



Faculty Roundtable:

The Challenges of Educating African Americans for the 21st Century

By Grace I. Virtue, Ph.D.



From L. to R.: Professors Kay T. Payne, Ph.D.; Lorraine N. Fleming, Ph.D., P.E.; A. Wade Boykin, Ph.D.; and Lawrence E. Gary, Ph.D., LICSW, with moderator Grace I. Virtue, Ph.D.

Higher education, early in the 21st century, is characterized by a near frenzied search for solutions to questions of how best to educate populations to deal with the complex challenges posed by new and emerging technologies, cross-cultural interactions, environmental changes and increasing human life spans. For the United States, and populations of color in general, the challenge is even more profound. The United States is struggling to keep abreast of nations such as China and Japan in the scientific disciplines. Minority populations, in particular, are severely under-represented in this area, and overall, are challenged by the gaps between themselves and their Asian and Caucasian counterparts.

In an informative roundtable, Howard Magazine explores the University's role in addressing these issues with faculty members: A. Wade Boykin, Ph.D., professor, Department of Psychology and executive director, The Capstone Institute for School Reform, Howard University; Lorraine N. Fleming, Ph.D., P.E., a professor in the College of Engineering, Architecture and Computer Sciences and director of Howard University's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) program; Lawrence E. Gary, Ph.D., LICSW, professor in the School of Social Work, specializing in human behavior, mental health, families, male development and social policy; and Kay T. Payne, Ph.D., associate professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders, specializing in advanced research, applied sociolinguistics and cultural diversity. Grace Virtue, Ph.D., senior writer and executive communications manager, Office of University Communications, moderated the discussion.

VIRTUE: What do you see as the most pressing issues in higher education today?

BOYKIN: To some degree, it's the twin matters of diversity and competition. I say this because American society at large is getting more diverse. Demographic projections suggest that by mid-century, the majority of Americans will be people of color. Whites will be roughly 45 percent of the population. Also, America is getting greyer. People are living longer. As a result, a smaller proportion of our population will be in their active, economic, productive years. This means there will be a smaller workforce that's going to have to meet even greater demands in a more technical, more technological, globally dependent world.

VIRTUE: What are the long-term implications?

BOYKIN: It means that skill levels will have to go up. A smaller workforce will have to work more efficiently in an environment that will be increasingly drawn from populations, like African Americans, who historically have had the most problematic schooling experiences in this country. So we will have to educate to the very highest levels a population that has had challenging educational experiences to date. This is a part of the challenge that universities are going to inherit and clearly, you know, a great proportion of this population will have to be prepared at schools like Howard University.

The competitive issue is that although higher education in the United States is still among the best in the world, other nations



are catching up. We really are going to have to prepare a diverse population and produce high level graduates and professionals with high level skills — particularly in math and science, but in other areas as well.

VIRTUE: There are approximately 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), how do you see them fitting into this scenario?

BOYKIN: They are going to have to step up and play their various roles. Howard is relatively unique in that it is a flagship among HBCUs in terms of the production of graduate level scholars and practitioners. Some of the others are more inclined toward baccalaureates. We have the responsibility of doing that, but we also must produce the master-level students, Ph.D.s, as well as the professionals, and scholars across different domains who are engaged in research that not only is of benefit to America in general, but also the communities of color in this country.



Fleming

GARY: Diversity and competition are some major challenges, but I think I would frame it a little bit differently. To me, the question would be how to educate a diverse population. I see that as a major challenge and I think the

diversity is not so much around ethnicity, but lifestyle, geography, social class and issues like disability, for example. I also see this diversity linked to the kinds of skills that the private sector is identifying as so important when people come out of the university — for example, knowing how to work in teams and how to problem solve. Another issue is this whole notion of cultural and scientific literacy. For example, I've had to rush back to school to learn all this neuroscience language and then figure out how to communicate this to students who come from departments such as communications, psychology and so forth. So, I think the issue is how to educate this diverse population especially when we don't have the research to support our strategies.

VIRTUE: This is where you come in Professor Payne.

PAYNE: From my perspective, we're now challenged with educating a global society, not so much African Americans and not so much educating for the diversity in the United States, but far beyond. As it stands, we are still in the process of figuring out our roles as well as our strengths as a university that we need to bring to globalization. We know our place pretty well, with regards to education of African

Americans and minorities, but I think it's a bit more of a challenge to find our way on the world stage.

VIRTUE: Do you have an idea of why this might be so?

PAYNE: It's a thought that we haven't entertained much to this point, as well as the fact that we have had our struggles as a people in this United States. We've been focused on that and overcoming our own struggles. Now, we're broadening that to Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere. Those students bring an interesting diversity as well. We have thought about how to educate African Americans and what African Americans need to know, but it's a different question. What do Africans need to know? Why are we educating Africans? What kind of world will we return them to? How do we appropriately train them for the challenges that they will face that are different from those of African Americans?

GARY: I was really struck by what Boykin said about us having good experience with how to educate African Americans in this context. What I have found now is that the African students and other immigrants coming into the classroom, creates a whole different dynamic. Many of the African and Caribbean students bring a different way of approaching education. They are often older, more mature and more experienced, and they also know how to debate and extend their point of view.

FLEMING: I'm finding it's a challenge to try to teach both sets of people. Usually, I don't teach differently; I don't focus on different types of problems. But, I have to understand that some of my students are going back to places where they may not have the same technology that we have here. Or they may not be a part of a team — they may be the whole office — so they have to know the whole thing instead of just one little piece of the project. So it's a different way of teaching the whole thing to them.

BOYKIN: This is indeed worthy of discussion, but the questions that I hear from my students are: what is Howard preparing them for? To fit into the mainstream? To fit into the world as it is? Or to see that there's still injustice, and there's still inequity in the world and to prepare them with skills that allow them to change the status quo? I think this continues to be a challenge among African Americans and people of color broadly speaking. And, the target continues to move. Some of the issues that were important to Black communities in America 30 years ago may not be the same issues that are in the present now. One of the ways that I think about it is, "Are we preparing them for the 21st century, or, are we helping them to prepare the 21st century," because they will be the ones, not us, who will be the leaders and the change agents in the years to come, in societies that will be more diverse.

VIRTUE: What is the difference between nurturing the students and spoon feeding them?

BOYKIN: You nurture them by being supportive - letting them know that you are going to hold them to a high standard, but you are going to be there to help them learn as opposed to becoming emotionally invested in them. That is draining because there are just so many emotionally needy students out there.

PAYNE: We are nurturing though; especially when you talk to our students who have come from predominantly White schools. Our presence is nurturing. They identify with their professors and it is comforting to them to know that we are coming from the same place.

BOYKIN: It seems to me that Howard has a particularly unique challenge among HBCUs. We have this bifurcated image. On the one hand we are striving to nurture undergraduates, but also trying to be a Research One institution. We are teaching, writing grants and trying to do research. This is not what is done at big White schools. We are trying to do both equally well.

VIRTUE: Is something lost in the process?

PAYNE: Howard is trying to find a unique place as an HBCU and that's the challenge we face...whether to have undergrads or graduate students.

FLEMING: You can have a strong undergraduate body without having a large one and maybe that is how some of these issues will get resolved.

BOYKIN: And the nurturing and support can be applied to the faculty as well. Junior faculty need to be mentored and research teams, instead of the lone ranger type individuals, need to be emphasized.

VIRTUE: Do you all have a sense of a model of leadership that would allow Howard University to adequately address these issues?

GARY: Leadership is not limited to the president or the provost. It is distributed throughout the university, for example, deans and chairs have significant leadership roles to play. I believe deans and chairs should be rotated. I am a very firm advocate that chairs, for example, should not serve longer than five years — maybe two non-consecutive five-year terms and then that's it.

That's one of the advantages of rotative leadership. A university is a place where ideas are debated and I strongly believe it is time for Howard to change. I have no problem advocating for changes that are going to bring Howard to a different level. Actually, this is quite important. Foundations, funding agencies actually pay attention to the debating culture.

FLEMING: You are exactly right. The young talent should be groomed for leadership.

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BOYKIN: I think one thing that we need to appreciate is that our disciplinary boundaries are somewhat arbitrary and maybe moving more toward problem-based research. For example, the problems of young Black males, which are interdisciplinary.

VIRTUE: The achievement gap is another area that's crying out for problem-based research. Is it even real to start with?

BOYKIN: It is real and it is multi-layered. We see the differences between White and Asian students and Blacks and Hispanics from as early as pre-school. Let's not forget too that

there is also an achievement gap between American students and students from other countries so, it's not just about helping Black and Brown children to catch up.

VIRTUE: How do we close the gap?

BOYKIN: By treating diversity not as a problem but as an asset. HBCUs have tried to do this — nurturing students to do this. I hope that Howard does not lose this for the sake of being a Research One institution. We also need to develop those pipeline issues. We get a lot of diamonds in the rough — at both levels, at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

PAYNE: The achievement gap is the by-product of a free society. You can be what you want to be or not. In a diverse society, you will always have people who will want to get ahead and others who don't.

BOYKIN: It's one thing to reach a point in your life where, of your own volition you choose what you want to do. For African-American children, not getting ahead is often not their choice.



Gary

GARY: It's complicated. In some ways, it is a by-product of a free society that is organized around vested interests. Wasn't there some statement from Greenspan about how the increase in income gap is a threat to our society?

BOYKIN: There are all kinds of gaps in this society.

VIRTUE: Dr. Fleming, how is the STEM program important to bridging the gap?

FLEMING: We are currently carrying out research so that we can fully understand the problems first. This way, our intervention can be based on scholarly work. Right now, we have a summer bridge program to prepare students for careers in engineering. Our students come here not quite prepared, sometimes. We help them analyze where they are and sometimes advise that it might not be "doable" in four years.

BOYKIN: The achievement gap is closable as long as efforts are research-based with good programs to identify learning disabilities and the deficits that exist. The Capstone Institute is working here and will be in the Caribbean as well. A part of the challenge is finding ways to turn diversity into an asset and apply subjects like math to the real world.

GARY: Wonderful conversation. This is what the University needs to be doing. [H](#)