



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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Good afternoon. I welcome this opportunity to participate in a forum that exemplifies our deliberative democracy at its best. There are far too few settings in which concerned citizens can meet with civic and business leaders to learn about and discuss legislative issues in depth and breadth. I commend those who have made this forum possible and each of you who has taken time to participate.

I am honored to join my esteemed colleagues on this panel to offer a few, brief remarks about the challenges facing Virginia's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and to discuss these challenges with you. Each member of this panel brings a unique vantage point to our discussion, but we share at least these two perspectives. First, we hold in common a heartfelt appreciation of the historic and continuing contributions Virginia's HCBUS make to the lives of individual students, to the local communities in which they are situated, and to society at large. Second, we each are firmly committed to empowering Virginia's HBCUs to survive and thrive.

Taking up the theme of today's workshop, I will note three prevailing myths about HBCUs, give lie to them by sketching out the reality, and suggest three important possibilities at hand for Virginia's traditionally black institutions.

1. Myth #1: There is no longer a role for HBCUs.

The reality: Nothing could be further from the truth than the notion that HBCUs no longer have an important role in our vast, diverse system of higher education. Instead, we can all learn from them a truth that they have long recognized and put into practice – namely, that the mission of undergraduate education is to help students develop in both intellect and character. Our historically black colleges and universities have made student success job #1 and they have excelled at this job for a long time.

2. Myth #2: Desegregation requires that public HBCUs should be eliminated or merged with other institutions.

The reality: The efforts earlier this decade in Mississippi and Alabama to shut down or merge public HBCUs introduced the ironic possibility that institutions that have contributed significantly to the education of black youths for more than a century may be eliminated in the name of desegregation. If, however, we look to the recent review by the Office of Civil Rights of Florida's efforts to desegregate its system of higher education, we find instead that one outcome was a commitment to strengthen the HBCU there, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University.

3. Myth #3: All HBCUs are facing financial and enrollment difficulties.

The reality: Each college faces a unique set of circumstances, which change over time. A generalization such as this cannot be made accurately about either all historically black or all predominantly white institutions. Even just within Virginia, the current picture for each of our five HBCUs varies.

To the extent that Virginia's traditionally black institutions encounter short-term financial or enrollment problems, the Council of Higher Education offers our services as an ally to assist the president and board of visitors in exploring options to restore stability.

Moving from actualities to possibilities, I'll add a few words about three areas in which I see some immediate, potential opportunities for Virginia's historically black colleges and universities.

First, while no one would want to try to predict outcomes, the review by the Office of Civil Rights Virginia's desegregation of its system of higher education, which is underway at present, will afford an opportunity for us to consider the position of at least the public HBCUs. We are at a very early point in the review, so we don't yet know what specific objectives will be established. The Commonwealth is currently working in a partnership with OCR, as they conduct their review. Governor Gilmore has designated Secretary Bryant as the point person for the review. SCHEV's role is subordinate, consisting of providing information upon request. It is worth noting that the few other post-Fordice reviews that OCR has undertaken have been extensive and lengthy, so we are unlikely to know for quite some time just what course the Virginia review will follow.

Second, one of my objectives as director of SCHEV will be to ensure that Virginia's HBCUs are full participants in our system of higher education. One specific area in which I want to review funding policies and practices is the support of Virginia's two land-grant universities. A joint proposal is currently being developed by Virginia State and Virginia Tech Universities, which would provide enhanced support in this important area.

Third – but not last – there is another SCHEV initiative that I think holds real promise for Virginia's traditionally black institutions. I have directed SCHEV staff to research new, more encompassing ways to assess institutional effectiveness. For example, one of the measures that Virginia and other states have chosen as a performance benchmark is graduation rate. Taken only at face value, graduation rates are too simplistic a measure for this purpose. They measure only nominal student progress without really telling us much about either the student's growth and development or about the college's contribution to that growth. We should hold colleges accountable for the value that they add to the lives of our students, not simply for the paper diploma.

I came to this understanding after realizing that I had settled into a career of teaching geniuses – the brightest students in the country – and then taking credit for their accomplishments. But what did I really, except to give them a road map? Since that awakening, I have been inspired by the land-grant vi-

sion to assure the sufficient intellect full opportunity to flower into genius by dint of effort and careful cultivation. It is just this sort of cultivation – this commitment to student growth and development – that HBCUs have long provided. I believe that as SCHEV is able to develop more appropriate yardsticks for gauging institutional effectiveness, we will come to a fuller appreciation of the distance that these colleges help students travel.

Looking ahead, I see great possibilities ahead for Virginia's HBCUs as they enter the 21st Century. I see a future that builds on the promise that was intrinsic in the founding, particularly, of the earliest HBCUs – namely, that education will set you free.

Thank you.