

## MICHAEL STEELE ON WHY HBCUS ARE HANGING BY A THREAD

By Michael Steele - October 25, 2013

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With so many of the civil rights battles behind us, and the satisfaction that comes from the success of African-Americans in business, politics, sports and entertainment, it is no surprise that the assault upon the integrity and historic purpose of our nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) has been little noticed by mainstream media and, more sadly, the Black community itself.

Not only do our HBCUs stand as a testament to the challenges that lie in the future but they are an important reminder of the proud history of African-American education in America and its unlimited potential.

Across America, HBCUs are giving African-Americans the tools and the knowledge they need to fully participate in our society, to build a solid economic foundation on which to raise their families and their businesses, and to become leaders of the future.

However, many of those tools had begun to be stripped away and much of that foundation began to crumble under the weight of neglect and institutional bias.

Maryland HBCUs (Bowie State University, Coppin State University, Morgan State University and University of Maryland Eastern Shore) were treated no differently.

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In October 1999, the State of Maryland and the United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), entered into a partnership for the purposes of improving the educational opportunities for African Americans in Maryland's public institutions of higher education and of ensuring compliance with the state's obligations under federal law. The partnership agreement set forth the commitments that the state and OCR anticipated would bring Maryland into full compliance with its obligation under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

But as the partnership agreement expired in December 2005, it was very clear that while the state had met the letter of the law under Title VI (and its agreement with OCR); embracing the spirit of such agreements would be another matter. In practice, Maryland's HBCUs had to deal with the growing reality of "duplication of specialized programs" whereby certain resources (e.g. laboratories and libraries) or academic programs (e.g. MBA) were duplicated at predominantly white institutions, resulting in HBCU students having to go to those institutions to access them.

As Lt. Governor of Maryland, I became acutely aware of the failure of so many to do just a little to help our state's HBCUs. But the supposed innocuousness of program duplication only masked the knife cutting away the ability to improve access to these fine institutions and to create opportunities for them to compete with the state's majority white institutions.

For example, the idea that Coppin State University's academic offerings, physical plant or department chairs should be comparable to and competitive with Towson State University was not a far-fetched proposition for me. After all, a quality education begins with equality of education. But the buzz saw of resistance and excuse-making by institutional forces was nothing short of stunning. Our administration

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was successful in getting new buildings and other physical plant investments for the HBCUs, but when we tried to set up research positions and endowed chairs, not to mention increased funding for scholarships, student services, information technologies, libraries, and other institutional infrastructures at those schools, the backlash was enormous.

The in-your-face moment for me came when two traditionally white institutions decided to create a joint MBA program between their two institutions which could well have meant the end of Morgan State University's vaunted MBA program (established by and named after Earl G. Graves, Sr.) just six miles away. Morgan State University's pleas to the Maryland Higher Education Commission for the integrity of its own MBA program fell largely on deaf ears as the program duplication was approved and Morgan had little recourse to stop it.

I was stunned to have certain academic and legislative "leaders" ask me directly why our administration would want to invest dollars in "those schools". They argued that we should put such program dollars in the predominantly white schools and allow the students from the HBCUs to visit those campuses to take a course or to use laboratories. Understand that this occurred not in 1955 but in 2005.

So, in 2006, with the support of Governor Bob Ehrlich, I spearheaded a proactive assessment of each HBCU and the steps that would be necessary to address, in a real way, the inadequate funding of these historically black academic institutions. In our State's final report to the OCR, we detailed our 2007 budget increases for specific programs and capital improvements that would begin the process toward parity. From significant increases in capital budgets to acquisition of property for campus-wide expansion to implementing initiatives arising out of each HBCU's strategic plans, the goal was to establish ongoing efforts to bring equality in funding and treatment to Maryland's HBCUs.

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However, by 2008, the problem of duplication had become so problematic for HBCUs that the Bohanan Commission was established to "develop a statewide framework for higher education funding, and among its recommendations stated specifically that HBCUs become comparable and competitive with other public institutions."

But once again, the progress would be slow and the concerns of HBCU students and alumni would fall on deaf ears until finally the Coalition for Equity and Excellence in Maryland Higher Education was formed and brought a lawsuit in 2011.

Needless to say, I was heartened by District Court Judge Catherine C. Blake's October 7th ruling that "The State has failed to meet its burden of demonstrating there are no ongoing segregative effects that are a result of the traceable unnecessary program duplication proven by the Coalition." And while Judge Blake deferred a final ruling in order to allow the State to mediate a remedy consistent with her findings, her ruling nonetheless exposes the lie that program duplication does not harm our HBCUs and that its ultimate affect is not discriminatory.

If you value the ruling of the District Court, then it is time for those who value the education at our nation's HBCUs to join with those who have silently and bravely pushed back against the idea that the days of receiving a quality education at such institutions are numbered. Instead, I believe, and have argued in the halls of Annapolis, that our HBCUs nurture the talent of our young people and remain dedicated, despite the obstacles put before them, to ensuring that the next generation of African-American scientists, scholars and business leaders has a greater opportunity to reach the pinnacle of American society than the generation before them.

The students who enter those lecture halls and laboratories or cull the shelves of the library are well on their way to maximizing their

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opportunity in this society and to realizing the full potential of their talents. But none of that happens if they are forced to leave campus because of program duplication.

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