Muriel A. Howard officially took the helm as AASCU’s new president on August 1, 2009. Selected after a highly competitive national search, she comes to this next stage in her career from a successful tenure as president of Buffalo State College, State University of New York. Prior to accepting that position in 1996, Howard spent nearly 15 years in administration at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, capping her experience there as vice president for public service and urban affairs. She earned her bachelor’s degree at City University of New York’s Richmond College, and both a Master of Education and a Ph.D. at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Howard is the first African-American—and second woman—to lead one of the six presidentially based higher education associations in Washington, D.C.

Howard joins AASCU during a time of unprecedented challenges and opportunities. In June, she spoke about her background and her vision for AASCU in an interview with Public Purpose.

**As you leave Buffalo State, what accomplishments there make you most proud?**
Overall, my experience at Buffalo State College was a wonderful and rewarding opportunity for me professionally and personally. It was also a great opportunity not only to engage with students, faculty and staff, but also to learn from them.
I initially assumed my position as the interim president of the college. To then be selected as the permanent president was a special opportunity that allowed me to make a difference in the lives of others, especially our students. It has been the most rewarding and transforming experience of my career. I am very proud that I was able to inspire and lead a change effort at Buffalo State that resulted in a much more student-oriented and student-centered institution. I leave Buffalo State knowing that it is a wonderful learning community that is diverse, purposeful, engaged and vibrant.

In terms of specific accomplishments, I was able to work with the faculty and staff to implement a new general education program entitled, "Intellectual Foundations." The college is investing over $350 million in new capital construction projects, including the new $33 million Burchfield Penney Art Center, which was recently completed. Construction has begun on a new science and mathematics complex and a new residential hall, and will start on a new technology building in the spring. I was also pleased that I was able to increase the number of new faculty, including the college's first two endowed chairs. Last year, for example, we were able to add about 50 new faculty positions. The leadership programs and the equity and campus diversity initiatives that have been implemented for our students and also for emerging leaders on campus—both professional staff and faculty members—will bode Buffalo State College well in the future. Most of all, I am proud of the relationship I was able to develop with students.

How do you anticipate that your experiences at Buffalo State will inform your work as AASCU’s president?

Buffalo State is an excellent example of an urban AASCU institution. But it can best be described as a regional comprehensive public institution that draws rural as well as urban students from different intellectual and socioeconomic backgrounds. While it is a large institution, I was still able to develop a close working relationship with many of our students, which gave me a good understanding of the needs that they face today.

While at Buffalo State, I was involved in AASCU in many ways, including serving on the board and teaching in the New Presidents Academy. Those experiences helped me understand the current trends and signal issues that leaders of public higher education institutions are addressing today.

What factors motivated you to consider the AASCU presidency?

Having spent 13 years at Buffalo State College, I was fortunate to have been able to accomplish many things. I was at a point in my career where I believed that I was ready for a new challenge and was very much interested in an opportunity that would enable me to help more students. Leadership development and mentoring have always been of great interest to me and an important part of my own career development. AASCU offered an opportunity to continue this kind of work.

It has been my goal throughout my career to have an impact on students’ lives. AASCU provides a unique opportunity to be able to support and help over 400 institutions and the students they enroll by influencing and shaping policies that will enable students to have the best learning experiences possible.

As you take the helm at AASCU, what is your perspective on public higher education in general?

As the American and global economy becomes more competitive and knowledge-based, the role of public higher education will become more significant. I believe that everyone has the basic right to attend college and that public institutions should provide access to ensure that opportunities exist to exercise that basic right. There are and will continue to be difficult choices in providing sufficient opportunities for students in the future, but I think as an organization AASCU will be capable of and highly committed to working through the salient issues and barriers that offer challenges.
As an association we will continue to pool our knowledge base and disseminate information so that we benefit from the knowledge and experiences of all member institutions. I think going forward with technology will allow us to enhance cooperation and collaboration, given that resources may continue to be limited in the near future.

What do you hope AASCU can achieve under your leadership?

First of all, I think Deno Curris has done a tremendous job over the past decade and he has left AASCU in very good stead. I believe AASCU has focused on the right issues and has been responsive in a timely way. I plan to build on the strong foundation that Deno has left at AASCU.

As we continue to mature and aspire to become one of the nation’s top organizations, the long list of issues that colleges and universities will have to address is growing. Whether the issues are institutional, economic, academic or policy oriented, I believe AASCU is positioned to deal with such challenges. Hence, in looking at those challenges, my goal is to ensure that future policies and funding services can assist colleges and universities to determine ways not to leave students behind as they make difficult choices. I hope I can help support important professional development leadership initiatives and curriculum efforts that strengthen our leaders and their institutions. I also hope to be able to take on a greater role in teacher education, which is critical and central to the future of all higher education.

I plan to have as much dialogue as possible with the AASCU membership to receive feedback about their priorities and concerns. Because higher education is so dynamic now and changing quite quickly, I think it is time for us to examine members’ views and priorities. For example, how can we help members respond to the issues that they face? How can we get information to them more efficiently? I’m interested in looking at how we can best deploy technology to communicate, share information, gather data, shape policy and influence what’s best for our students.

How can AASCU best make the case for public higher education?

More and more Americans comprehend the signal role that public higher education will play in the future development of our society and throughout the world. I believe AASCU must take the lead in telling the story of its member institutions. AASCU and its members certainly impact and transform the lives of thousands upon thousands of students and families year after year. As our ability to be transparent and responsive continues to evolve, more focus and clarity will be important as we seek to maximize our opportunities to garner greater support for public higher education.

From intensive economic development to educating local citizens to providing cultural opportunities, AASCU colleges and universities make indispensable contributions to their communities. We must ensure that such opportunities remain available to all.

What do you hope to accomplish in your first months or perhaps year as AASCU’s president?

I expect to be able to respond to any current national issues and policies that will impact AASCU institutions, but I will also be spending a good amount of time listening and learning from member institutions. I care very much about the many challenges they are facing and I am sure that I will be energized by the many successes they are having in providing access, diversity and excellent learning opportunities for students.

I am excited about the opportunity to meet and engage with various individuals, organizations and agency leaders that can assist AASCU institutions in providing greater support and services for students. I am humbled by this opportunity, and I am looking forward to working with my colleagues to make a difference for the students that we serve.

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