

STRENGTHENING HBCU GOVERNANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

NOVEMBER 1, 2006

REMARKS BY PHYLLIS PALMIERO, DIRECTOR
INSTITUTE FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Good morning and welcome – I am Phyllis Palmiero - the Director of the Institute for Effective Governance in Washington, DC. It is great to be here today for what I hope will be an intriguing talk about the importance of effective governance in strengthening HBCUs. This conference is entitled “*Looking Beyond the Challenges...Finding Solutions.*” So - it is appropriate that we consider college and university governance in the context of solutions to the challenges that face HBCUs in the 21st century.

I don't need to tell you and, indeed, you will hear throughout this conference: these are exciting and challenging times in higher education. Understanding the challenges – especially the challenges to institutional governance and leadership – will help us to find solutions for strengthening our colleges and universities. The success of an institution is usually the result of its leadership and that starts with its governance!

As we enter the new century, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a vital role to play. There are over 100 HBCUs in the United States providing opportunity for hundreds of thousands of minority and disadvantaged youth. These institutions are motivated by the vision that education is the key to uplifting the individual and the community. They are devoted to expanding access and success in higher education across the country.

In the past, “majority” higher education institutions were unreceptive to African-American students. HBCUs provided a necessary alternative. These institutions upheld standards of excellence that enabled countless young people to succeed, even when the odds were stacked against them.

Now, half a century later, the landscape looks very different. Increasingly, the best and brightest of African-American students are courted by elite public and private colleges across the country. HBCUs are now just one of many higher education choices and their continued existence is subject to pressures of every kind – pressures for more and better students, for more cost-effective management, and for financial stability.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, for many HBCUs, “a major challenge is developing a sound financial foundation for their institutions. HBCUs are often undercapitalized, with smaller endowments and fewer dollars per student and faculty member.”

In recent years, several HBCUs have been closed down by accreditors because of severe financial and management problems. At the same time, student retention and degree attainment rates are quite low. In sum, many of these colleges and universities have significant governance challenges.

It is the job of college and university trustees today to devote their time and efforts to helping their institutions become flexible, innovative, and cost-effective. Unless they do so, their institutions will find themselves hard-pressed to survive in the highly competitive higher education marketplace.

But while we need to understand the challenges – we must also know that there exist great opportunities and great possibilities.

HBCU's offer unique potential for greatness. They are special institutions, centers of excellence and access, offering a sustaining and nurturing environment. The existing universe of HBCUs enrolls more than 10 percent of the African-American students who go to college and award close to 30 percent of all degrees.

They are producers of innovative leaders – past and contemporary - [Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall, Jesse Jackson, and Oprah Winfrey, among them]. HBCUs make a strong and unique contribution to the US by providing an education to many disadvantaged young people. They offer a supportive environment in which qualities of leadership, strong values and character are developed and participation of HBCU graduates in the nation's business, social and political systems offers great value to this nation. HBCU's are indispensable and their mission must continue.

That's why there is an increasing focus on HBCU governance and exploring ways to make them stronger, more innovative and better. And that's why we are here today - to discuss how effective governance will strengthen HBCUs for the 21st Century.

I've been involved with higher education for more than 15 years, and I can tell you – the concept of more engaged trustees is sometimes viewed with some real skepticism.

Most presidents have a vision of where the institution can go and they are on campus each and every day...they know all about their institution and their faculties. They are familiar with the academic programs and buildings. So why even worry about a strong board?

Lay trustees, after all, often have had little or no experience with higher education; they have little familiarity with the special protocols that govern the campus, insufficient grasp of academic freedom, faculty governance, etc. When they get involved, they can micromanage and interfere.

And while most presidents would rather trustees just leave them alone, I venture that a president can accomplish great things with an effective board!

Lay governance is a peculiarly American institution. It is part of our democratic tradition and brings the perspective of informed citizens to the heart of the university. By design, these responsibilities rest not with academicians or experts of any kind, not with government employees or even elected officials, but with lay boards. Like their counterparts in the corporate world, it is important for trustees to find ways of better connecting the dots between the promise and the practice of effective oversight.

Robust lay stewardship ensures that the unique vantage point of the lay trustee truly permeates the day to day focus of the institution, translating statutory responsibilities into policies and practices that work. Active stewardship can make a real difference in what students know and can do when they graduate, in access, cost-effectiveness, and quality of public

higher education and in developing closer linkages between the priorities of the greater society and universities that serve them.

An institution that fails to identify and capitalize on the potential talents of citizens who make up the board – whether it's in fundraising or business development or community support– is missing out on immense resources that can help an institution question the status quo and move forward with a vision and a mission.

A strong board allows the president the creative room to balance board and faculty. A strong board provides the feedback and reality check that a president needs. A rubber-stamp boards fails to provide the needed balance that will protect a strong president from himself or herself. A more engaged board is a more supportive board.

Engaged boards working with presidents and senior administrators, can

- identify what the university's goals and objectives are;
- Allocate resources accordingly;
- Develop metrics for measuring the achievement of those objectives;
- Ensure accountability;

- And do all of this in an inclusive way that reduces distrust among affected constituencies.

Board members should work with their presidents to define the mission of the institution, to establish a niche, and pursue strategic and development plans. How can we raise more money to achieve that mission? What can we do to develop greater business and community support? How can we improve our graduation and retention rates and work effectively with the high schools to ensure that students who are enrolled are prepared for college work?

A strong, responsible board sets policy, but it depends on the president to carry out its policies and run the show. One of the president's jobs is to make sure the board understands the points of view of the faculty and other campus constituencies. Together, the president and board can make the tough decisions to achieve their common vision for the institution and to ensure that the very important mission and success of HBCU's will continue.

Now I want to focus on the specific board duties that have particular relevance to today's topic – they are strategic planning and academic quality.

How does a board actively engage in strategic planning – setting the board agenda for the university?

Development of the university's strategic plan is the primary responsibility of the board, working with the faculty and administration. The trustees, with input from the administration and faculty, have a fiduciary duty to clarify the mission and set broad goals for the institution. It is the board's role to develop the strategic plan, establish quantifiable goals and to periodically measure them. The strategic plan guides the board's decisions especially in terms of priorities and resource allocation.

Let's take for example Dr. Carey's talk today on enrollment management. She spoke of demographical changes in the U.S. and specifically referenced the growing Hispanic populations. Dr. Carey suggested that as a means of enrollment management, HBCUs might consider attracting this increasing population of students. This would mean that institutions' boards of trustees would examine mission and purpose. This should be deliberate and come from the boards of trustees with the administration and faculty. The related goals, objectives and strategies would then follow.

The board needs to actively engage in the planning process and articulate what they want done. Boards tend to fail to recognize the importance of documenting its short and long-range goals and objectives through a strategic plan and to regularly evaluate itself and the president on how well they are achieving the goals and objectives they developed. Some questions the board might consider are:

- Has the board reviewed the institution's mission?
- Does the plan include goals and strategies for increasing academic performance?

- Does the plan include strategies for resource acquisition, enrollment management, recruitment and retention?
- Do staffing and organizational structures match the strategic goals and objectives?
- Are capital assets and facilities fully utilized and any new capital resources aligned to the strategic directives?

How do boards assess and improving institutional performance?

Increasingly, colleges must show evidence that the investment adds “value” for students. But what is the best way to measure the value a college adds to the knowledge and skills of its graduates? What are the outcomes the board wants to reward? These are questions the board should ask and answer for its institution. There is no one size fits all – the board must include in its plan actions to increase institutional performance it should set measurable goals and monitor results based on its strategic goals and objectives.

College and university trustees are responsible for the academic as well as the financial well-being of their institutions. It is interesting that for most boards, the core business of higher education – EDUCATION - is rarely the focus of their work. This is in part because they are told – from the beginning – that the academics are the business of the faculty. They are expected to be “hands-off” when it comes to academic issues. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As a college trustee, boards are responsible for the academic quality of their institution. They can and should play a key role in sparking a reexamination of a college's academic programs. To do so, trustees need to be familiar with the key issues and with the norms and expectations of working with faculty and administrators.

And while the faculty has primary responsibility for the curriculum, the board is responsible for monitoring and ensuring its quality. When it comes to general education requirements, trustees – usually successful individuals with a wide range of experience – are well positioned to understand what graduates should know if they in turn are to have successful, informed, and thoughtful lives.

This does not mean reviewing the course syllabi and selecting books. It means obtaining enough information to see what students are being asked to learn and whether they emerge as educated men and women when they graduate. What are the course requirements? Are there many choices or few? Are the courses general or narrow? Do students learn to write? To compute? To understand the heritage of human civilization and the wonders of the natural world? In short, will these courses prepare students to become engaged and informed participants in the economic and civic life of our society? These are the kinds of questions that a responsible board must ask. It is up to the board - working with faculty and administrators – to establish the framework of a curriculum that will achieve the institution's educational mission, goals and objectives.

Another issue of importance to HBCUs is graduation and retention. I want to applaud you for attending this conference and focusing on this very issue - graduation and retention are a major theme of the plenary sessions and deserve the focus you are giving it.

As you know, HBCUs typically have low graduation and retention rates. This, as part of the board's academic focus, needs to be an issue that is included in college and university's strategic plans. Boards must ask how the institution plans to increase retention and graduation rates and include those strategies in its broad agenda.

The Board's Role in Educating Better School Teachers

There can be few HBCU roles more significant than the production of K-12 teachers. Trustees have a unique opportunity to examine schools of education and to hold teachers and those who train them accountable for the value they add to K-12 learning. Teacher quality is widely recognized as a supremely important factor in student achievement, and many have expressed deep dissatisfaction with existing teacher training programs. Boards must ensure that the next generation of teachers is taught by individuals who are themselves knowledgeable about history, literature, the sciences, and the other humanities, and have the quantitative and writing skills to properly teach our children.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A trustee's job is not easy. Trustees typically come from a dedicated cloth, however, many underestimate the time commitment and research required to be effective trustees. The bottom-line - trusteeship is hard work – requiring dedication of time and effort.

To borrow from Drew Miller, Regent, University of Nebraska and one of our IEG advisors, I quote:

"To be a responsible board member, one must ask hard questions, do research, and frequently question ...college administrators who, understandably, often focus on the narrower interests of the college or university rather than the broader public interest.

In serving as a trustee, ...if you are spending more time attending the athletic events, parties, and dinners with administrators rather than researching and questioning, then you are not serving as a responsible trustee."

Today, the public and parents are demanding greater accountability. Trustees must be stewards of the public interest, helping public and private colleges and universities provide a high-quality education at an affordable price.

The Institute for Effective Governance (IEG) is a nonpartisan membership and service organization founded by college and university trustees, for trustees. The mission of the Institute is to help trustees in higher education realize the promise of effective trusteeship. IEG assists boards of trustees in fulfillment of their fiduciary duties and responsibilities enabling them to bring the promise of lay governance into practice. We are devoted to

enhancing boards' effectiveness and helping trustees fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities fully and effectively.

Thank you for letting me be with you today and share some of the challenges to and the strategies toward effective governance. I urge you to take a look at the folders we have brought for you [on the table outside the door].