



This article is adapted from President Burnim's lecture at AASCU's 2016 Annual Meeting in Miami, Florida. A tradition at the AASCU Annual Meeting for more than 30 years, the President-to-Presidents lecture is a signal honor bestowed by the AASCU Board of Directors on one of their colleagues.

# *The* Challenge of Presidential Leadership

by Mickey L. Burnim

**T**hanks to my colleague and friend Jerry Farley for the introduction. Congratulations to Distinguished Alumna Dr. Doris Taylor and to Muriel Howard on her excellent leadership of AASCU. My compliments to Steve Jordan on a fine job this year as chairman of the board. Thanks to the AASCU board for granting me this very high honor.

LaVera [my spouse] and I have been active in AASCU for at least 20 years now. The association has been wonderfully supportive to both of us as we have worked to lead two different AASCU institutions. The annual meetings have consistently provided relevant themes and sessions that have been food for thought, and opportunities for engaging discussions about the roles of the president or chancellor, and the spouse or partner, and strategies for dealing with many of the common problems/opportunities that we have faced. The summer meetings have been relaxing respites for unwinding and recharging, and enjoying the fellowship of colleagues and friends while beginning to formulate plans for the ensuing academic year. One way that I have described the AASCU meetings is that they are “venues for comfortable commiseration,” and opportunities to learn from colleagues—both formally and informally.

AASCU institutions have been a very important part of my personal and professional life. My parents met at one, and I graduated from one! They serve large proportions of first generation college students, have improved the economic well being of individuals and families, and in doing so, have helped to strengthen our social fabric. These institutions work to improve access and inclusion for all; put our students first; foster innovation; support our leaders; and hold ourselves accountable in doing all of this. I am thankful and proud of my association with AASCU institutions and with this organization.



This year is one of transition for me, and therefore, cause for reflection on my 40-plus years in higher education. I am retiring from the presidency at the end of June. It has been a wonderful journey [that] has afforded me the opportunity to make a real difference while interacting with students and seeing them grow and develop into aware, conscientious and contributing citizens. My goal today is to encourage you *and* to challenge you! I have taken literary license this afternoon in saying that I will talk about “the” challenge of presidential leadership. We all know that there are many challenges, and they seem to be multiplying by the day.

The challenge of presidential leadership can be emphasized by using my two hands. On the one hand, we must strive to continue to be the best of who we are as AASCU institutions. We provide access to quality higher education programs to a very broad segment of the population. We have “a historic commitment to underserved populations.” We are also protectors and promoters of understanding for, and appreciation of, the “public purpose of higher education.” And we serve as stewards of place. Our institutions establish linkages to our communities and the world at large so as “to function as learners as well as teachers in tackling the myriad opportunities and issues facing our communities and regions.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, we must strive to transform our institutions to serve the needs of tomorrow. This is increasingly difficult because of a number of factors, including the following:

- Forces of disruption in higher education—primarily online education and the move toward competency-based evaluation of learning;
- Changing demographics (*The Chronicle’s* piece “The College of 2020: Students” noted, “At some point, probably just after 2020, minority students will outnumber whites on college campuses for the first time.”<sup>2</sup>); and
- The changing higher education marketplace (That same article reported, “The rest of colleges—regional public universities, small liberal arts colleges, and private universities without national followings—can expect to compete for students based on price, convenience, and

the perceived strengths of the institutions. They will need to constantly ask themselves ‘What is college?’ and be constantly rethinking the answer if they want students to attend.”<sup>3</sup>).

The emphasis on inclusion is the right thing to do, but that has costs also! Listen to this quote: “The continuing diversification of the college-going population will put pressure on many aspects of postsecondary education to adapt. Colleges will have to pay more attention to what factors will allow members of different ethnic groups to succeed, especially because the fastest-growing group (Hispanics) has historically low rates of college attendance.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, our efforts to diversify our institutions include faculty and staff also. Likewise, we need to address campus gender proportions and LGBTQ issues. Another factor is the continuing need to make sure that our curricula are relevant and up to date. We must offer what our students and prospective students are demanding! Jeffrey Selingo’s piece in the April 13, 2016 issue of *The Chronicle* makes a very persuasive case for the need for redesigning the baccalaureate degree.<sup>5</sup> Selingo states: “The most valuable of those degrees will provide a mix of academic disciplines interwoven with workplace experiences and hands-on projects.”<sup>6</sup>

Any one of these challenging factors could serve as a formidable lead goal for today’s president or chancellor! All are worthy, and the prudent leader cannot afford to neglect any of them. The challenge that I want to focus on for a few minutes today, however, is one of very longstanding and seeming intractability. It derives directly from the AASCU value of “access and inclusion” and is very obviously related to the changing demographics in our society and our universities. And that is the issue of race.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W. E. B. DuBois wrote, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Most of you old enough to remember the 1960s know from those memories that DuBois had certainly been right. The “color line” can be thought of as a metaphor for what we broadly refer to as the challenge of “diversity and inclusion” today. Having already acknowledged that diversity and

# WE WANT THIS EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRACY TO SUCCEED [...].

inclusion are broader than race, I submit that the problem of the color line is still very much with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! The evidence is all around us. Consider the following:

- During his initial campaign for president, then candidate Obama was forced into a position where he felt he had to renounce his former pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a black man, because of a statement made years earlier in one of his sermons that some people perceived as being racist;
- Shootings of unarmed black men by police officers, or in one case, a vigilante;
- Traffic stops for being black while driving;
- The arrest of preeminent scholar Henry Louis Gates after forcing open a stuck door to enter his own home and being reported as a possible burglar; and
- The slogan used by one of the presidential campaigns—“Make America Great Again”—which is widely interpreted to be code for returning to some of the bigotry and “white privilege” of the past.

These are but examples of a significant divide in our society—largely, but not exclusively, along racial lines. Yes, the color line is *still* a problem for America. A recent *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found that almost two-thirds (63 percent) of all Americans think race relations are bad. Racism is indeed a persistent problem in America. And the October 14 issue of *The Chronicle* reminds us of the problems of racism found on some of our college campuses around the country.<sup>7</sup> The most recent issue reports on the initiation of a Twitter campaign by an African-American graduate student at Northwestern University to give academics a vehicle for sharing examples of racism in the academy. He was surprised at the welcome reception that it received from so many black students and professors.

Some aspects of this societal problem are manifested in economic terms. Look at the economic reality faced by our nation today: 2015 Census Bureau data show that median household income for blacks is only 58 percent of that for whites, and for Hispanics, 72 percent of that for whites.<sup>8</sup> The poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites is 9.1 percent; for African Americans, it is 24.1 percent; and

for Hispanics, it is 21.4 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Colleagues, I believe that there is not a more important issue facing the United States today! How we deal with this matter has implications beyond that of simple justice for peoples of color. We are in a 240-year experiment in representative democracy. It is not guaranteed to succeed. In fact, world history has many examples of societies that once flourished but no longer exist. The Roman Empire, for example, lasted about 700 years. More recently, the Soviet Union only lasted 64 years. Alexis de Tocqueville, 19<sup>th</sup> century French political analyst and commentator, wrote the following: “General prosperity is favorable to the stability of all governments, but more particularly of a democratic one, which depends upon the will of the majority, and especially upon the will of that portion of the community which is most exposed to want. When the people rule, they must be rendered happy or they will overturn the state . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Colleagues, we all have a vested interest in helping our nation to solve this problem of the color line! And, you, as presidents and chancellors, and spouses and partners, are in positions where you can, and I would argue, “must” make a difference! We want this experiment in democracy to succeed, and the world needs a strong example of how to deal with differences among peoples in positive and constructive ways. Obviously, access to higher education programs and student outcomes is more important than ever. And I know that even as we grapple with being more inclusive, and improving student retention and graduation rates, there are obstacles.

You are in an ideal position to have significant impact! The job of higher education leadership is tougher than ever, but you are the right people to accept the challenge at this time. Use your influence and your power to develop more critical thinkers who know something about service for the common good and human behavior. Our challenge is to lead our institutions through these changes, as the job of leading becomes ever more difficult! In this era of social media, rumors and reports of negative incidents move with lightning speed, making it very hard to provide carefully considered, fact-based responses. Deep-seated and long-standing social divisions and tensions, like those of personal distribution of income inequities, that

give rise to expressions of discontent with the “top one percent” inevitably find their way into campus discussions and issues.

What’s a thoughtful, well-meaning president or chancellor to do? Keep on doing what you do—embracing with enthusiasm the privilege of guiding your institution through real constructive change! A poignant front-page story in *The Washington Post* on October 16 illustrates the impact that a challenging and broadening educational experience can make. Written by Eli Saslow and titled, “The White Flight of Derek Black,” it is a story about a rising star in the white nationalist movement, Derek Black, the son of Don Black, a former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard, and the godson of David Duke. He attended the New College of Florida, and through that educational experience, was transformed from “the leading light” of the white nationalist movement to a position of “disaffiliation” wherein he is quoted as having said in a communique to the Southern Poverty Law Center: “The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, to people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I am sorry for the damage done.” My brother and sister presidents and chancellors, when we pursue our missions with enthusiasm, integrity and focus, we *can* make a difference! I encourage you to do the following:

- Take full advantage of your leadership platform. This is both an opportunity and an obligation!
- Model the way of open-minded inclusion and appreciation of the value of diversity.
- Insist that your campus academic leaders and faculty update their programs and courses to represent well the complete and rich history of our nation and the world.
- Emphasize the importance of all people developing good critical-thinking skills. (The need for people to know how to frame questions, collect and analyze data, draw conclusions and take the appropriate actions) has never been greater for our country than right now during this presidential election season!)
- Work to make your campus one populated by culturally competent<sup>11</sup> people, those who have come to grips with the fact that we all have implicit biases, and challenge your leadership team to design and create experiences for all campus constituencies that help move them towards this realization. (Implicit bias refers to the “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.” Implicit biases are pervasive; everyone has them. The effect of racism is so pernicious that about half of African-Americans who take the Implicit Association Test (IAT) have an automatic preference for white over black.)
- Call on MLI for leadership team prospects.
- Take full advantage of the resources available to you—

particularly, your faculty and staff. Call on your campus experts for advice and guidance.

In conclusion, the challenge of presidential leadership is to commit to make a meaningful contribution to a critical problem of our time. I implore you to use your position and the resources at your disposal to dismantle the vestiges of racism and broaden the opportunities for full participation and prosperity for all people! You are up to the task. The issue of the color line is broad and deep, but we must solve it, and you are in a wonderful position to make a difference. *Know that*, and resolve to do so! I bid you Godspeed!

Thank you. **P**

---

Mickey L. Burnim is president of Bowie State University, (Md.)

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>AASCU Task Force on Public Engagement. *Stepping Forward As Stewards of Place*. AASCU, Washington, D.C., 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Van Der Werf and Grant Sabatier. *The College of 2020: Students*. Chronicle Research Services, Washington, D.C., 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Jeffrey Selingo. “Rebuilding the Bachelor’s Degree.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 April 2016.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>“When Racism Reappears, How Can a Campus Show It Has Made Any Gains?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. LXIII, no. 7, 6 Oct. 2016.

<sup>8</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015.” Current Population Reports, Income and Earnings Summary Measures by Selected Characteristics. 2014 and 2015, table 1. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.pdf>. Accessed 20 Oct. 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics. 2014 and 2015, table 3.

<sup>10</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Book 1, chapter 17, 372, (first published in 1835).

<sup>11</sup>Terry L. Cross, et al. *Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care: A Monograph on Effective Services for Minority Children Who Are Severely Emotionally Disturbed*, volume 1. Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center, Washington, D.C., 1989.