

## Equality under the law

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to examine how Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU) implemented the negotiated ruling of the *Ayers* desegregation lawsuit and settlement to empower the institution and similarly situated historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The spoken and written words of three administrators of the MVSU Executive Council identified MVSU's need to increase enrollment, increase freshman retention rates and achieve student diversity. MVSU's ability to achieve student, programmatic and funding diversity after the *Ayers* settlement can be explained by the interest convergence principle of Critical Race Theory.

Keywords: *Ayers* case, desegregation lawsuit, United States v. Fordice, Mississippi Valley State University, Critical Race Theory



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## **EQUALITY UNDER THE LAW: IMPLEMENTING THE AYERS SETTLEMENT**

Historically black colleges and universities were created to educate the masses of African Americans emancipated after the Civil War (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). States that either admitted blacks into existing universities or created colleges for blacks were granted access to federal funds under the Second Morrill Act (1890). This act in conjunction with the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling (1896) codified and reinforced the “separate but equal” principle in federal law. Since 1970, the percentage of African Americans enrolling in college has steadily increased (Harley, 2001) while the numbers of African Americans students attending HBCUs has dropped (Brown, 2013). Currently, a higher percentage of African Americans attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs) than HBCUs, but the converse is not true. Whites are not attending historically black colleges and universities in large numbers (Nichols, 2004).

In 1975, Jake Ayers filed a lawsuit against the state of Mississippi, the Commissioner of Higher Education, The Board of Trustees for the State Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), and presidents of predominantly white institutions in the state for maintaining a dual system of higher education based on race in violation of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001; Muhammad, 2009; Williams, 2005). The plaintiffs requested an equitable distribution of financial support in the Mississippi higher education system and the dismantling of policies traceable to de jure segregation. In addition, plaintiffs wanted issues of faculty and staff employment, governance on the Board of Trustees, accreditation, and institutional mission designations addressed by the litigation (Muhammad, 2009). The case concluded in the landmark case *U.S. v. Fordice* (1992) before the U.S. Supreme Court. The high court held that Mississippi’s system of higher education had policies traceable to de jure segregation without sound educational justification and that these policies be eliminated. Upon remand, the Court required the State to look at admissions standards, program duplication, institutional mission and the number of institutions. A settlement agreement in the case was reached in 2001 which was accepted by the court in 2002. After unsuccessful appeals to the Fifth Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court in 2004, the Settlement brought an end to the 29-year-old higher education discrimination lawsuit (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001; Muhammad, 2009).

Administrators at historically black colleges and universities have implemented recruitment strategies to attract white students and faculty to their campuses. While all three public historically black colleges and universities in Mississippi have been charged with increasing student diversity on their campuses (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001), this study will attempt to address how one public four-year historically black university, Mississippi Valley State University, addressed the demands of the Ayers case in the day-to-day operations of the administrators of the institution.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

With the issues facing historically black colleges and universities at this point in history, HBCUs are at a “crossroads” (Brown, 2013). Strong presidential leadership is necessary to lead HBCUs during the economic crisis, which resulted in rising tuition for students and greater need for universities to increase and sustain enrollment and diversity in the student body and faculty. Diversity of the student body, namely recruiting non-African American students, is expressly stated in the Ayers Settlement Agreement in order for Alcorn State, Jackson State and Mississippi Valley State, the three public HBCUs in Mississippi, to receive their portion of the

monetary remedy for past desegregation. A discussion of the presidential leadership and diversity at HBCUs will be followed by an explanation of Ayers the settlement agreement, the history of Mississippi Valley State University and the theoretical framework for this study: Critical Race Theory.

## **PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP AT HBCUS**

Scholarship on black college presidents consists of depictions by supporters and critics or an analysis of their treatment in scholarly literature (Gasman, 2011). Administrators at HBCUs must justify their relevance in higher education to combat the negative public perception directed toward their institutions (Brown, 2013). Negative connotations of Black college presidents have occurred in fiction writings, studies of white scholars, and writings of black thinkers (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom & Bowman, 2010; Gasman, 2011). Recently, Jason Riley (2010) and Richard Vedder (2010) concluded that HBCUs had outdated missions. June (2003) even suggested that HBCUs are “endangered institutions” on the verge of extinction. Not only do these works influence the way HBCUs are perceived, but they erode the public trust and confidence in black college leaders and place the academic standards, academic freedom and fiscal responsibility of HBCUs under harsher scrutiny. These views, based at times in racist and Jim Crow mentalities, have made it difficult for leaders of HBCUs to perform their duties, protect their students and maintain integrity of the institution (Donahoo & Lee, 2008; Gasman, 2007; Gasman, 2011).

However, a broad-based attack on the media and critics is not totally unfounded. Historically black colleges and universities must offer a more nuanced perspective to combat the perception of the general public, media, policymakers and scholars. The struggles of HBCUs must be placed in a historic context. Since the Civil War, presidents of HBCUs have struggled with unprepared students, students from low-income families who are unable to pay the rising cost of tuition (Nichols, 2004), inadequate management and ineffective leadership (Nichols, 2004; Young, 2008), a legacy of conservative leadership (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010), limited and insufficient financial resources and stability (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010; Nichols, 2004; Young, 2008), underfunding (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010; Jewell, 2002), low endowments (Nichols, 2004), competition for students and faculty members from other institutions (Hatton, 2012; Nichols, 2004), an alumni base with not much wealth (Nichols, 2004), and shared governance issues (Young, 2008). Accreditation standards, retention rates and fiscal policy are challenges that threaten the survival of some HBCUs (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico & Schmid 2007; Hatton, 2012).

The success of an HBCU is largely determined by the work and influence of presidents and the administrative team and the faculty. By strengthening their networks, HBCU presidents can succeed with visionary leadership and committed faculties and support (Hatton, 2012). In a case study of three HBCUs, Wagener and Smith (1993) found that HBCUs must build upon their strengths. Public HBCU presidents must take the opportunity to envision new goals for the institution, its culture and graduates and capture the moment in a vision statement (Hatton, 2012). Second, HBCUs need bold leadership (Wagener & Smith, 1993). Presidents must lead and the Board must govern. Both the president and the Board must be willing to work together and set policy on behalf of the institution (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010). Third, presidents must be aware of the relationship between long-term academic health and fiscal stability (Wagener & Smith, 1993). The success of a president depends almost entirely on having a strong, competent,

highly respected fiscal officer with excellence in financial accountability and reporting (Hatton, 2012). Fourth, presidents must engage faculty and staff in providing leadership for the institution (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010; Wagener & Smith, 1993).

Former and current HBCU presidents, trustees and other leaders agreed that presidents of HBCUs must firmly understand the academic enterprise, management, finances, personnel administration, information systems and planning (Foster, 1987). State college presidents must be engaged in federal and state government policy making to ensure policies are beneficial and not detrimental to their institutions. College leaders must communicate effectively with faculty, students, administrative staff, support staff, community organizations, alumni, friends, and other interested parties (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010; Nichols, 2004).

## **DIVERSITY AT HBCUS**

In the discussion of diversity in higher education, HBCUs are largely ignored and do not receive credit for the diversity they have (Brown & Ricard, 2007). Diversity exists among the types of HBCUs, the student body and faculty. Historically black colleges and universities are extremely diverse and range from public to private, large to small, religious to nonsectarian, selective to open enrollment. Fewer than half are private and fewer are two-year associate-degree granting institutions (Ezell & Schexnider, 2010). Yet HBCUs are discussed as if they were a single, similar group based on their historical racial makeup.

HBCUs have been mistakenly perceived as race-exclusive institutions that only serve African-American students. While they were initially created for the education of African Americans, HBCUs were inclusive to all who sought higher education and did not prohibit the participation of any group (Brown & Ricard, 2007; Muhammad, 2009). HBCUs are challenged to increase minority enrollment of white students, strengthen and maintain institutional quality, and clarify the unique function of the historically Black college and/or university (Hall & Closson, 2005).

The diversity movement gained traction as the result of state and government mandates (Closson & Henry, 2008). In the state of Mississippi, historically black universities in Mississippi were ordered by the courts to improve racial balance and increase non-Black enrollment to 10 percent (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001; Closson & Henry, 2008; Harley, 2001; Muhammad, 2009). Since the mid-1970s, there has been a 65 percent increase in white students at HBCUs, from 20,000 to nearly 34,000 (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick & Tudico, 2007). The number of white undergraduates enrolling in HBCUs increased by 10,000 students between 1980 and 1990 and peaked at 35,963 in 1995 (Gasman et al., 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Gasman (2009) stated that 8 percent of the student body at HBCUs is white, 2 percent is Latino and 1 percent is Asian.

Diversity is not limited to the student body, but also includes faculty, staff and administration (Brown & Ricard, 2007). HBCUs are more racially diverse than PWIs (Foster, Guyden, & Miller, 1999; Slater, 1993). Slater (1993) has observed that the “only significant diversity in academic ranks in this country exists in Black colleges and universities” (p. 67). According to Gasman (2009), faculty at public and private HBCUs is about 60 percent African American, African and African Caribbean, 30 percent White and 10 percent Latino and Asian.

White participation among HBCU faculty is related to its origins and social movements to educate Blacks (Closson & Henry, 2008; Foster, 2001). Jewel (2002) states that HBCUs were diverse from their inception. From 1865-1877, African Americans recognized poor Whites as

victims of the social order and pushed for a system that supported universal education in the South, making no distinction with regard to class, gender and race. White northerners affiliated with religious denominations, relief agencies or missionary societies came to establish staff and schools for African Americans (Jewel, 2002). In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, white philanthropists participated in planning, mission, structure, and employment patterns at HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2010). The majority of administrators and faculty at HBCUs was white idealistic missionaries who were assisted by a nominal group of Blacks who had been educated in the North (Foster, 2001). In the mid-1920s, white faculty had a noticeable presence at HBCUs. Between the 1940s and 1950s, HBCUs provided academic refuge to Jewish white scholars who had fled to the United States to escape persecution and the tyranny of oppressive regimes and restrictions in Europe (Gasman et al., 2010; Foster, 2001; Jewell, 2002). During the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, faculty diversity at both private and public Black colleges was enhanced by the presence of young, liberal, and idealistic White faculty who had participated in many of the activities of the movement for equal rights, particularly in the area of educational access and opportunity (Foster, 2001; Jewell, 2002). In contemporary times, White faculty have been increasingly attracted to Black colleges and universities because these institutions are among the few higher education institutions where opportunities for academic employment remain open and viable amid shrinking full-time and tenure-track professorial ranks at PWIs (Foster, 2001).

#### **AYERS SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT**

The Ayers settlement provided funds for student financial assistance, academic programs, public and private endowment, and capital improvements at the Alcorn State University, Jackson State University, and Mississippi Valley State University. First, the settlement provided a total of \$6.25 million for financial assistance to students attending summer development programs at all eight public four-year institutions in Mississippi (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001; Gasman et al., 2007; Muhammad, 2009; Williams, 2005). Second, new academic programs and enhancements were funded in the amounts of \$16.946 million (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001). Third, the State of Mississippi agreed to fund a public endowment in the amount of \$55 million and a private endowment of \$35 million for the three public HBCUs (Alcorn State University, Jackson State University and Mississippi Valley State University). Alcorn State University and Mississippi Valley State University were to be allocated 28.3 percent of the funds and Jackson State University was allocated 43.4 percent of the funds to be used for “other-race marketing and recruitment, including employment of other-race recruiting personnel and award of other race scholarships” and new academic programs and enhancements (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001, pp. 9-10). Both endowments remain under the control of the IHL until the HBCU “attains a total headcount of other-race enrollment of 10% and sustains such a 10% other-race enrollment for a period of three consecutive years” (p. 10). At such time the IHL will transfer the pro rata share of the existing principal to the endowment to the university. Fourth, capital improvements at the three institutions were not to exceed \$75 million. The total funding amount for the settlement was \$503.236 million (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001; Joint Legislative Committee, 2009; Williams, 2005). After the appeals of the plaintiffs were exhausted, the allocation of funds to Alcorn State, Jackson State and Mississippi Valley State began (Joint Legislative Committee, 2009).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed by legal scholars and activists. Critical Race Theory is the dialectical engagement of Critical Legal Studies and liberal race discourse (Crenshaw, 2002). It challenges claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy in society (Gasman & Hilton, 2010) and questions the foundations of liberal order (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theorists believe that liberalism did not go far enough or move fast enough to serve as a catalyst for change in America (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical race theorists seek to change and transform society, which is organized along racial lines and hierarchies, for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Five basic tenets of critical race theory are: ordinariness, interest convergence or material determinism, social construction, differential racialization of minorities, and unique voice of color. First, racism is an ordinary and permanent part of American society. It is so embedded into fabric of our social order that it is difficult to address and cure (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Second, whites have little reason to eliminate racism because elite whites benefit from it structurally and working class whites benefit psychically, thus advancing the interests of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Interest convergence is the belief that equality of blacks will be accommodated when it converges with the interest of middle- and upper-class whites (Gasman & Hilton, 2010). Third, racial categories are not based on a biological or genetic reality, but are the products of societal thoughts and relations which can be invented, manipulated or retired when convenient. Fourth, the dominant society names minorities in response to shifting needs. In a similar manner, whiteness is seen as a property which can be possessed and transferred, thereby attributing status to those who possess it (Gasman & Hilton, 2010). In addition each “race” has its own origins and ever evolving history. The principles of intersectionality and anti-essentialism state that individuals belong to more than one single group, which results in conflicting and overlapping identities. As a result, race and racism should be placed in contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods (Gasman & Hilton, 2010). Fifth, the minority status of voices of color can speak differently about race because they have different histories and experiences with oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT asserts that experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate and integral in analyzing and understanding racial inequality (Gasman & Hilton, 2010). Critical Race Theorists allow marginalized groups and minorities to name their own reality and dispel the myths and inaccurate narratives regarding them in the dominant culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Therefore, the purpose of this critical race case study is to examine how Mississippi Valley State University implemented and negotiated the ruling of the Ayers case discrimination lawsuit. This research project examined the following research questions: (1) How has past history affected the current reality Mississippi Valley State University faces today? (2) How does MVSU plan to diversify its student body, faculty, academic programs, and revenue streams? (3) How do personal experiences inform the decisions administrators make regarding the future of Mississippi Valley State University?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This research study employed a qualitative research methodology called a case study, which is “both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of the inquiry” (Stake, 2003, p. 121). In a case study, a researcher collects detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time to explore an activity, event, program, process or one or more individuals in depth (Stake, 2003). This case study provides insight into public higher education in Mississippi and recreates a narrative or counter-narrative based on the experiences of one HBCU. In order to adhere to the principle of triangulation, non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews based on narrative inquiry and artifact analysis of various documents were utilized. Additional details on the observations made and documents reviewed are in the data collection section.

Narrative inquiry is a way of organizing one’s knowledge and experience (Hendry, 2010). Narratives offer emancipator potential for formerly silenced voices (Blumenreich, 2004) and provide an opportunity for marginalized individuals to rediscover their voice (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000; Wellin, 2007). A number of things occur during this narrative process: (1) Individuals understand “their experience in the context of their everyday lives while simultaneously looking to the wider social/cultural resources on which people draw to help them make sense of their lives” (McCormack, 2004, p. 220). (2) People understand the meanings and constraints of social roles and transitions shaped by class, race, and gender (Wellin, 2007). (3) Understanding of the experience is constructed, reconstructed, and given structure. (4) Differences between cultural backgrounds of the listener and the speaker are illuminated (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000).

### **Setting**

Mississippi Valley State University, located in Itta Bena, Mississippi, was created by the Mississippi Legislature in 1946 authorized the establishment of Mississippi Vocational College for the purpose of providing vocational training and training teachers for rural and elementary schools. James Herbert White, the first president of MVSU, was a well-known and accomplished fundraiser, was charged with building the institution from the ground (MVSU, 2010). In the summer of 1950, the college opened with 205 in-service teachers. The College provided Extension Services and offered a bachelor’s of science degree in 14 areas. In 1964, the College was authorized to offer the liberal arts degree as well as education and science degrees. The name of the institution was changed to Mississippi Valley State College in 1971 (MVSU, n.d.). The institution was granted university status in 1974 (HBCU Digest, 2010a; MVSU, n.d.).

The IHL designated Mississippi Valley State University a regional institution in 1981. A Carnegie Classified Master’s University, the mission of Mississippi Valley State University is to provide “comprehensive undergraduate and graduate programs in education, the arts and sciences, and professional studies” (MVSU, 2011, p. 17). The institution focuses on seven main goals: the foundation of excellence, meeting regional educational needs and maintaining historical relationships, community service and service learning, centers of excellent, health and wellness, research and culture, and a global perspective.

## **Participants**

The researcher identified three participants for this study. In qualitative research, a small sample size is suitable for collecting extensive details about each participant (Creswell, 2008). The participants were chosen based on their service on the Executive Cabinet of Mississippi Valley State University which consists of the following capacities: the Acting President, the Interim Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, the Chief of Staff and Interim Vice President for University Advancement, the Chief Financial Officer and Vice President for Business and Finance, the Vice President for Student Affairs, Enrollment Management and Diversity, the Director of Athletics. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study.

In order to gain access to the potential respondents, the researcher made phone calls to the secretaries of the Executive Cabinet members. Secretaries serve as gatekeepers and act as a buffer between the administrator in power and individuals who would like to access them. On each occasion, the researcher was told that the individual would give the message to the potential respondent. In the case of three Executive Cabinet members, my email, phone call or office visit requesting an interview and return phone call was met with silence. The Vice President of Student affairs agreed to participate in the study. The Acting President's representative called to inform me that he declined to participate. The position of the Chief of Staff and Vice President for University Advancement was vacant at the time of data collection. The Director of Athletics, the Chief Financial Officer and the Interim Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs did not return my emails or phone calls.

One administrator (B) eventually agreed to be interviewed on the promise of anonymity. Informed consent was granted to conduct the interview and shadow the participant for two hours. The administrator's consent was gained as required by the University of Memphis Institutional Review Board and the Mississippi Valley State University Institutional Review Board.

## **Data Collection**

The time frame of research spanned from April 2013 to October 2013. The data for this study examined the words and writings of three administrators at Mississippi Valley State University. First, Administrator A wrote an article about HBCU philanthropy at historically black colleges and universities in response to a colleague at another university. Administrator A and the person he responded to were subsequently interviewed on the topic of HBCU philanthropy. The article on HBCU philanthropy and the subsequent interview constituted two additional pieces for document analysis.

Second, Administrator B, agreed to be interviewed and shadowed by the researcher. I interviewed this administrator for 90 minutes. To make good use of this time, I used a semi-structured interview guide based on narrative inquiry to evoke stories from the participants about the current reality facing the University, diversity, and personal experiences that inform the administrator's decision making.

Third, the researcher attended an alumni meeting where Administrator C was the speaker. In addition, Administrator C wrote a letter to alumni, friends and supporters in a Florida newspaper introducing Mississippi Valley State University to a new region of the country days before a nationally televised football game featuring the university's football team. The address



given to alumni and the letter to supporters constituted nonparticipant observation and document analysis for the study.

For all interviews and public meetings, I recorded the sessions on a digital recorder. I also transcribed the interviews and meetings for analysis.

### **Data analysis.**

The data for the study was analyzed in three ways. Thematic analysis was utilized “to identify themes within the data” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 88). First, line-by-line open coding generated a set of emergent codes. Next, axial coding was used to group similar codes into categories. Finally, thematic analysis was completed by identifying the major themes that emerged from the categories (Ezzy, 2002). Second, transcripts were analyzed by looking at inter-subjective relations, the social field, and cultural meta-narratives in the text. The inter-subjective relations look at explicit references, assumed context, and immediate context to understand and interpret the narrative. The social field refers to the institutions and organizations and temporal historical events and figures which comprise the experience. The cultural meta-narrative reflects on cultural themes and beliefs to see if the participant agrees with or challenges these dominant cultural discourse (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiah & Lieblich, 2008).

## **RESULTS**

### **Past History**

The first research question explored how past history affected the current reality of Mississippi Valley State University. Topics that were discussed include the founding of the University, administrators’ roles, the impact of the Ayers case on their job performance, and the public’s and constituents’ perception of the University. Regarding the history of Mississippi Valley State University (Valley), Administrator B began by explaining the history of the Mississippi Delta.

Of course the Delta is one of the most impoverished areas in the country, one of the most undereducated areas in the country. But yet, in spite of that, there are so many achievements by the people of the Delta because the Delta is not much different than when I grew up in terms of the poverty level, in terms of the underserved.

Later in the interview, the Administrator B stated that “Valley” is not on even footing with the other institutions in the state. The participant supposed that this goes back to the institution’s inception when it had difficulty finding land on which to build. When talking to alumni, Administrator C explained the institution’s founding in this way: “Valley State just celebrated its 63rd anniversary and as we reflect upon our humble beginnings of one-classroom, fourteen-student, seven-teacher institution, we should be reminded that Valley remains a beacon of hope for all who enter, providing educational opportunities for those wanting to change their circumstances.”

From its inception to now, it is important to note that funding has always been an issue at Mississippi Valley State University. The following captures one administrator’s explanation of

how Mississippi Valley State differs from other HBCUs and predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in the state.

Administrator B: Valley is, of course, the youngest. Valley is the smallest. Valley serves more students who are underprepared and at risk. And Valley, I think has more challenges in terms of its physical facilities, residence halls, student center.

Interviewer: Do I even need to ask how Valley differs from the predominantly white institutions in the state?

Administrator B: All of that. The same differences. As I said, the same thing. I don't think Valley has received its fair share of funding.

Interviewer: Over its history?

Administrator B: Over its history.

When talking to the alumni group, Administrator C explained the stressed fiscal condition of the State of Mississippi and the impact Mississippi Valley has on the western Delta region of Mississippi.

Over the past several years, declining enrollment coupled with declining state appropriations from the legislature and increasing operational costs has created tremendous fiscal stress for Valley. Since the year 2000, state joint fund revenue has increased by 35 percent. Over that same time period, funding for K-12 and community colleges has increased by over 40 percent. Yet state support for our universities has declined by 7 percent over that same time period. Last fiscal year, state joint support for Valley was \$13 million while Valley had an economic impact of over \$30 million in the form of labor income, contributions back to the general fund and local sales taxes.

Administrator A had previously worked at three different institutions and the biggest perceived issue at MVSU was a lack of resources. "In the Mississippi Delta, 90 percent of the students are Pell eligible. MVSU is struggling to find resources first for students and second for academic programs. With shrinking state and federal funding for institutions, HBCU leaders must be audacious and bold enough to make some tough calls."

## **Diversity**

The second research question delved the institution's plans to achieve diversity in terms of student enrollment, faculty and staff recruitment, program offerings, and sources of revenue. The issue of diversity was breached when the researcher asked Administrator B about certain accomplishments as an administrator. The development of the Five Year Strategic Diversity Plan for Mississippi Valley State University was listed as one of many achievements.

All eight of the institutions had to develop a five-year diversity plan and all eight public higher education institutions need to increase our diversity in certain areas, including employees to become more diverse, to become more diverse in students. For us, it's non-African American students. We need to be more diverse in our business practices – who we award, who we do business with, more minority contractors – and also we need to infuse diversity into the curriculum to make sure that every student who comes to

Mississippi Valley has some course in which the content has diversity, where students learn to appreciate diversity and differences and that type of thing.

In the case of HBCUs, African American students are the majority and White students are the minority. Non-African American is another way of referring to White students. Administrator B was asked if the Ayers case was a pressing matter in the day-to-day job. The respondent replied, “No, it isn’t pressing in what I do.” But as an aside, the respondent stated that a recruiter is assigned the task of recruiting white students. “But so far, we have been unable to reach that 10 percent. And I think the only school that has reached the 10 percent has been Alcorn State, and that has a lot to do with the academic programs that Alcorn has – nursing in particular.”

One of the major challenges for Mississippi Valley State University is increasing enrollment. A decreasing population in the Mississippi Delta, the main source of students for Mississippi Valley State, has made it necessary for institutional leaders to recruit out of state for additional students. This is what Administrator C explained to the alumni group.

Currently 85 percent of our students come from 10 counties here in the Mississippi Delta. Over the past 10 years, the population in those same 10 Delta counties has declined by 15 percent. We must continue to recruit just as aggressively as we always have across the Delta, but if we are to grow we must also start aggressive recruiting outside of the Delta.

Administrator B explained the thinking behind Mississippi Valley State University waiving out-of-state tuition for all students as a way to increase enrollment.

We have waived out-of-state tuition so all of our students pay the same tuition regardless of whether they’re out-of-state. Mississippi Valley and Delta State I think are the only two schools that waived out-of-state tuition for everybody. It’s actually a loss in revenue because, unless you significantly increase your enrollment of more students, and I think that was the idea behind that proposal when the former President and the Chief Financial Officer developed it that if we don’t have out-of-state fees for anybody, then we can increase our out-of-state student enrollment which would make up for the money we would lose, you know with quantity, which would make up for the money we’ll lose.

Administrator C stated that recruiting students to Mississippi Valley State University is not the problem. According to Administrator B, MVSU experienced its largest number of new first-time freshmen in its history during Fall 2013. The institution enrolled 520 new freshmen and 266 transfer students. However, despite the 786 new students who enrolled during the fall of 2013, the University still experienced a decrease in enrollment. Administrator C explained to alumni that retention, not recruitment, is the problem.

Recruiting students is critical, but there is something much more critical to the success of Valley and that is retaining our students. Currently our freshmen to sophomore retention rate is just over 50 percent which means nearly half of our freshmen do not return for their sophomore year. We have to change that trend. Since my arrival at Valley, we’ve been working to put appropriate student support systems in place to help our students persist through graduation and not drop out or stop out.

Tuition is a major revenue stream for Mississippi Valley State University. Its appropriations are dependent in large part on its ability to enroll a certain number of students. Administrator B talked about the long-term and short-term goals for Mississippi Valley State.

Well, I know the short-term goal is to increase enrollment and the long-term goals has to be to sustain that enrollment, to have better retention programs, to have more intrusive interaction with students regarding academic performance. Long-term goals – to have better facilities, better residence halls, a new student union, more activities for students to engage in.

Regarding faculty, Administrator B said the economic impact has not had an impact on hiring. MVSU still advertises in major publications and institution has not had major staffing cuts. According to Administrator C, “Valley has been able to persevere through these tough economic challenges. Valley has not had a massive lay off of employees, nor have we had to have a massive reduction in our program offerings. Additionally, the institution is on sound financial ground and is not operating in the red.”

Earlier Administrator B stated that the nursing program at Alcorn State was the reason it was able to achieve 10 percent white enrollment for three consecutive years. Following along the lines of program diversity, the researcher asked if this was part of the reason Mississippi Valley had not achieved the required white enrollment. The respondent agreed and offered some ideas about “cutting edge” programs to attract students. After suggesting possible degrees in engineering and forensic sciences, the revitalization of the education program was examined and critiqued.

I think that if we can get our education programs back, like we had a Masters degree in special education that we don't offer anymore, I think. We used to graduate a lot of students out of education. But the numbers of students who are enrolled in education have decreased and the graduates have decreased. I think it has something to do with the Praxis exam. I think that we need to look at that and see what we can do to overhaul that program because, you know, Valley was created as a teaching institution. And right now, our education department is experiencing some challenges.

The lack of alumni giving to historical black colleges and universities by its alumni is one of the reasons for its weakened fiscal state. Here is the brief exchange between the interviewer and the Administrator B concerning philanthropy.

Interviewer: What can constituents do to help Valley shore up its finances?

Administrator B: Give.

Administrator C made an appeal to the alumni in this way.

Valley is a sound investment. And the Valley naysayers need to understand that dollars appropriated to Valley are dollars well spent. But funds from the state are not enough. No one on a white horse is going to ride into Itta Bena with a sack full of money and address all of our needs on campus. We must as one take progress and change into our own hands and look out for our own interests. Many of our students need financial assistance to cover the rising cost of attending college. It is incumbent upon me, it is incumbent upon

you, and Valley alumni across the world to raise money and give money for needs-based financial aid and merit-based scholarships for our students.

Administrator A explained in the interview why HBCUs are not routinely awarded multimillion dollar philanthropic gifts.

HBCU leaders must make philanthropy a highest priority at the institution to offset the volatile economic and political environment. The majority of HBCUs cannot reach institutional and programmatic success because of a lack of financial resources. However, these institutions do not place the staffing, resources, training and development of institutional professionals in order to the needs of the institution or expect million dollar beneficence. Institutions that close multi-million dollar gifts have institutional leaders who have invested institutional dollars representative of their commitment to make institutional development a top priority.

Administrator C went on to explain that HBCUs need to do a better job of cultivating alumni gifts. The administrator stated that for every piece of mail the HBCU sends, the PWI sends 20 pieces of mail.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Gaining Access to Administrators**

For this research study, I planned to interview five Executive Administrators at Mississippi Valley State University. One person accepted my invitation to participate in an interview, another declined and three did not return phone calls. During the time data were being gathered for this study, the institution was undergoing a presidential search for its seventh president. Perhaps this situation influenced the administrators' unwillingness to participate in this research. As it turned out, none of the individuals currently hold their Executive Cabinet positions. In any case, gaining access to high-level administrators was more difficult than originally thought.

Mikecz (2012) stated that gaining access to elites is difficult and gaining their trust and building rapport is even more difficult. To set themselves apart from society, elites purposefully erect barriers and are surrounded by numerous gatekeepers (Laurila, 1997; Shenton & Hayter, 2004; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen & Tahvanainen, 2002). While elites are visible, they are not necessarily accessible (Laurila, 1997). They are also in a position to manipulate information or deny access to it (Mikecz, 2012). The perceived problem between a researcher and influential and powerful elites is the inconsistency of the position of the researcher. According to Herod (1999), the relative power of the elite interviewee is more powerful than that of the researcher. As such, the interviewee does a favor for the researcher who stands to gain the most from the interview. As a result, the elite status of the interviewees and the power they hold in their position allowed them to buffer themselves and deny my request to participate in the study.

## **POWER DYNAMIC BETWEEN HBCU ADMINISTRATORS AND STATE OFFICIALS**

Perhaps the caution of the administrators interviewed can be understood by fairly recent events. Former Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour proposed to merge Alcorn State University and Mississippi Valley State University with Jackson State University and Mississippi University for Women (the W) with Mississippi State University. The merger would leave all the campuses open but consolidate the administration for a savings of \$35 million and would reduce the number of higher education institutions from eight to five (Associated Press, 2009b). The response of Alcorn State University President George Ross and Mississippi Valley State University President Donna Oliver sidestepped a direct rebuttal of the Governor's merger plan to examine ways to increase efficiency and decrease costs. Mississippi University for Women President Claudia Limbert challenged former Governor Barbour to provide specific details on how merging "the W" with Mississippi State University would save money for the state (Chandler, 2009). This demonstrates the power dynamic between institutional leaders and political ones.

"The purpose of the Board of Trustees is to manage and control Mississippi's eight institutions of higher learning" by operating "a coordinated system of higher education," establishing "prudent governance policies," employing "capable chief executives," requiring "legal, fiscal and programmatic accountability" and reporting annually "to the Legislature and the citizenry on the needs and accomplishments of the IHL System" (Board of Trustees, 2012, p. 12). The Board of Trustees for the State Institutions of Higher Learning holds tremendous power, which includes hiring university presidents, setting rates for tuition, room and board and meal plans, creating funding formula for higher education, and requesting funds from the Mississippi Legislature for the support of higher education (Board of Trustees, 2012). Not only was the job security of the HBCU presidents tied up in the political aims of the Governor, but the survival of the institutions depended upon the presidents receiving support from the Mississippi Board of Trustees, the state Legislature and rallying students and their alumni base. The historic role IHL has historically and currently plays in the recommendation of funding for the state's eight public universities plays an alleged role in the administrators' lack of or refusal to participate.

## **DOUBLE STANDARD OF MEDIA REPORTING**

Another possible reason for Mississippi Valley State University administrators' decision not to participate in the study may be due to the coverage the institution received in the media. Brown (2013) stated that the reputation of an HBCU is a cross-section of culture and public opinion. Slovic (2002) suggests that public perception lies between truth and belief and is shaped by three primary forces: popular opinion, popular media and individual or institutional reputation. Regarding the history of media coverage, HBCUs "have been the recipient of countless jabs and continuing skepticism since their beginnings" (Gasman, 2006, p. 113). Media influence regional politics, shapes public discourse and reports on appropriations conflicts (Gasman, 2006). Jones (2004) found that between 1980 and 1989, many of the 25 stories The Chronicle of Higher Education published on higher education scandal and corruption pertained to HBCUs. While PWIs traditionally received a slap on the hand by the media, newspapers called for the closure of some black institutions and state governments threatened to close some institutions. This led to the claim by some HBCU college administrators that when it comes to

PWIs and HBCUs, the media has a dual standard for treatment of college and university scandals.

Articles written about Mississippi Valley State University by the Associated Press included the following titles: “2 Miss. Delta Colleges see enrollment decline” (2009a), “Enrollment plummets at Mississippi Valley (2010), “Some Valley faculty oppose no-confidence vote on Oliver” (2011), “With no interim, board begins hunt for MVSU president” (2013c), “MVSU becomes second university to house students in hotel” (2013b) and “Group of alumni oppose Bynum as next president” (2013a). Articles on possible mergers, low enrollments, lawsuits by former students, votes of no-confidence, administrative problems and operations, failure to spend money have greatly undermined the reputation of Mississippi Valley State University and hampered its efforts to increase enrollment and diversify the student body.

Gasman (2006) found that in the narrative of the demise of Morris Brown College, the media focused on four dominant themes: the decline of Black colleges, student desertion versus allegiance, failure of the institution and religious devotion of community, administrators, faculty and staff. Conversely, Muhammad (2009) compared and contrasted the media attention that follows where a white student believes reverse discrimination is the reason they were denied the college of their first choice. Even when reverse discrimination is alleged, the media typically ignores voices of college students of color. In light of the Ayers discrimination lawsuit and settlement, there has been little media coverage of the Ayers desegregation lawsuit with the exception of academic journals. Critical race theory may explain why this is so.

## **CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

Critical race theory includes the concept of interest convergence, which states that people of color make social, economic and political progress only when whites benefit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Muhammad, 2009). According to the Ayers Settlement Agreement, the plaintiff class was certified and defined as follows:

All black citizens residing in Mississippi, whether students, former students, parents, employees or taxpayers, who have been, are, or will be discriminated against on account of race in receiving equal educational opportunity and/or equal employment opportunity in the universities operated by [the] Board of Trustees [of State Institutions of Higher Learning] (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001, p. 2).

Unfortunately, the courts treated the remedy as if the entire state was discriminated against. The remedy of the Supreme Court in *Fordice* must include benefits to white citizens, even though whites never suffered discrimination by the state of Mississippi or IHL. Black students at HBCUs cannot receive the programmatic and facility upgrades designated for those campuses “until there are enough whites enrolled and benefitting from scholarships and other desegregation remedy funding” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 330).

The District Court issued a decree addressing admission and enrollment, institutional mission, program offerings, program duplication, facilities and allocation of funds and deemed these changes effective (Muhammad, 2009). Prior to the settlement, all public four-year universities had different admissions standards based solely on American College Test (ACT) scores. PWIs required higher ACT scores than HBCUs. The courts found this practice was enacted in 1961 to prevent African Americans from attending PWIs in the state. After the

settlement, the IHL standardized admissions for all public four-year universities to consider the students' college preparatory curriculum, grade point average and ACT score (United States v. Fordice, 1992). The current required ACT score for admission was lowered at PWIs and raised at HBCUs. Research has shown that whites scores higher on the ACT test than African Americans (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2010). This policy in effect makes it easier for whites to be admitted by lowering the required ACT score at PWIs and makes it more difficult for blacks to be admitted to public universities.

Program duplication, the practice of offering specialized courses at PWIs and HBCUs in close proximity, affects student choice. The practice by the United State Supreme Court was found to be a continuation of segregation policies of the past and without educational justification (U.S. v. Fordice, 1992). White students avoid attending a HBCU with a specialized program by attending a PWi which offers the same program.

Likewise, institutional mission designations were shown to affect student choice. IHL designated Mississippi State University, the University of Mississippi and the University of Southern Mississippi as comprehensive research universities which have the most varied programs and offer doctoral degrees. Jackson State University as designated an urban university with a limited research function and degrees geared for its urban setting while Alcorn State University, Delta State University, Mississippi University for Women and Mississippi Valley State University were designated regional universities to serve as undergraduate institutions with limited offerings of master's degrees. These institutional mission designations created in 1981 were found to be remnants of de jure segregation. When combined with the admission policy and program duplication, the designations affected student choice (U.S. v. Fordice, 1992). The settlement agreement designated Jackson State University a comprehensive university "but does not imply any change in JSU's institutional mission classification" (Ayers v. Musgrove, 2001, p. 18). Alcorn State and Mississippi Valley State serve an undergraduate function and Jackson State continues to have a limited research function. Students regardless of race are likely to attend comprehensive universities with a vast program offering instead of a regional or urban institution with limited course offerings.

## CONCLUSION

There is a need for qualitative research on historically black colleges and universities, particularly the institutions who are under a court order, settlement agreement or undergoing legal proceedings to right the wrongs of past discrimination by state governments and boards of higher education. While statistics give numbers about enrollment, admissions, retention, graduation and cohort rates, there is a larger story behind the numbers that must be investigated, understood, and told.

Presidents and administrators at HBCUs are needed to articulate their vision for their institutions and project a positive image for the general public and critics of HBCUs. Communicating the vision also informs students, staff, faculty and the local and higher education community of initiatives that will move the institution forward. By telling their story, presidents and administrators of HBCUs can combat the incorrect notion that these institutions are race-exclusive institutions. Not only are the institutions diverse and different from each other, they are diverse in terms of the composition of faculty and staff as well as program offerings. The majority of HBCUs are working hard to achieve racial and ethnic diversity among its student body and secure additional revenue for their institutions. Presidents of public HBCUs must also



seek ways to neutralize and work within the power dynamic of the state and higher education system to help their institution achieve its goals, while being every mindful of the history of the role the State and its officials played during the era of segregation. By taking a proactive approach with the media, college administrators can positively shape and begin to change the narrative about their institution and HBCUs in general.

Increasing enrollment and sustaining enrollment are two of the major issues Mississippi Valley State University faces in the coming years. MVSU has been granted a tuition waiver by the IHL Board of Trustees for all out-of-state students in an effort to increase enrollment in an area where the population is decreasing. Additional research is needed to understand why large numbers of students do not return to the institution after their freshman year.

In the settlement of the Ayers case, the principle of interest convergence can be found in the funding of scholarships to attract white students to attend the university. By achieving 10 percent white student enrollment, the endowment can be received and subsequent program and capital projects can begin. Sixty-five percent of the remedy is to recruit and enhance programs so whites can attend HBCUs. It is important to note there are no such race-based scholarships for African Americans to attend PWIs in the state of Mississippi (St. John, 2000).

Finally, \$503 million is not nearly enough money to remedy the decades of unequal funding, admissions standards and program duplication which caused the current situation. The case turned from the equitable distribution of funds in the higher education system to one that sought to achieve student diversity at HBCUs at the expense of the institutions that were historically discriminated against. “While finality is important, like its cousin, efficiency, finality is only worth the larger principles of justice and equity encompassed” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 328).

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