

Muriel A. Howard

*As she steps down
as president,
Dr. Muriel A.
Howard reflects
on her experiences
leading AASCU.*

Conducted for *Public Purpose* by Stephen G. Pelletier

In July 2017, AASCU President Muriel A. Howard announced that she would retire in 2018. Dr. Howard was named president of AASCU in April 2009. She was the first African-American to lead one of the six presidentially-based higher education associations in Washington, D.C., and was AASCU's first female president. As AASCU's leader, Howard was an avid advocate for public higher education at the national level. She worked to influence federal policy and regulations, consulted regularly with individual presidents and chancellors, developed collaborative partnerships and initiatives to advance public higher education, and helped design and deliver professional development programming to help current and prospective leaders of public colleges and universities hone their leadership skills.

Writing to inform the AASCU Board of Directors about the transition, then-Board Chair Deborah F. Stanley, president of the State University of New York at Oswego, noted, "During her tenure as president, Dr. Howard provided both exemplary leadership to AASCU, as well as expert guidance and support to our members. Her advocacy on behalf of state colleges and universities has forged a positive path during difficult fiscal and political environments." Stanley further observed that Howard "will leave a significant legacy in expanding the understanding of our mission through Opportunities for All, and for engaging our members' voices in the grand challenges of our time: immigration policy, environmental and climate concerns, and diversity, equity and inclusion."

Prior to her appointment at AASCU, Howard served from 1996 to 2009 as president of Buffalo State College, State University of New York, where she led a campus of more than 11,000 students, approximately 1,700 faculty and staff, and a financial operation of more than \$214 million.

Howard started her transition to retirement on January 5, 2018 and began a sabbatical leave that will conclude on July 31, 2018, when she will formally retire. Speaking with Howard in late December 2017, we asked her to reflect on her time as president of AASCU.¹



*Muriel Howard at a retirement
celebration in her honor,
December 15, 2017.*

Looking back over your time at AASCU, what would you count as some of your best accomplishments? And are there some goals that you had aspired to that you were not able to accomplish?

I am proud of our work on student success. Being student focused is a hallmark of AASCU institutions, so it makes sense that we as an association initiate programs and support policies that are student-centered. We've been fortunate to secure funding for these initiatives that we could share with our members to help them focus on the programmatic changes required to address student success. Historically AASCU has supported our members' efforts to put students at the heart of their institutions, which is why our work in student success has been so important.

I'm very pleased that our civic engagement agenda has remained a priority. The importance of such an agenda has become more apparent this past year. AASCU's non-partisan American Democracy Project began 15 years ago to ensure that our students understood the importance of civic engagement, had the knowledge and skills to be effective, and to understand that as citizens they have an obligation to serve society in this way. I expect AASCU will expand and offer an even more robust support platform for campuses.

I was gratified that AASCU, working with our members, was able to introduce the national branding and messaging campaign, Opportunities for All. It is crucial that the mission of our state colleges and universities and what makes them distinctive is understood by both the public and by opinion leaders. This is a long-term project with important consequences; I am pleased to have led its launch.

The work we've done to raise visibility around the policy issue of state disinvestment in higher education has been important but, unfortunately, we were not able to meet our goal. From a policy standpoint, we came very close to seeing a meaningful and valuable policy emerge. With the outcome of the 2016 election we lost the ability to encourage the federal government to form a partnership with states to reinvest in public higher education. Had we had been successful, I think state colleges and universities today would be in a better position to help students (especially adults who have lost work and jobs) pursue new opportunities

to support their families. Regardless of the outcome, raising this issue and keeping it on the agenda must be a constant for public higher education. I believe this is especially important given what we are hearing and reading about the lack of public trust in higher education, as well as the questioning of its value.

AASCU did ground breaking work on sexual assault. Our campuses have addressed this issue for years, long before it garnered the national spotlight. But through our work with our campuses and our partners, we brought more awareness, knowledge and research to the issue. We strengthened foundational knowledge and supported effective policies and practices in addressing sexual assault. The expectations of our students and society were for us to do a better job and I believe we have.

As a university president, you had a reputation for putting students first, and you've advocated for access to education and educational opportunity throughout your career. How has that philosophy informed your work at AASCU?

The principle of putting students first guides our work every day at AASCU. As a matter of fact, my first conversation this morning was with [AASCU Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change] George Mehaffy, who was talking about his experience speaking at a graduation ceremony this past Friday in Wisconsin. He mentioned that he had had lunch with five students who were just taking the world by storm in terms of their academic performance and world view. Both of us commented about how special it is to be able to be with students and share in their intellectual challenges and observations.

That's where our inspiration comes from at AASCU: the students. All of our work at AASCU—the policy decisions that we have focused on, the initiatives we have pursued, the leadership development programs we have conducted, and indeed across our programming—has always been about students. They are the main reason that we do what we do.

I believe strongly that if you think about students first, you'll make the right decisions. The work you do will make a difference in their lives. Any success I had as a university president and as president of AASCU was rooted in that philosophy.



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¹ Mildred Garcia assumed the presidency of AASCU in January, 2018. We will interview Dr. Garcia in the next edition of Public Purpose.

Looking at the sector of public higher education writ large, what are some of the most notable trends or developments that you have seen during your time as president of AASCU?

Clearly the pace of change, especially during this past decade. Change has come a lot faster and it hasn't been relegated to a single issue. It's been across the spectrum of work in the academy.

For example, competition has increased and it has changed the way we approach teaching, learning and research. Technology continues to be a driving force and, while it helps us, it also contributes to the increased pace of change. The way our universities employ contingent faculty has changed. They used to be seen as a temporary way to supplement instruction or as a means to garner expertise you might not have at your institution. Now contingent faculty have become a permanent and very important part of the teaching personnel at our colleges and universities. That means that we have to give contingent faculty more support and attention in areas like professional development.

Demographics will continue to be one of the biggest changes we'll see in the future. In terms of the gender of students, women are certainly outpacing men in enrollment in higher education, but we're also going to see demographic shifts in ethnicity and race. That has already begun and can be seen in the students who are currently making their way through the Pre-K-12 pipeline. I would say the biggest changes we're going to see in the future are going to be around ethnic and race demographics.

What other trends do you expect will continue to be important in the future—on the policy front, for example?

Student debt is a concern for all of us in public higher education. By and large, student debt for those attending a public institution isn't as burdensome as it has been for students in other sectors, but it still blocks access; the lack of access means an impediment to student success. We need more financial aid, and it needs to be easily accessible. Work is going on now in the context of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that we hope will contribute to making it easier for students to access financial aid. I believe the financial aid issue will remain very important, especially in the context of its role vis-à-vis access to higher education.

In an era when higher education has come under heightened scrutiny from the federal government, states, and perhaps the public in general, how can the academy and particularly public institutions maintain or perhaps regain the public's confidence and trust in public colleges and universities?

Speaking about AASCU institutions, I would say engagement. Historically our institutions have been engaged with their regions and their communities. Colleges and universities in the public sector should be strongly committed to serving their communities. The expertise of their faculty

and staff should be used to benefit their communities and regions. Our institutions must continue to be a key driver of local economic development and to partner with K-12 to improve schools as well as the pipeline to higher education. Being an integral part of the fabric of their communities, and being viewed as a part of that fabric, will help foster partnerships and build confidence. This, in turn, will affect how we are viewed and valued.

Finally, what plans do you have for retirement and life after AASCU?

My husband and I are looking forward to spending time with our 17 grandchildren and, as of this past week, our nine great grandchildren. They're just growing so fast, so we want to spend more time with them. We're also going to work on our golf games. I also hope to be involved in some selected engagement in higher education initiatives, where I feel I can make a difference. I enjoy mentoring young people who want to go into or advance in a leadership role within the academy. I'm hoping I can strike a balance by focusing on these three themes. **P**

