

Opening Remarks for Governance Conference, LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, Tennessee, 29 March 2008

In 1966 the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) jointly formulated a policy statement on the government of colleges and universities, that, while recognizing the authority of administrators and governing boards, explicitly states: "The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. On these matters the power of review or final decision lodged in the governing board or delegated by it to the president should be exercised adversely only in exceptional circumstances, and for reasons communicated to the faculty." Sadly, the faculty's role is too often abridged or usurped by rogue administrators and boards operating out of motives that are not always benign. Faculties at historically black institutions, known as HBCUs, are often viewed as particularly vulnerable to attacks on their prerogatives.

I spent 29 years as a faculty member at a public historically black institution, Delaware State University, located in the geographical center of a border state that allowed slavery, but that fought on the side of the Union in the Civil War. To give you a sense of the political and social climate in which my institution has been forced to operate, I quote an African-American colleague who told me that he felt as though, so far as race relations were concerned, he had gone back in time 30 years when he moved to Delaware from Mississippi in the 1980s. In 1968, the year of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the

National Guard occupied the campus, with attack dogs and a full complement of weaponry.

Delaware State, rather diverse with respect to both faculty and student body, is probably fairly typical of public HBCUs. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the HBCUs are as varied as the historically white institutions. There are more than 100 HBCUs located primarily in southern and border states. They are small, private, church-related colleges like LeMoyne-Owen, with only a few hundred students and minuscule endowments. They are elite, private, liberal-arts colleges whose graduates are virtually guaranteed admission into professional and graduate programs. They are medium-sized public comprehensive universities, dependent in large part on the largesse of state legislatures. And they are large, prestigious research universities like Howard.

HBCU student bodies are sometimes almost exclusively African-American, as is that of Lincoln University of Pennsylvania and sometimes, to the surprise of many, almost exclusively European-American, as is that of Bluefield State University in West Virginia. Most HBCUs were founded to educate former slaves after the Civil War, but the oldest by one reckoning, Cheyney State University in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1837 to educate free African-Americans separately from whites simply because they were black. Racism was the foundation on which the HBCUs were built. The administrations of HBCUs have always had to be politically sensitive and astute, because the survival of their institutions has always depended on their ability to negotiate very tricky racial and political waters.

In the 1990s two developments in higher education had a negative impact on the exercise of shared governance. Governing boards turned increasingly to corporate managers for their members. Market metaphors began to dominate discussions of curriculum, faculty responsibilities, and students' place in the academy. Academic concerns gave way to the bottom line. Most public colleges and universities faced the additional burden of making up the shortfall created by decreasing state appropriations. The public HBCUs, already vulnerable to mounting skepticism about the need for their continued existence, were forced into a defensive posture. The perceived necessity for all components of the institution to present a united front to lawmakers and the general public generated an atmosphere that was less than favorable to the vigorous debate that shared governance requires.

A major challenge facing the HBCUs is to find ways to maintain their rich heritage of service to the

African-American community, while encouraging and welcoming students and faculty of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. In my view, it is in the best interest of the larger society and the individual HBCU to strengthen collegial governance. The contributions of an intellectually diverse and unfettered faculty are essential to the viability of the academy as a whole and to the HBCUs, which occupy a unique position in American higher education. A college or university that hopes to compete for the best faculty members, those that will attract the best students, would be well advised to advertise its commitment to academic freedom and shared governance, which are inextricably entwined. We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.