I became an HBCU president in 2004, the early days of a new millennium. While HBCUs had enjoyed a great deal of prosperity post Brown vs Board, fueled by prime time popular culture shows like “A Different World” and movies like “Drumline,” there were signs that greater challenges were rapidly coming to all of higher education. And as with challenges that face America, the impact is always greater or more severe for Black America.

The winds of change began to blow strong in 2005 with the appointment of what is known as the Spellings Commission, formally known as the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. A range of sweeping reforms were presented, creating a great deal of discussion in higher education circles and beyond. One of the issues that made lots of headlines was one of accountability.

The national media has done an exceptional job painting higher education as extravagantly priced. In that context, the Spellings Commission opened the door of inquiry into effectiveness of colleges and universities in graduating students. The message was clear— if people are spending all of this money for college, then colleges must do a better job of producing graduates. To keep the pressure on colleges and universities, the commission proposed the creation of a public database so that students, parents, and all interested could gather information about performance, and then use that information to make decisions about which institutions to attend or support.

In 2013, President Obama launched a College Scorecard to provide the database that the Spellings Commission recommended, pitched to the public as an alternative to the US News rankings which provide little valuable data. As the scorecard was released, it garnered much attention, and soon people began to look at who did well, and who did poorly. Naturally, one group to be scrutinized was HBCUs. And due to the unique demographics of the HBCU student body, in many instances, the numbers presented, on the surface, were not favorable.

Despite a great deal of outcry and push back, the Obama administration did not waver on the scorecard. In fact, in 2015 the scorecard was revamped and relaunched.
We are at a point where there is unprecedented, easy access to data about colleges and universities. And even though the data can easily be misinterpreted, these numbers will be used to judge the effectiveness of colleges and universities.

In 2004, when I became a president, there was still a great deal of defending HBCUs using the old Negro spiritual playbook. In short, HBCUs were important because of when they were founded, racism in America, opportunities for Blacks, that they made lemons from lemonade. We all know the script. By 2004 the music had changed, so our song often came across as off key and off beat.

This is not to say all of those issues are not still relevant. The entire need for a Black Lives Matter movement suggests that Black colleges are definitely relevant. But a much more sophisticated and quantitative defense of HBCUs is needed today. Part of that defense must be to take a hard look at our performance, to improve that performance, and to be able to articulate the factors that impact the numbers that everyone has access to these days.

Retention and subsequent graduation rates are key metrics that everyone must address. In “Setting A New Agenda for Student Engagement and Retention at Historically Black Colleges and Universities” Charles Prince, Rochelle Ford, and colleagues provide a range of topics to review, digest and act upon to solidify and even improve the status of HBCUs in this new century. The chapters are presented with a goal of encouraging fresh thinking and innovation from HBCU leaders so that the institutions are better positioned for this new higher education environment.

A text like this is extremely timely, and hopefully it will be engaged by a wide variety of constituencies in order to improve HBCUs. In fact, it is imperative that our entire sector begins to engage in the issues of engagement and retention in a much more aggressive and proactive way. I have had a number of opportunities to engage Department of Education officials during my tenure. It has been very clear that they respond overwhelmingly positively to well thought-out arguments undergirded by theory and substantiated with quantitative statistics. Those of us who have embraced this strategy have found some success; those who refuse to embrace this new reality lead their institutions into peril. There really is no other way to say it.

This is not just a timely matter but an urgent one. Hopefully this work will play an important role as we work to present a new, refreshed and relevant role for HBCUs in this nation.

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