special programs.

Fourth, institutions of HE should become "engaged institutions" in relationship to their relationship to minority communities and help to produce a more positive environment within which education takes place and more substantial linkages to their institutions. They must have the courage to confront the neighborhood and community context that shapes educational attitude and concrete achievement that prepares minorities for college in order to increase the size of the pipeline. In this, with the technical resources they possess, universities should develop more robust models of community development and engagement in health, economic development planning, job training, family supports, poverty alleviation, and in other fields.

6. Action Bounded by Courage

In some ironic way, HE institutions are some of the last bastions of the liberal philosophy upon which the basic principles of this country are founded such as inclusion, opportunity, acquiring expertise to contribute to self and society, love of knowledge, awareness of the global community and service to the less fortunate. However, it is under siege from conservative forces that seek to change its mission and return it to a mechanism for privileging a certain racial and class strata in American society. In this conflict, university officials are the front lines of a struggle to preserve this heritage and they will need the kind of courage that was symptomatic of such officials in other eras of history.

One such individual was Brit Kirwan, former President of UMD, and now Chancellor of the System, who fought a courageous battle to maintain programs that were installed by the University to address the fact that for 250 years, African Americans were slaves in the State of Maryland and for most of that time, were excluded from entrance.

In a speech last year, he said:

"What's missing today ... is the broad-based, intense commitment for diversity that we had several decades ago." He talked of the way that higher education "caved in" during the period leading up to the Michigan decision" when universities "voluntarily dismantled diversity programs for fear of law suits, and cited the moral underpinnings of

affirmative action" as enough of a reason to maintain a passion to advocate for it. He did not take this position merely on the strength of his own convictions, but as a precondition to other elements that were necessary to the "enlightened self interest of the nation."

This kind of position takes courage today, the same kind of courage it took to fight for the Banneker Scholarship program 15 years ago. Discussing the case with Rev. Jesse Jackson one day when it clear that Kirwan would appeal the District Court decision, he said, "That guy's got guts." I told him he was right, and it one of the first things that came to mind when I finally accepted an invitation to join the faculty.

7. Conclusion

I believe with Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr. that, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, and convenience, but where he stands at time of challenge and controversy," He felt that there was something called the "point of challenge" where people, leaders, were tested. The university in the early 21st century is at the point of challenge and we must not only lionize Dr. King, we must activate the principles of the civil rights movement as a part of the democratic processes by which we administer these institutions and the content of the education that we dispense. But most important, in this work, let us emphasize the courage that displayed to meet the challenges I have presented, which after all is the characteristic of leadership that has been most responsible for making this the great country that it is today.