

# THE IDEA OF A BLACK UNIVERSITY

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## Abstract

*The existence of universities that are exclusively committed to promoting the untrammelled use of reason is crucial to the survival of democracy. A truly liberal democratic society is essentially a society of free autonomous individuals—presumably intellectually capable of exercising the positive freedom that autonomy implies. A Liberal Arts education that cultivates the intellect for its own sake is indispensable for positive freedom, and consequently, the viability of liberal democracy as an ongoing project. Currently, only two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are classified as Liberal Arts institutions. This essay argues that by emphasizing vocationalism in the undergraduate curriculum, HBCUs are undermining black intellectualism, compromising the positive freedom of black Americans, and contributing to eroding the stake that black America has in liberal democracy. A fundamental principle defended is the idea of a black university—the HBCU should exist solely to cultivate the black intellect for its own sake so as to promote the black intellectual culture necessary to preserve black America's stake in liberal democracy.*

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## **Introduction**

It was approximately a century and a half ago that Cardinal Newman rationalized and defended the purpose of a university education in his classic *The Idea of a University*.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the claim could be made that history has not been kind to Newman's vision, as the modern university seems committed exclusively to professionally training its students enabling them to queue favorably in professional labor markets. Certainly, if true, this function of the modern university corrupts Newman's vision, and if Ortega y Gasset (1932) is correct, the long-run result is civilizational decline; as universities continue to provide society with a class of individuals who lack cultivated intellects, no one will remain who can negotiate the complexities that make civilization possible, and the prospects for a continuing liberal democracy, and all its attendant benefits will slowly disappear.

While the prospect of civilizational decline should be alarming to all the beneficiaries of liberal democracy, it is of special importance to black Americans—a historically subordinated group—who have only recently started reaping the benefits of a society in which all men are at least formally free, and worthy of full civil status. The fact that black Americans have only recently been able to draw from the account of liberal democracy suggests that it ought to be more valuable to black Americans in the sense that black America has yet to maximize its potential as a vital participant in a liberal democratic polis. To continue to draw from that account requires from each generation, a class of individuals with cultivated intellects that understand, and can sustain the great

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<sup>1</sup>The *Idea of a University* evolved out of Newman's lectures at the Catholic University of Ireland, of which he became rector in 1851. The fundamental question addressed by Newman was the issue of how asceticism and intellectual discipline can combine to create a valid culture. The eight discourses that comprise the first half of *The Idea of a University* are a defense of four major theses: (1) A University that claims to be an exponent of universal knowledge must have a Faculty of Theology, (2) The purpose of education is to train the mind for its own sake, (3) The values served by intellectualism are not absolutely good, but good in themselves, and (4) The inculcation of a philosophic temper advances society.

arguments that flourished during the Enlightenment forming the very basis of contemporary western civilization. The idea of a universal humanity itself, is a unique contribution of the Enlightenment, and thus served as a rationale for the social and political liberation of blacks in America during the Civil Rights movement.

What I would like to suggest in this essay is that the apparent virtual uniformity of the academic curriculum among HBCUs—that is the fact that only two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)—Spelman and Morehouse, are officially recognized as Liberal Arts Colleges, is detrimental to the progress of the traditional constituency served by HBCUs—black Americans. An HBCU college curriculum that departs significantly from an emphasis on cultivating black intellect for its own sake, but instead encourages learning only for its practical utility, will only catalyze the gradual but certain decline of black America by reducing its stake in liberal democracy as an ongoing project. This would be an outcome of tragic proportions, but it can in fact be avoided. HBCUs need only take as serious Cardinal Newman's eloquent and noble conception of the university—echoed by W.E.B. Du Bois—and commit themselves to a Liberal Arts education that focuses exclusively on intellectual cultivation. This would enable HBCUs to provide black America with the educated citizenry she so desperately needs in order for black America to preserve its stake in the best ideas and human ideals of the Enlightenment.

### **Newman's Vision Of The University**

Any lamentations on the empirical fact that only two HBCUs are classified as Liberal Arts institutions by the Carnegie Foundation, presupposes that such a classification is worthy, even serving a function that society could not otherwise do without.<sup>2</sup> It further

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<sup>2</sup>The Carnegie Foundation For The Advancement of Teaching defines a Liberal Arts College as an institution that is primarily undergraduate, with a major emphasis on baccalaureate degree programs. These institutions award 40 percent or more of their baccalaureate degrees in Liberal

presupposes that, whatever a university ought to do, HBCUs that are committed to offering black students an education that has a foundation in the Liberal Arts, is satisfying some normative goal that if not met, is lamentable. But what exactly is the normative role of the university? Newman (1954, p. 129) argues that:

Hence it is that his education is called "liberal". A habit of mind is formed which lasts through his life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in former discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a university, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes or teaching. This is the main purpose of a university in its treatment of its students. [Italics added]

For Newman, an ideal society is one that has a "valid intellectual culture". The university is valuable to society to the extent that it enables an intellectual culture. A culture of university-trained "intellectuals" differs fundamentally from one in which the university trains "professionals" for vocational pursuits. A complex society demands rational beings that can engage their intellects to the demands of such a society. The university that eschews intellectual cultivation in favor of professional training merely creates a class of individuals who have been "degraded as rational beings" [Newman, p. 183], preventing them from performing their duty in a society that requires, deserves, and demands rational beings.

The consequences of the university shirking its responsibility in cultivating the intellect of students is perilous. Writing in 1934, almost at the turn of the century, Ortega y Gasset (1993) suggested that modern European culture predisposed its members to eschew reasoning altogether. The chief culprit in this deintellectualizing was the

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Arts fields, and are restrictive in admissions. For a listing of institutions with a Liberal Arts classification see the Carnegie Foundation at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/cihe/bc-i.htm>.

European university itself, which faced with a mass of humanity dumped upon it, liberated by the western democratic project, found that it was impossible to cultivate their intellects, and resorted to merely instructing them in using the tools of modern civilization. In effect, the triumph of liberal democracy, created new possibilities for the "common man", but also new limitations:

For, in fact, the common man, finding himself in a world so excellent, technically and socially, believes that it has been produced by nature, and never thinks of the personal efforts of highly-endowed individuals which the creation of this new world presupposed. *Still less will he admit the notion that all these facilities still require the support of certain difficult human virtues, the least failure of which would cause the rapid disappearance of the whole magnificent edifice.*[Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 58, Italics Added]

Ortega y Gasset was pessimistic in general about civilization's prospects given the presence of "common men" entering the universities, and the universities acquiescing to their vulgar sensibilities regarding the benefits of civilization, a sensibility that can only be accommodated by making available an illiberal professional education to a growing mass that has no desire for true intellectual cultivation. This sentiment reflects the idea that "the simple process of preserving our present civilization is supremely complex, and demands incalculably subtle powers. Ill-fitted to direct it is this average man who has learned to use much of the machinery of civilisation, but who is characterised by root-ignorance of the very principles of that civilisation" [Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 67]. The very fact that a university can accommodate the vulgarity of the masses, is tragic because civilization becomes more complex as a result of the ideas of the Enlightenment. With increasing complexity comes a requirement of having a society of minds capable of dealing with complexity. The tragedy of modern civilization is that "This disproportion between the complex subtlety of the problems and the *minds that should study them* will

become greater if a remedy is not found" [Ortega y Gasset, 1993, p. 90, Italics added]. To the extent that the university is in the business of cultivating the intellect, it stands to reason that universities, and perhaps universities alone bear the burden of reversing the forces that will ultimately destroy western civilization.

Supposing as true, that modern universities, and their illiberalizing tendencies, are catalyzing the decline of western civilization, it is of interest to consider the extent to which HBCUs can be viewed similarly. Taking as serious an institution's official Carnegie Classification, that is assuming that an institution's classification indicates what the primary educational function of that institution is, then the fact that only two HBCUs are classified as Liberal Arts colleges suggest that as a class, HBCUs—like the modern university in general—are also catalyzing the decline of western civilization. But of what ultimate significance is this, given that HBCUs, in terms of numbers, are a negligible portion of all colleges/universities in the United States, and the World? To the extent that black Americans have a stake in a valid intellectual culture, and the university is in the business of promoting such, then HBCUs, as universities where a disproportionate number of black Americans receive baccalaureate degrees, should also be in the business of cultivating the intellects of black students so that they can contribute to, and participate in, a society in which there is a valid intellectual culture.<sup>3</sup> But if the typical educational experience of students at HBCUs is illiberal, in that HBCUs as universities do not satisfy Newman's criteria of a university, then HBCUs are catalyzing the decline of civilization, and more importantly contributing to eroding the stake that black Americans have in liberal democracy, the legacy of the Enlightenment.

What are the stakes that black America has in liberal democracy? Perhaps the ultimate significance of liberal democracy is the idea of a universal humanity, ideally

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<sup>3</sup>Agesa, Granger, and Price (1999) report that in 1995, only 19 percent of all black college students were enrolled at HBCUs, but in that same year, HBCUs accounted for 33 percent of all baccalaureate degrees awarded to Blacks.

organized in a civil society, in which men can live, thrive and prosper under a democracy that at its best, encourages and promotes the maximization of each citizen's endowment of positive rights.<sup>4</sup> A positive right, stands in contrast to a negative right—the capability to make choices per se. A positive right is associated with positive freedom, or autonomy, with the freedom to make informed choices based upon reason. A liberal democracy recognizes the autonomy of all men, which is what distinguishes it from alternative forms of political organization. To work to its fullest potential, liberal democracy presupposes that men are rational, and can appeal to reason alone to mediate and referee all the competing claims that arise in the polity. Freedom, in this context, is an artifact of reason—it is a conclusion arrived at by a deliberate sustained effort that began in its modern form, during the Enlightenment. The triumph of reason also led to the conclusion of the existence of a univereal humanity, thus subjecting all men to a legacy of presumptive worthiness. Black Americans, of course, have only recently become legitimate heirs of this legacy. It took both a civil war, and a political movement to secure and make effective the benefits of liberal democracy for black Americans. This liberation process itself was based on a logic, a conclusion based on reason, that black men too, are worthy and eligible beneficiaries of liberal democracy. But conclusions are not just facts that can be taken for granted. Freedom, viewed as a mere fact ignores the requirement that men must be capable of negotiating the logic and reasoning that justifies it. Black Americans are not exempt from this requirement. If black Americans are to remain free, and to preserve an ongoing stake in liberal democracy, then black Americans must be willing and able to negotiate the logic and reasoning that justifies liberal democracy.

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<sup>4</sup>Crouch (1995) is an eloquent proponent of black America's stake in liberal democracy. According to Crouch "Our history, like the history of the world since the Enlightenment, is either one of adopting, expanding, and acting on the vision of *univereal humanity* or rejecting it, since there can neither be thorough democracy nor a world morality based on the recognition of fundamental commonality without universal humanism [ p. 47, Italics added].

Allan Bloom (1987) informs us that "a society based on reason needs those who reason best" (p. 258). The liberal democratic regime that is easy to take for granted is based upon a particular rationalization of freedom, and is based on a conceptualized political ideal that "promised untrammelled freedom to reason—not to everything indiscriminately, but to reason, the essential freedom that justifies the other freedoms" [Bloom, 1987, p. 39]. The role of the university in a truly free society is to encourage and protect the *untrammelled freedom to reason*. If this role is abandoned, then the virtue and power of reason itself may become diminished, ultimately undermining the liberal democratic project. Gabriel Marcel (1969, p. 59) remarked that "as soon as a preoccupation with security begins to dominate human life, the scope of life itself tends to be diminished. Life, as it were, tends to shrink back on itself, to wither". It is in this context that the modern university's emphasis on vocational education imperils liberal democracy. What exactly is the relationship between encouraging and protecting the *untrammelled freedom to reason*, and say a major in marketing, engineering, or communications? Given that a liberal democracy requires a culture of men endowed with an appreciation of, and a significant capacity for reasoning, such educational pursuits seem vulgar, and exclusively focused on a *preoccupation with security*, merely extracting and transforming the earth's bounty to satisfy the routine demands of daily sustenance—instead of satisfying the demands of positive liberal democratic freedom.

### **Du Bois' Vision Of The Black University**

Given black America's stake in liberal democracy as an ongoing project, HBCUs that commit almost exclusively to vocational education are effectively conspirators in a scheme that will compromise the positive freedoms that black Americans currently enjoy. An emphasis on a vocational education also compromises the whole idea of the rational black man, a black man that is capable, and worthy of reason, and committed to the power of reason to sustain him and his stake in the best ideal of the Enlightenment—

liberal democracy. This is a mission that HBCUs ought to take seriously, and recognize that a Liberal Arts education alone is indispensable for cultivating and training a class of black intellectuals who are capable of preserving black America's stake in liberal democracy. Du Bois certainly understood this:

The function of the *Negro college*, then, is clear; it must maintain the standards of popular education, it must seek the social regeneration of the Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race-contact, and cooperation. And finally, beyond all this, *it must develop men*. Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass, must persist and evolve that higher individualism which the centers of culture protect; there must come a *loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development*; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. [1994, p. 83, italics added]

Like Cardinal Newman, Du Bois had a noble conception of the HBCU as a university where true intellectual cultivation is possible. Du Bois understood the need for a class of exceptional black intellectuals that were capable of securing for black America the benefits of a universal humanity implied in the ideals of the Enlightenment. Du Bois also understood that this task required men that could not be produced in the vocationalist educational program articulated by Booker T. Washington since "we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living—not *sordid money-getting, not apples of gold*"[Du Bois, 1994, p. 67, Italics added]. In general, Du Bois saw no relationship between a college training in utilitarian vocations that prepares one for careers, and positive freedom for black Americans—the most significant kind of freedom in a liberal democracy.

Du Bois clearly understood the link between a college education rooted in the Liberal Arts, and enhancing and preserving the stake that black America had in liberal

democracy. A primary concern for Du Bois was the emerging mammonism among Negroes, and the tendency to regard money as the be all and end all of life—a tendency vulgarly reinforced by a vocational curriculum. Such a tendency would merely divert the talented tenth from "a strife for righteousness, from a love of knowing" [Du Bois, 1994,p. 63]. A "love for knowing" is the sine qua non of a valid intellectual culture, the absence of which it is not possible to sustain any democratic society in the long run. If black America is to make and sustain the progress made possible by the ideals of the Enlightenment, the "riddle of existence" must ever be tackled anew by those whom have been cultivated to appreciate the complexity of liberal democratic society. The HBCU ought to be the mechanism for this task, and this can be best realized with a Liberal Arts curriculum that Du Bois endorsed:

*The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium, and is today laid before the freedman's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change: its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.*[Du Bois, 1994, p. 63, Italics added]

### **Vocationalism And Nihilism**

Judging by the fact that only two HBCUs are committed to a Liberal Arts education, one can only conclude that the typical HBCU is only concerned with producing a student solely interested in the "earning of meat". The implied vocational emphasis of the academic curriculum corrupts the noble ideal of creating an elite and cultivated class of men who *know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes*. The ultimate tragedy of course is that the typical HBCU effectively degrades black students as rational beings, inhibiting the prospects for the formation of a valid black intellectual culture that can

continuously engage, renew, and rationalize the claim and stake that black America has in liberal democracy. A student weaned on a professional-vocational curriculum is only likely to see the world in terms of narrow self-interest—truth and beauty cease to be operative and normative standards of how men should live their lives. The whole idea of a universal humanity thus becomes conflated with idea of a "superabundant life" in which the standard by which a society is judged racially fair is the extent to which market-based outcomes are not racially disparate. The vulgar logic of the superabundant life only contaminates the idea of a black university further—the sole virtue of attending and graduating from an HBCU is that it provides the wherewithal for one to enter the black middle class, and all the superabundant material privileges associated with it—the triumph of E. Franklin Frazier's (1997) vulgar Black Bourgeoisie.

The existence of a black middle class, many whom were educated at HBCUs, seemingly obsessed with securing a material based superabundant life, is not surprising given the typical HBCU's lack of commitment of a Liberal Arts education. Nietzsche (1974) informed us long ago that one of the major consequences of men relinquishing the pursuit of ideas, is the formation of an ignoble culture, where men who previously held ideas in high esteem, replace their highest ideals with the vulgar hedonistic pursuits of material comforts.<sup>5</sup> Life turns in upon itself, and the dialectic of nihilism fuels itself on the disappearance of the Socratic ideals that once provided and anchored the possibilities for a valid intellectual culture. With the death of the Socratic ideal—Nietzsche's "death of God", nothing is left to enable a civil society—liberal democracy itself becomes threatened.<sup>6</sup> It is in this context that the university is of monumental significance. The

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<sup>5</sup>Notwithstanding his reputation for anti-intellectualism, in aphorism 265 of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche upholds the idea of a university and its role in cultivating reason by noting that "Schooling has no more important task than to teach rigorous thinking, careful judgement, logical conclusion; that is why it must refrain from everything which is not suitable for these operations" [p. 162, 1996].

<sup>6</sup>By proclaiming that "God" is dead, Nietzsche's madman is of course metaphorically suggesting that the Platonic suprasensory world no longer has any significance. Heidegger (1977) notes that

university must be the guardian of a valid intellectual culture, and commit itself to the ideals that fueled the Enlightenment. Without a Liberal Arts curriculum that takes those ideals as serious, the Nietzschean superman emerges by default, and rationalizes away the whole idea of a universal humanity, offering instead a society based on instinct, not reason—Dionysus defeats Apollo.

Cornel West (1993) laments the nihilism that plagues black America's underclass, and the extent to which it degrades the humanity of this segment of black America. Properly understood, nihilism can be viewed as "the fundamental movement of the history of the West" [Heidegger 1977, p. 62, italics added]. Nietzsche's madman, by exhorting that "God is dead", is merely elaborating upon the consequences of men abandoning the realm of ideas and ideals—and God is the embodiment and reification of this realm. For Nietzsche, the realm of ideas and ideals soon becomes replaced with doctrines espousing a superabundant material life—the earth's physical bounty replaces God as the highest value—and the idea of a life worth living itself becomes conflated with material prosperity. The death of ideas and ideals homogenizes all men into a money-grubbing herd, singularly hitching their fate to earth's physical bounty—they cease to be rational animals as belief in ideas and ideals is no longer possible:

For these men are not unbelievers because God as God has to them become unworthy of belief, but rather because they themselves have given up the possibility of belief, inasmuch as they are no longer able to seek God. They can no longer seek because they can no longer think. Those standing about in the *market place* have abolished thinking and replaced it with idle babble that scents nihilism in every place in which it supposes its own opinion to be endangered. [Heidegger, 1977, p. 112, Italics Added]

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in this context, nihilism becomes attractive and operative, since, if suprasensory ideas have lost their capacity to orient man's reality, —and "God" has been, at least until his death, man's ultimate reality through which existence gains validity—ideas no longer have significance for life.

To the extent that an HBCU-educated black middle class is merely enabled to *stand about in the market place*, with nonliberal professional undergraduate degrees, nihilism becomes entrenched throughout black America. Thus, other than a few consumer goods and services, there is really nothing that fundamentally distinguishes black America's underclass from her presumably educated middleclass—as both are committed to a nihilistic superabundant material life. This of course ultimately betrays Du Bois' noble idea of a talented tenth—the existence of a black intelligentsia committed to implementing the grand idea of a universal humanity that would secure for black America her stake in liberal democracy.

That any triumph of the nihilistic instinct over cultivated reason will devastate black America should be obvious. It was reason itself that ultimately provided the basis for black America to become the most recent beneficiaries of the liberal democratic project. The idea that *all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights*, is a fundamental idea—not a fact to be taken for granted, that Martin Luther King, Jr., a graduate from a Liberal Arts HBCU, eloquently appealed to in advocating for the abolition of the Jim Crow social and political regime that denied black Americans the benefits of a liberal democracy. King's advocacy of a universal humanity in his *I have a Dream* speech represents one of the best examples of the use and appeal to reason in western intellectual history. It also represents the power of an intellect cultivated at an HBCU—uncorrupted by a nonliberal vocational curriculum.

One has to wonder, counterfactually and hypothetically, about the prospects for a Martin Luther King, Jr. being produced at a typical HBCU today. Given that King's triumph was made possible through a logic that rationalized a universal humanity that only a Liberal Arts curriculum takes as serious, one can reasonably conclude that the contemporary prospects of an HBCU producing a rational being like Martin Luther King Jr. are close to zero. The typical black male enrolling in the typical HBCU today is

probably advised and encouraged to major in say accounting, engineering, computer science, or business administration—job-ready in four years. If he is not advised and encouraged as such, because the typical HBCU is not a Liberal Arts institution, there is probably nothing freestanding within the typical HBCU curriculum that would naturally cultivate an interest and appreciation for the ideals of the Enlightenment that made it possible for a black male to pursue and secure a career as an accountant, engineer, computer scientist or management trainee at a major corporation.

### **Black College Vocationalism As A Barrier To Black Intellectual Culture**

The reduced likelihood of a typical HBCU producing a cultivated intellect that Martin Luther King, Jr. represented underscores the way in which the typical HBCU, with its nonliberal emphasis, catalyzes the decline of black America. If liberal democracy requires, for its ongoing viability, a valid intellectual culture, then the fact that the typical HBCU is biased against producing cultivated black intellectuals will render them a liability with respect to protecting and sustaining black America's stake in liberal democracy. HBCUs ought to take as serious the requirements of securing and expanding black America's stake in liberal democracy—and recognize that black America cannot live by bread alone. The cultivation of black intellectuals should be the primary goal of an HBCU education—and not just at the two HBCUs with a Liberal Arts classification. This insight, however elitist sounding, is one that ought to be taken seriously, and has been recognized by at least one partisan of HBCUs:

If one had to single out the most significant, abiding challenge facing private black colleges in general, it would be that of *expanding and developing the class of black intellectuals*. This is not to ignore or discredit in any way the efforts many colleges are making to increase the number of blacks who go into skilled and other para-professional and non-professional pursuits. Booker T. Washington was right to point out that all vocations have inherent

dignity and worth. *However, it is true too that that no group or race or nation can develop to its fullest potential until it has first developed a class of intellectuals who are highly trained as specialists in the basic professional and business pursuits.* This is particularly urgent in the complex, competitive world society in which we live. Blacks, like other people, badly need highly trained, sensitive, responsible authorities in the major areas of life [Thompson, 1979. p. 187, italics added].

Notwithstanding the dignity and worth of vocational pursuits, the creation of a class of HBCU educated black intellectuals ought to be the first priority of HBCUs. However bold, this claim is self-evident, as the university exists solely for the cultivation of intellects—unless one wants to lower the standard for HBCUs. Phillip Richards is correct in noting that intellectuals, black or otherwise, are created and governed by "the language of the great texts" [1998, p. 180]. A vocational curriculum degrades men as rational beings and fails to equip them for the demands that a liberal society places on cultivated reason. If presumably educated black men are ill-equipped to participate in a valid intellectual culture, the likely consequence is the arrested development of black America. It is only through the language of the great texts and their manner of organizing reality and contextualizing the big questions, that the best and brightest of black America can continue to secure and expand upon the stake that black America has in liberal democracy.

It is ultimately actual intellectuals, weaned on the insights of the great texts, that initiate and provide the discourse that constitute a valid intellectual culture. To the extent that the university is responsible for cultivating a class of men with philosophic tempers, the university has served society well—it has promoted a valid intellectual culture crucial for the viability of liberal democracy. In recent years, it appears that the typical HBCU is not committed to promoting a valid intellectual culture. Of all the prominent black public

intellectuals considered by Boynton (1995), none were educated or employed at HBCUs.<sup>7</sup> Boynton notes that "Black thinkers who want to make changes in the wider public intellectual culture have a better chance working from within the university than outside it" [p. 65]. That prominent black intellectuals apparently find it easier to promote changes in the culture outside of HBCUs is tragic, suggesting that black America is not capable any longer of producing first rate intellectuals within the confines of black educational institutions.<sup>8</sup> The fact that none of these black intellectuals were educated at HBCUs tragically suggests that the typical HBCU does not cultivate the philosophic temper in black students which is necessary for one to be a public intellectual—and contribute to a valid intellectual culture. All of this suggests that the typical HBCU, not being committed to a Liberal Arts education, and cultivating black students with the intellectual majesty of the great books, is not capable of supporting a valid intellectual culture—and consequently a class of black intellectuals.

The importance of HBCUs housing intellectuals, and engaging in intellectual activity—particularly publishing in refereed journals, should not be minimized as it seems to engender the creation of black intellectuals among HBCU baccalaureate graduates. Agesa, Granger, and Price (1998) show that in the case of economics, there is a positive correlation between the number of refereed publications of HBCU economics faculty, and the number of HBCU baccalaureate graduates that earn doctorates in economics. Thus, if HBCUs are serious not just about disseminating contingent

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<sup>7</sup>This appears to be a post 1970's phenomena, as Richards (1998) notes "The rigorous intellectual self-definitions that one encountered in the earlier generation of the elder black intelligentsia in the sixties and seventies had often been forged at Lincoln, Howard and Morehouse" [p. 79]. In the same context West (1993) notes that "And in all honesty, there were relatively more and better black intellectuals then than now" [p. 59]. In the case of economics, as recently as 1989, a top twenty black economist—in terms of citations, was employed at an HBCU according to Medoff (1989).

<sup>8</sup>Watts (1989) argues that the contributing factors explaining the flight of black intellectuals from HBCUs include (1) A better intellectual infrastructure at nonHBCUs, and (2) The tenuous financial status of some, but not all HBCUs.

vocational knowledge, but also creating pure intellectual knowledge, a priority should be to house among its faculty as many active intellectuals as possible. Not only would this lead to the cultivating of intellectualism among HBCU students, but in addition, as Benjamin Mays argued almost sixty years ago, raise the intellectual stature of HBCUs:

It may be that this is one of the ways Negro colleges will cease to be labeled Negro colleges and will become just colleges. It may be one of the ways to abolish discrimination. It is not an idle dream to think that within the lifetime of most persons now living, the most eminent scholars in many fields will be Negroes in Negro colleges and universities. If this should obtain, their services will be widely sought after far beyond the confines of the Negro race. It is hoped that this challenge will not go unheeded by the Negro liberal arts college.[Mays, 1942, p. 407, italics added]

### **The Case For Liberal Arts At Black Colleges**

The fact that HBCUs, as currently constituted, may not be capable of providing black America with the intellectual leadership she needs was recognized approximately a decade ago by Jerry Watts (1989)

The problem of a "quality lag" centers around an elite sector of black Americans who have not been encouraged to think critically about themselves and American society at large. *The result is that a large black sector of college graduates appears to be too technocratic in outlook to provide the creative leadership that black American communities desperately need.*[Watts, 1989, p. 502, italics added]

Watts, in particular lamented the fact that at many HBCUs, "students are specifically trained to assume administrative jobs at corporations" [p. 502], which corrupts the ideas underlying the humanistic concerns of a proper liberal arts education. It is in this context

that Watts expresses a concern about HBCUs engendering a "quality lag" in black America. If HBCUs cannot cultivate a serious intellectualism among its students, the connection between positive human freedom for black America and an HBCU education will seem dubious. If Watts is correct in that the elite black student—presumably covetous of serious intellectual cultivation—has a reduced incentive to attend the typical HBCU, then the typical HBCU may have no choice but to eschew a liberal arts education altogether and become a mere job training institute, providing no assistance to the goal of enhancing positive freedom for black America.

A concern about HBCUs engendering a quality lag in black America is really a concern that relative to nonHBCUs, black graduates of HBCUs may not be capable of providing black America with the intellectual capital she needs. Price (1998) has provided some evidence to this by noting that between 1986 and 1996, the black share of doctorates of HBCU graduates in the intellectual disciplines has declined. This trend suggests that black graduates of nonHBCUs are increasingly more likely to pursue a life of the mind than HBCU graduates. The trend also suggests that relative to the typical nonHBCU, the typical HBCU curriculum does not predispose the black student towards intellectualism. Thus, empirical data confirm to some extent Watts' concern about an intellectual quality lag being engendered by HBCUs—increasingly, black intellectuals are being produced outside of HBCUs—driven perhaps by an HBCU curriculum that is coercively vocational.

The educational missions of HBCUs that enthusiastically embrace vocationalism contradict a major assumption underlying the black liberation struggle—the idea that black men are worthy of freedom. The classical view of education maintains that education is the process of perfecting human beings, and it should be specialized only to the extent that it develops specifically human excellences. Strauss (1967) informs us that originally, a Liberal education was the proper education for a Liberal man—meaning a man who behaved in a manner becoming a free man instead of a slave. Within the

classical tradition of education, Liberal Arts—*artes liberales*—literally means art of freedom, practiced by free men as opposed to slaves. Thus, as John Dewey (1997) asserted, a nonliberal vocational education is the training of animals or slaves. A Liberal man, nourished on a Liberal education, is his own master, and his cultivated intellect permits him the luxury of engaging the demands of liberal democracy, and participating in the intellectual culture which sustains it. The typical HBCU, not being committed to a serious Liberal Arts education, denies the black student his status as a free man that must function in a liberal democracy that requires an ongoing intellectual culture. Whatever the practical virtues of vocational training in, say, accounting, marketing, and engineering, they do not bear directly on positive freedom for blacks, and may in fact undermine it.

A commitment to a Liberal Arts education, unlike vocational education, bears directly upon positive freedom—in which black America has a substantial stake. By definition, a Liberal Arts education is committed solely to enhancing the free exercise of the mind, enabling one to engage the foundations of thought so as to be free of prejudice, superstition, and dogma. These are the attributes required for successful black intellectual leadership—not likely to be acquired in a vocational curriculum—that black America needs. This insight has been recognized by Verharen (1993), who argued that as currently constituted, the HBCU curriculum does not offer enough liberating content for its students. The remedy is straightforward enough: HBCUs should design the curriculum in a way that unifies the social sciences, natural sciences, and the art and humanities in such a way that promotes critical reflection on the foundations of thought. Of course, this is a noble ideal, but if HBCUs fail to take seriously Verharen's proposal, they are merely initiating and perpetuating a new form of slavery on a substantial portion of black America—a well-paid and ultimately well-funeralized class of black professionals weaned on a vocational curriculum the renders them impotent with regard to sustaining the stake that black America has in liberal democracy and positive human freedom.

Other than securing the stakes that black America has in liberal democracy, there are apparently other returns that HBCUs could secure for its constituency by committing to a Liberal Arts curriculum. To the extent that the corporatization of the HBCU administrative culture demands relevance and job readiness of its graduates, some reflection ought to take place as to whether or not “many of the jobs that require a degree do not really require a college-level education” [Watts, 1989 p. 502], or even more soberly the fact that “one need never have read the *Iliad* to function competently as a manager at Macy’s” [Watts, 1989, p. 502]. In this context, Pryor and Schaffer (1997) utilizing data from the 1971-1995 Current Population Surveys, find that many college graduates find their way into high-school level jobs—only university graduates with high literacy skills have enjoyed a significant and increasing labor market return on their college education.<sup>9</sup> As literacy is the sine qua non of a Liberal Arts education, any arguments against value of intellectual cultivation for its own sake with regard to desirable labor market outcomes seem without merit. As for black Americans, the recent analysis of Affirmative Action in university admissions by Bowen and Bok (1998), suggests that being black does not mean one needs practical and useful vocational college training in order to secure a decent paying job in the labor market. For the black males who graduated from one of the 28 Liberal Arts and Research institutions in their sample, the average salary in 1995 dollars was \$85,000 in contrast to an average salary of approximately \$47,000 for black male college graduates who did not attend one of the colleges in their sample. Apparently, the labor market values a Liberal Arts education—even for black males.<sup>10</sup> Thus any defense by HBCUs of a thoroughgoing vocational

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<sup>9</sup>The authors define literacy as the ability to use skills in reading, interpreting documents, and carrying out quantitative calculations in real-life situations. The degree of functional literacy is measured through scores from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey. This test distinguishes three types of literacy. Prose literacy measures the knowledge and skills need to understand and use information from texts. Document literacy measures the ability to locate and use information. Quantitative literacy measures the knowledge and skills required to apply the operations of arithmetic, whenever relevant.

<sup>10</sup>It is important to note that with the exception of the four public universities in their sample (Miami University (Ohio), University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, and Pennsylvania State University), the majority of the sample (73%), consisted of private research universities and coeducational liberal arts colleges. It is typically the case at these type of

curriculum for its students not only corrupts the idea of a black university—it also ignores the extent to which the labor market values literacy and intellectual cultivation in college graduates.

### ***The Idea Of A Black University***

Ultimately, the idea of a black university must be based on the premise that the status of liberal democracy as an ongoing project is dependent upon an intellectually-cultivated class of individuals that can service the demands of an intellectual culture required by liberal democracy. Given black America's stake in liberal democracy, HBCUs should recognize how a vocational curriculum imperils this stake, and by emphasizing practical utility—disparages the fact that black Americans are a free people. A vocational education is fundamentally a slave's education. In this context, HBCUs ought to recognize its young students as free individuals, and if practical utility is a concern—and we all must ultimately work to feed ourselves—there is no reason why a professional education cannot be postponed until after the student has received a rigorous Liberal Arts education that will first enable him to know how to live as a free man. There is no fundamental reason one could fathom, as to why a 23 year old must be absolutely ready for a meaningful and well-paying job after receiving an undergraduate degree.<sup>11</sup>

What then can one conclude as to the idea of a black university? First, the current status quo—that is the fact that only two HBCUs have a Liberal Arts classification—is abominable. HBCUs have a special responsibility to enable black America in securing its stake in liberal democracy as an ongoing project. Securing this stake requires of individuals an ability to participate in and contribute to the intellectual culture required of

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institutions, a student does not have the option of majoring in a vocational discipline such as nursing, accounting, marketing, or business administration at the undergraduate level.

<sup>11</sup>It may be useful to recall the Socratic ideal, as articulated in *The Republic of Plato*. There, it is posited that in the ideal state, men are not ready for practical and useful training until they are at least 35 years of age.

a liberal democracy. Black Americans, like all citizens of the west, are heirs of a noble legacy—the Enlightenment—which culminated in liberal democracy. The typical HBCU, not being committed to a Liberal Arts education, undermines the required black intellectual culture necessary to sustain black America’s stake in liberal democracy. If HBCUs are serious about being of value to black America, then a wholesale dismantling of the current vocational emphasis in the curriculum needs to take place—making it available only to graduate students, if the institution can justify graduate education. Second, the idea of a black university implies that an HBCU undergraduate education ought to be solely committed to intellectual culture, and the curriculum should be geared toward providing students an immersion in intellectual culture—as thoroughgoing as possible. Finally, the idea of a black university means HBCUs should recognize that “the very distinction between learning free of interested motive and training for practical ends implies a recognition of high and low, a hierarchy of worth in matters intellectual” [Brann, 1999, p 161, Italics added]. An HBCU education ought to be valuable to the extent that it affords an opportunity for black students to learn for its own sake—without regard to any particular labor market outcome. To ignore this noble ideal is to risk several more generations of HBCU-trained accountants, management trainees, and engineers destined to labor as drones incapable of contributing to the intellectual culture necessary for black America to maintain its stake in liberal democracy—and this would undermine the freedom that black America has only recently won.

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