

# Untold Stories of Black Leadership in Higher Education



# Untold Stories of Black Leadership in Higher Education:

*Learned, Gifted, and Black*

Edited by

W. Franklin Evans

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Untold Stories of Black Leadership in Higher Education:  
Learned, Gifted, and Black

Edited by W. Franklin Evans

This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2023 by W. Franklin Evans and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9467-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9467-8

To my father, Isam Evans, Sr.  
for not only showing me what hard work and perseverance means  
but also teaching me that your word is your bond.

To my mother, Othella Wilson Evans  
for the lessons of tough love and exposing me to a world of  
possibilities. You pour into me a zeal and yearning to be the best at  
whatever I attempted to accomplish and achieve.

To my ancestors who withstood the issues, challenges, and  
struggles of having dark skin but believed that God would bless the  
next generation to rise higher than what had occurred in the past or  
what was presently taking place.

To my son and daughter, A. Leighton, and S. Avery,  
for being precious gifts from God, and for loving me despite my  
imperfections, flaws, and weaknesses.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
Introduction .....	1
W. Franklin Evans	
Chapter 1 .....	5
<i>True Mentoring is More Than a Notion</i>	
W. Franklin Evans	
Chapter 2 .....	10
<i>New Kid on the Block: Being the Youngest Chair in the Division</i>	
Tywana Chenault-Hemby	
Chapter 3 .....	15
<i>Beyond Kansas: Taking Past Lessons and Navigating Your Oz</i>	
David S. Hood	
Chapter 4 .....	24
<i>Maneuvering the 4-Year to 2-Year College Shift</i>	
Vickie M. Whidbee	
Chapter 5 .....	30
<i>Work Hard, Gain the Skills, and Find your Niche</i>	
Calvin Brown	
Chapter 6 .....	38
<i>When the Music Stops</i>	
Sylvia Mason	
Chapter 7 .....	46
<i>Trained by the Best to Give My Best</i>	
LaRonda Conley	
Chapter 8 .....	51
<i>The Power and Security of the Professorship</i>	
W. Franklin Evans	

Chapter 9 .....	55
<i>God Grant Me the Serenity: HBCU Academic Administrators as Agents of Change</i>	
Ronnie Hopkins	
Chapter 10 .....	64
<i>Back in Stride Again: Returning to My Passion in Higher Education</i>	
Herman “Skip” Mason, Jr.	
Chapter 11 .....	69
<i>Just the Two of Us...and More: The Personal Narrative of a Black Couple in Higher Education</i>	
Mia Hardy	
Chapter 12 .....	76
<i>Leading While Black</i>	
Vincent Mumford	
Chapter 13 .....	92
<i>The Journey to Executive Leadership in Higher Education: A (Re)Examination of Gender Based Barriers Through a Womanist Lens</i>	
Monique L. Akassi	
Chapter 14 .....	105
<i>Being Your Best Self</i>	
W. Franklin Evans	
Contributors.....	110



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For years there have been numerous individuals telling and urging me to write a book. I knew that there were stories deep inside of me that needed to be told and shared. There are lessons and experiences that I learned and endured that should be freely and earnestly conveyed to others. I am blessed have family members, friends, neighbors, church members, classmates, associates, colleagues, mentees, and supporters who encouraged, prayed, and motivated me in ways unimaginable.

I am grateful to the contributions that my village of mentees provided in making this project possible. Each is an amazingly learned, gifted, and black leader in higher education, and their insight has been vital to bringing this dream to reality.

I give thanks to a few of the seasoned black male administrators that I gleaned tidbits of wisdom and knowledge from to include Dr. Henry N. Tisdale, Dr. Charlie Nelms, Dr. Alfred McWilliams, Dr. David Beckley, Dr. Robert Jennings, and Dr. Ronald Blackmon. Special thanks go to some phenomenal female leaders such as Dr. Mary Brown, Dr. Valencia Price, Dr. Velma Blackmon, Dr. Belinda Anderson, Dr. Cynthia Warrick, Dr. Dorothy Yancey, Dr. Hattie P. Harris, Dr. Diane B. Evans, and Anita Lee.

Without question, I am indebted to my Church of God in Christ family, especially Victor Temple COGIC, for the guidance and strength given to me in so many ways. Thanks to my supportive fraternity brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Phi Mu Alpha Music Sinfonia, and Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity.

Lastly, I would also like to thank Lisa Stokes, Cammie Grate, Sarah Simpson, Shena Crittendon, Joyce Baul, Curtis Swain, Eddie Moore, Dr. Derrick Wilkins, Dr. John Humphrey, Dr. Marion Robinson, Dr. John Robinson, Sybil O'Neal, and Dr. Lugenia Rochelle for loving and assisting me and the children with whatever we have needed and wanted. And to Dr.

Monique L. Akassi for her editing skills and the unwavering confidence she has instilled in me.

My love to all of you. . .

# INTRODUCTION

W. FRANKLIN EVANS

This book has been in the making for so many years. As a three-time serving President in the academy, there were stories to be told, lessons to be learned, and directions that needed to be given to those seeking guidance. Why write another book about black leadership or blacks in higher education? Truthfully, there is not enough written about today's leadership challenges, higher education issues, and the plight of persons of color serving at our institutions of higher learning. Over the years, so often an aspiring leader will say to me "My goal is to be a college president." My follow up questions generally include:

1. What are you doing now?
2. What professional route are you taking to ascend to the presidency?
3. Have you mastered other positions that will prepare you for the presidency?
4. Are you sure the presidency is what you really want?
5. Have you created a plan or outlined the necessary steps you plan to take to achieve this goal of the presidency?

From my experience, very few have critically taken time to answer the above questions, and it became quite apparent that perhaps there was a need for insight to be provided to help aspiring and young, black leaders who are committed to impacting the arena of higher education to devise a strategic and well thought out plan to the presidency.

It was my calling to be in higher education, but it was never my intent to be a college president. My goal was to attain the position of chief academic officer, and for some reason, Georgetown University was my aim. Unlike so many young professionals and preservice educators who are aspiring to the presidency, that was never something I wanted to do or was strategically

working to achieve. When I meet individuals who aspire and desire to be a college president, but they have no plan or real understanding of the path one should take in order for this dream to become a reality—I try to educate them and offer enlightenment.

I have identified several routes or tracks that generally lead to the presidency. The most traditional route, or track, is the Academic Track. It is the one I personally experienced with my more than 28 years in higher education. The Academic Track includes starting out as a professor and moving along those ranks and becoming a chairperson or director, a dean, and then becoming a senior academic leader (Assistant or Associate Vice President, Vice President, and Provost). This track could include a person working in Academic Services— such as a librarian, counselor, or researcher.

A second route is the Student Affairs Track. Persons who are passionate about working directly with students as advisors, Greek-life specialists, student life coordinators, judicial affairs directors, health service personnel, counselors, housing directors, and dean of students. Another closely related route is the Enrollment Management Track— which includes recruiters, financial aid personnel, registrar, international coordinators, and retention specialists. For persons working as an accountant, auditor, human resource officer, facilities manager, transportation coordinator, or comptroller, the Business-Finance Track might suit them.

The Institutional Development Track provides another avenue to the presidency. Persons serving as gift officers, marketing-communication specialists, alumni affairs directors, governmental and/or community relations leaders, or fundraisers would fall into this category. There is a Research-Sponsored Program Track for individuals skilled in 1890 administration, research and grant-funded projects, compliance officer, and governmental contracts.

Interestingly enough, there are other tracks that most recently persons have emerged to become president. The Executive-Legal Affairs Track includes individuals who have served as chief of staff, executive or special assistant

to the president, general counsel, chief operating office, or chief information office as well.

Perhaps one of the most unique routes that has allowed individuals to take on the presidency has been the Governance Track. The Governance Track has produced several presidents whose only exposure to higher education leadership has been their service to the board of trustees, board of governors, board of visitors, or some other type of governing relationship. These individuals, often while serving as a board member, are placed as interim president; however, ultimately, some are appointed as the permanent chief executive officer—despite their lack of higher education experience.

And one of the other tracks that has yielded persons shifting to the presidency is the Intermediary Affiliate Track—which includes individuals coming from regulatory accrediting agencies or other groups, such as UNCF, TMCF, and NAFEO.

There are other “less defined” routes that could lead to the presidency, but I have chosen to use this forum, this book, to help provide insight on the roles and positions often found in Academic Affairs. This book focuses primarily on the Academic Track and gives a snapshot of several persons functioning in various academic positions. It speaks very candidly about specific situations and obstacles faced in higher education. Written in narrative form, each chapter deals with a theme or a challenge that was faced head-on. It is through these personal experiences and challenges that lessons are learned and can be shared.

Over my career in higher education, I have personal, professional, and spiritual experiences that have helped to mold me into the leader that I have become. Fortunately for me, I have been blessed to teach, supervise, mentor, and advise a cadre of individuals for decades who are skilled and phenomenal leaders in higher education. These leaders have excelled in their careers—some as K-12 principals, practitioners, and superintendents. And there are others who have worked as professors, department chairpersons, deans, vice presidents, chief of staff, special assistant to the president, and even president. These leaders have experienced the ups and downs of being black, educational leaders. They have sought my advice and

counsel on many different situations, issues, and challenges. I thought that it would be beneficial for them to share their stories and testimonies— not only about some of the struggles they endured, and how they were able to withstand the pressures and adversity; but I also thought it would be helpful to hear about their triumphs and successes as well.

Nelson Mandela once said, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” and I am a firm believer that being educated and trained equips black leaders to be effective. I am proud to be a fourth-generation college graduate. My parents instilled in me the thirst for knowledge, and I recognized from an early age that excelling in my studies was important. I grew up in an era where more choices were made available for me that did not exist for my parents or even for my older siblings. It was no secret that if I could increase my knowledgebase and fine-tune the skills and gifts I had been blessed to acquire— I was destined to compete with anybody, regardless of my race. Race does matter, and for leaders who are people of color— we never forget that things may not ever come easy for us. However, the combination of being learned, gifted, and black can be advantageous. For those black educational professionals who have been called to serve and lead— especially in the arena of higher education— our road, our calling, our fate, and our legacy might vary differently from our counterparts; however, the need for our presence is so very necessary.

Therefore, this book is written to provide the reader with some insight into the experiences of several leaders, like myself, in higher education who are learned, gifted, and black. Hopefully, these experiences shared in this book will help the reader get a better view of what some black leaders have endured in their leadership role, offer some solution or options for having dealt with a challenge, and provide additional insight into the various roles, duties, and responsibilities of leaders who work within the confines of the Academic Track.

# CHAPTER 1

## TRUE MENTORING IS MORE THAN A NOTION

W. FRANKLIN EVANS

“A mentor is someone who allows you to see the hope inside yourself.”

—Oprah Winfrey

The word “mentoring” is not a new concept. I believe it is a word that is used very loosely and is often misunderstood as much as the word “love.” Not a day goes by without hearing someone use the word, either in conversation, written word, or via a song. There are numerous programs, groups, and organizations that have been developed and created to mentor or train individuals. Mentoring is not an uncommon occurrence, but what is mentoring? How is it defined? What does mentoring look like? How important is it to developing leaders?

When it comes to defining mentoring or mentorship, some view it as advising. They would say that mentoring is simply giving sound and reasonable advice about situations. Others would suggest that mentoring is the process of giving a suggested plan to help others solve a problem. Still, there are those who see mentoring as coaching, helping others to fine-tune their skills in order to complete a certain goal or stage in life. And there also are some who would define mentoring as a form of sponsorship. Truthfully, I think mentoring is a combination of all these things, and more. I would offer as an operational definition that mentoring is offering support, guidance, advice, encouragement, and counseling to help assist someone with his or her personal and professional development. I believe it to be a mutually beneficial relationship where both the mentor and mentee gain positively from the relationship.

The key to mentoring lies in development and learning. When one chooses to mentor, he or she should do so understanding that mentoring is not

designed to be a short-term occurrence. True mentoring involves long-term development that leads not only to personal growth but also to professional growth as well. On occasion, a mentee might think that the relationship established with the mentor is to assist with one's current role, present situation, or immediate aspiration, but mentoring is about the present and the future. It is a partnership, where both the mentor and mentee can collaborate, work together, learn from one another.

When I think of great mentoring partnerships, three sets of people to mind. First, the fictional bond between Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson demonstrates a positive mentoring example. John Watson was often referred to as the sidekick of Sherlock Holmes, but I believe he was much more than that. Watson was an ally, a devoted associate, a true friend, and a major support of Sherlock Holmes. A second example is the relationship between Batman and Robin. Yes, this is another fictional, comic-book pair of characters, but few would argue that these two demonstrate a very popular mentor-mentee relationship. From one episode or situation to the next, Batman and Robin worked collaboratively and collectively to get out of some stick situations. They assisted one another when faced with challenges and obstacles, and they overcame those obstacles and challenges, they celebrated their successes and victories. Batman would stress to Robin lessons to be learned, and he imparted knowledge and wisdom consistently. When I think of a real-world mentoring partnership, I am reminded of the mentor-mentee relationship between Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey. Maya Angelou's relationship was often referred to as "mentor-mother-friend." Ms. Winfrey has often shared that Maya Angelou played a significant role in her life by just being there, supporting her, and guiding her life from one step to another. She described Maya Angelou as being a dynamic teacher, one who modeled and lived the life she spoke about and taught.

Are there tasks or responsibilities for an effective mentor to carry out? I think that an effective mentor listens. He hears with his eyes and heart. I have heard it mentioned that God gives us two ears and one mouth for a reason. We should listen twice as much as we open our mouths to speak. Listening to one's mentee is very important. And sometimes, it is not so much what is said that becomes the focus, but rather it is the unsaid that



could easily be the main concern. Secondly, an effective mentor probes and asks questions. The probing or asking questions does not need to be intrusive, but it should provide the necessary examination or inquiry so that clarification and understanding can be achieved. A strong mentor challenges. He gets the mentee to open up and share. He uses techniques and strategies to increase the mentee's confidence while reducing stress and anxiety at the same time. The mentor challenges the mentee to be creative, innovative, and to take risks. An effective mentor is also one who motivates. Although some would say that it is impossible to motivate someone else because motivation is intrinsic, I would disagree and say that you can motivate others. You can successfully be a motivating force that has a major effect on others. A good mentor motivates by sharing his or her own experiences, and then connecting those experiences with the goals or aspirations of the mentee. When a mentor is positive, uplifting, and realistic, he is able to motivate and inspire change in those he comes in contact with to do better and be better.

I received an email from someone asking if I would serve as his mentor. I did not know the individual. We had not met in person, conversed by phone, nor had we been introduced by a mutual associate. He was familiar with me via social media and what he had seen on television. When I asked him what was the connection for the two of us or what did he really know about me? His response was quite pedestrian, and it confirmed for me that he did not understand the concept of mentoring. I am so perplexed by individuals who meet or have been introduced to someone and within minutes, those individuals now claim to have a new mentor. Meeting someone that impresses you, being introduced to someone whose career might sound exciting, or greeting someone who speaks to you at a gathering or function is not the formula for locking in on a mentor. There has to be more in order for you to connect with that individual, and certainly you will need to make a request for that individual to even consider the possibility of such a dynamic relationship.

If you are claiming someone as your mentor, that person should at least know your whole name. The two of you should have engaged in some type of private dialogue prior to your labeling the individual as a mentor. There has to be an acceptance and agreement that a mentoring relationship has

been established. If you are meeting someone for the first time, do your homework and find out as much as you can about the person. Determine what it is that connects the two of you as well as what gains you are hoping to accomplish from having this person as your mentor.

A couple of years ago I attend a reception and was asked by the host to make a few comments. Later that evening, a young lady approached me and asked if I would be her mentor. When I asked her a series of questions (i.e., What did she know about me? Why would I be the ideal mentor? What were her professional aspirations?), she could only respond that I seemed like a successful and cool person. And based upon that, she wanted a mentor who was successful and cool. She was not affiliated with any educational entity at all, we did not have any mutual professional ties, and there were no obvious personal connections that she mentioned. Moreover, her desire was to become an airline pilot. Needless to say, I am not an airline pilot, nor do I possess the skill set or network for that field of inquiry. But she did view me as successful and cool. It was our first encounter, and as brief of an encounter it was, she asked if I would serve as her mentor.

I realize that someone does not have to currently be in the same profession as you or even desire to be in that profession in order for you to serve as a mentor, but there has to be common ground, mutual interest, and a connection on some level in order for a mentoring relationship to occur. Therefore, I do not take or use the word mentor loosely. At its best, it is a great and amazing thing to have a mentor; however, it is more than just a word or an occasional idea and perception.

Over my career as an educator, having a true mentor has probably been lacking in my own professional development. I traveled this career path without having persons who were either willing to step up and mentor, did not see the value of mentoring, or embraced the idea of “pulling themselves up by their own bootstrap.” I have often said that if I had encountered a strong mentor early on in my professional career that I probably would be doing something else in life (serving as a judge and sitting on some federal bench). Nonetheless, I chose a career in education, more specifically higher education administration. I see and understand the value of mentorship, and

I believe that as a leader, I have a responsibility to give back, reach back, and help train a new cadre of educational leader.

Mentoring is extremely important. It requires dedication and commitment. It takes time and energy to do it successfully. The investment of one's time, energy, dedication, and commitment are invaluable. And when you are investing these things into someone else, you are in essence creating and developing your own legacy for the future. It is a long-term endeavor, but you are shaping the minds and lives of others who will be equipped to reach their full potential as they succeed in life.

## CHAPTER 2

### NEW KID ON THE BLOCK: BEING THE YOUNGEST CHAIR IN THE DIVISION

TYWANA CHENAULT-HEMBY

“Nothing is impossible – the word itself says ‘I’m possible.’”

—Audrey Hepburn

Whoever said, “age ain’t nothing but a number,” certainly has never served as the youngest chair in the division. I am certain that very few Division Chairs ever stated, “When I grow up, I plan on being the youngest chair in the division. Yet, after moving up the ranks from adjunct instructor to full-time faculty member to program coordinator, I found myself unenthusiastically assuming the crown jewel of *Division Chairperson*. In light of my youth, it felt as though some seasoned faculty members only saw a baby’s highchair. As such, I was forced to conduct an honest assessment of my credentials, higher education skill sets, and leadership abilities. There were lingering questions posed by me as well as others. Could I be an effective Division Chair? Was I simply too young? What would happen if I failed miserably? How could I address self-doubt while assuaging the doubt of others?

Abraham Lincoln once said, “I will prepare and someday my chance will come.” However, what happens when your chance comes before you feel sufficiently prepared? Unfortunately, the completion of my self-assessment did not reveal any astute academic prowess or superpower. I would like to think I was asked to assume the division chair position because of my proven leadership experience or perhaps my ability to solve complex problems. I could even kid myself and cite superior intellect like some pompous academicians do. But who was I kidding? I was young, capable, available, and optimistic about the future of the academe. Besides, many of the faculty members in my department simply did not have the time, energy,

or effort to assume the weight of the duties and responsibilities of such a demanding position.

After accepting my new reality as the youngest chair in the division, I went from being a member of the faculty gang to leading the gang! Instantaneously, I transitioned from faculty to administration and from friend of all to foe of some. I realized quickly, how some peoples' perceptions of positions can change. For the first time, I felt like a chef in the academic kitchen looking over a pot of faculty, liaison, and administrator gumbo. This particular experience provided a moment of clarity that would lend credence to and shape my future leadership style.

For the record, prior to assuming the position of Division Chair, I served as faculty for ten years. Like many others, I had the pleasure of being led by great division chairs. I have also suffered under the leadership of division chairs who were not-so-great. Which kind of chair would I become? How might previous colleagues perceive me as chair? I did not feel as though I was adequately prepared to assume the duties and responsibilities of division chair. After all, I neither enrolled in nor graduated from "Division Chair School." What would I do?

Immediately I contacted a few faculty members at other institutions, who had recently taken on the role of division chair, to inquire about their experiences. Their responses differed dramatically. Some expressed to me that it would be best to rule with an iron fist and take no prisoners. Some suggested that I blindly support the Academic Dean and make his vision my own. Yet others recommended that I befriend faculty and also assume a pro-faculty stance. Although their opinions varied, they each assured me they felt "ready" to assume the duties and responsibilities of the position. In the end, I decided to adopt an amalgamation of trusted advice and lived faculty experience. I thought about the duties and responsibilities of the job as well as what I would desire in a division chair to lead me. In so doing, I have identified what I like to call a Young Division Chair's Wish List.

As the Youngest Chair in the Division, I wish I were made aware of five simple things:

1. The Division Chair position is actually many positions masquerading as one.
2. Always Think: Students First!
3. Get *On the Job* Training
4. Build Relationships
5. Prioritize by saying “NO”

As the Youngest Chair in the Division, I wish someone would have explained to me how multi-dimensional the position is. Overnight, I went from being a full-time faculty member to being a leader, facilitator, manager, support system, and chief representative of an entire department. I no longer had someone to “go to” for answers because I immediately became the person to “go to.” I went from being managed to managing and from needing support to being a conduit for support. I wish someone would have told me there is a tremendous difference between being “a” representative of the division and being “the” representative of the division. I wish someone would have shared with me that the ability to compartmentalize is key and how the nomenclature of “division chair” is truly misleading.

First lesson...there are so many hats one must wear in order to be a successful chair. I wish someone would have explained to me the position is not about pleasing the Academic Dean or faculty. At the beginning tenure of my first year as chair, I initially sought the advice of faculty, administrators, and staff. I was curious about viewing the qualities of an effective chair through their respective academic lens. However, I quickly realized that most problems were not really faculty, administrators, and/or staff problems. They were student problems! As I begin to reflect on the advice I formerly solicited from previous and current chairs, I recognized they gave one of two options: lead with the academic dean in mind or lead with faculty in mind. As a full-time faculty member, I have always ascribed to a student-centered approach. After my first year as the chair, I understood that I didn’t have to choose between two options. I wish someone would have told me that I could best lead with the A.F.S. triad (Academic Dean, Faculty, and Students). Every higher education institution exists to meet the needs of its students. An effective chair must find a way to balance the

directives of the Academic Dean and meet the needs of faculty while thinking about students first.

Second lesson...It is perfectly o.k. to adopt a student first leadership approach. I wish someone would have explained to me the job would present a variety of opportunities to learn and grow and that I would be baptized by fire with on the job training that would aid in my development as the youngest chair in the division. I wish someone would have coached me to believe in my ability to lead and find unconventional answers to everyday questions. I also wish someone would have informed me early in my career as chair that I would not have all of the answers and that no one really expects for me to have all of the answers. I wish I would have known how humbling this position can be. It made me aware of how much I did not know about the structure and function of many facets of my institution. However, my ability to solve problems increased the more I read books and articles about being an effective chair. The more I spoke with proven leaders and mentors, the better I became at providing answers to everyday questions.

Third lesson...Mentors matter! Find a great mentor to talk to regularly. I wish someone would have reminded me about the importance of relationship building. John C. Maxwell often says, "People don't care what you know until they know how much you care." I have learned that building successful relationships is about displaying a general concern for the sanctity of people. When I first assumed the position of the youngest chair in the division, I was admonished for "showing too much care and concern" for people. It was suggested that I would never become an effective leader if I did so. However, through experience, I have found the opposite to be true and I am truly grateful. I have established great relationships with every department on campus. I speak with the physical plant staff in the same manner in which I speak to the faculty, cafeteria staff, library staff, coaching staff, or the Academic Dean and students. This simple gesture has proved invaluable. When I am in need these people assist me in unimaginable ways and they do it with a smile. Much can be said about one's leadership style when people are willing to do things for a leader because they want to and not simply because they have to.

Fourth lesson...Take time to build relationships. It is time well spent and a great investment in your future. As a final point, I wish someone would have told me the importance of learning to say, "No." It is often said, "Your YES means nothing unless you can say NO!" This last lesson is a tough one for me. I admit I am still learning the art of saying "no". Due to the demands of the position, I realize I cannot be all things to all people. There are many items I would like to say no to that I simply cannot. There are many worthwhile endeavors I would like to say yes to that I simply cannot. I am still attempting to devise an effective strategy to help me prioritize my No's. For now, my Yes is winning the battle, however, my No's is gaining traction and I sense I am moving in the right direction. I plan to keep working on my No for I am sure it will end up being my saving grace. Until I am proficient at saying No, I will continue to reflect on the other lessons I have learned for they have already helped to ease my transition as the youngest chair in the division.



# CHAPTER 3

## BEYOND KANSAS: TAKING PAST LESSONS AND NAVIGATING YOUR OZ

DAVID S. HOOD

“Everything in life has some risk, and what you have to actually learn to do is how to navigate it.”

—Reid Hoffman

### The Wisdom of Oz

In *Bought Wisdom: Tales of Living and Learning*, Burks defines Bought Wisdom as “the kind of wisdom you get from experiencing life and all it tosses your way” (2017, xiii). It is the kind of wisdom for which you pay a price to learn. Through his interactive teaching memoir, he tells his leadership story and invites readers to reflect on their own lessons learned, their Bought Wisdom. Growing up, I could count on the annual telecast of one of the greatest films in cinema history, *The Wizard of Oz*. *The Wizard of Oz* is the well-known 1939 adaptation of L. Frank Baum’s whimsical children’s book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. It was very much a part of our cultural fabric, airing annually from 1959 until 1991 and often signaling the change in seasons.

Dorothy utters this classic line within minutes of crash-landing in a new and unfamiliar land, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore!” As I reflect on *Bought Wisdom: Tales of Living and Learning* and *The Wizard of Oz*, I recall the lessons Dorothy Gale learned at home in Kansas. These lessons—her Bought Wisdom—when examined from an appreciative inquiry perspective nurtured her growth and success in Oz. These lessons

ultimately equipped her to complete what Joseph Campbell (2004) would call a “Hero’s Journey” and one day return to Kansas empowered.

Given this framing, my experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are my collective “Kansas” and my new work at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) or Historically White Institution (HWI) is my Oz. In transparency, the Kansas-Oz metaphor cannot transfer or translate to every example of my lived experiences in higher education. Furthermore, the illustrative metaphor does not exclusively inform my craft knowledge as a scholar and a leader.

### **Stops, Detours, Setbacks, Oh Goodness**

My grounding in Kansas spanned an eleven-year period and included three distinct institutions with very unique missions, serving diverse students and purposes. I contend Kansas prepared me for Oz; however, Oz was not the only place with trails and brick roads. Kansas was a journey unto itself as well. Indeed, if we are not careful, we miss out on the importance of our Kansas experiences. We dismiss the preparation these experiences offer for our time in the Land of Oz. From the unexpected setbacks, required detours, and stops that caused me to linger longer than intended, I learned essential lessons along my journey through Kansas.

According to Collins (2001), “Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great.” For some people, their journey to “goodness” was so challenging that a long stop—or a permanent residence—at good is welcomed over the continued pursuit of the seemingly mythical “great”. To be sure, there is a sense of satisfaction that comes from being good. But Collin continues and cautions, “We don’t have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don’t have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life.”

Among the existing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States, a number of institutions are comfortable resting in their goodness. Perhaps this institutional paralysis is caused by senior leaders

who are either unwilling or unable to shift to greatness. Perhaps this institutional paralysis is rooted in the persistent maintenance of the status quo. Whatever the myriad reasons, what I know is this: higher educational institutions and their students miss out when leaders do not evolve. Central to our evolution are (1) seeking right relationships of alignment and allegiance with leaders with whom we learn and develop, (2) building a capacity for navigating and transforming resistance and rejection, (3) wedding passion, purpose, and productivity to develop our capacity knowing our institution deeply, sharpening our ability to lead teams, and sustaining partnerships, (4) reflecting on our journey to change course, blaze trails, and achieve goals.

### **Alignment and Allegiance in Kansas**

Over the years I have had the great blessing of work with leaders in ways uncommon and—at times—unknown to my peers. The way I connected with them was simply different: from my pastor when I was a child and my high school and college band directors, to higher education administrators from deans to provosts and presidents. I got to know them beyond their public personas. As a trusted protege, I was exposed to some conversations that were sensitive or even confidential. This was both rewarding and challenging. It came with a great measure of responsibility and essential expectations of discernment, integrity, and discretion.

This association with leaders was not without peril. There were times in Kansas when my connection with a leader conveyed alignment. In one instance I was involuntarily enlisted in a turf war. Over a six month period, I was promoted from a tenure track faculty position to a senior academic administrative role only to be returned to a faculty position. My rapid ascent and equally rapid descent were the direct result of my alignment to my supervisor who happened to get removed by the institution's chief officer. Over three of my supervisor's other direct reports were demoted, severed ties, or otherwise left the institution.

The lesson learned from this—and the Bought Wisdom I offer you—is to be discerning about who you choose as a mentor and with whom you serve

as a direct report. This is critical because they become targets and thereby exponentially increase your exposure to becoming an unexpected casualty.

## **Resistance and Rejection in Kansas**

During another Kansas moment, I wrestled with stifling resistance and rejection to my creativity and my genuine desire to provide access and resources for students. My colleagues and I presented a bevy of programs and initiatives aimed at improving the academic experience of students. Ultimately our focus was on radically transforming first-year retention and four-year graduation rates. Academic leadership from junior leaders to members of the Chancellor's cabinet presented programs and initiatives. Unfortunately, all programs and initiatives required the approval of the Chancellor. It did not matter if the idea came from a department leader or a vice chancellor, it had to be blessed by the Chancellor.

We were determined to make a difference and so we persisted. I was eventually granted a limited approval of one initiative. We were excited to begin resurrecting, rebranding, and relaunching the institution's Honors Program. Once my team began marketing, recruiting, interviewing, and selecting the first cohort of students, I worked with the Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement and Giving to identify potential donors to support the Honors Program.

The Vice Chancellor had been cultivating a donor and she was thrilled to connect us. The donor wanted to support the institution's work that aligned with his organization's mission. The organization was a newcomer to the region and sought meaningful connections to building a purposeful presence. The Chancellor and Vice Chancellor had pitched several ideas and made the funding "ask". None of the initiatives resonated with the donor; that is, until the Vice Chancellor presented our Honors Program initiative. The potential donor was intrigued and wanted substantially to support the Honors Program. The Chancellor was not pleased with this turn of events and adamantly opposed the donor's desire to fund the Honors Program initiative over funding any of the Chancellor's initiatives. Because of this short-sighted reaction, the institution missed out on a \$1 million gift.

The lesson learned from this—and the Bought Wisdom I offer you—is attune yourself to the culture and climate of your institution with attention to how your senior leaders respond to change, resourcefulness, and creativity. Learn sooner—rather than later—if your leaders feel every idea must generate from them or if they are welcomed to building on the greatness of the team.

### **Passion, Purpose, and Productivity in Kansas**

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi explores a realm wherein one's challenges and skills align such that one's work is effort. When we are “in flow” we are so immersed and engaged in whatever we are doing that we become—at times—oblivious to time and space. In fact, we may stop only to realize we have been working away for hours without concerns wondering how the time passed. I experienced this notion of flow during seven of what would be my last eight years in Kansas. I was serving an institution where my passion and purpose aligned to catapult me to unparalleled productivity. My work was focused and resulted in measurable success, professional growth, and meaningful professional and personal relationships.

By this time, I had learned from my missteps and from the Bought Wisdom of others. I connected with a veteran higher education leader shortly upon my arrival. She was a well-regarded campus fixture and who had impeccable focus on the critical work of our division. She was not content to rest on the solid work of her past; all of us—including our leader—worked long hours to achieve our goals and produce outcomes that met our expectations. We were “in flow”. We honed our skills and produced resources that furthered our research agenda and secured our institution's place in the national student success conversation.

There were times when my colleagues and I quietly questioned the methods our leader used to produce results. She was unwavering. Her standards were high. She inspected what she expected. I vividly recall submitting weekly reports to her each Friday. All of us as direct reports were required to do so. Our weekly reports provided her with an overview of the work of our division for the week, important internal or external partner meetings, our

specific contributions to student success, any challenges or obstacles, and major accomplishments. We silently balked yet we did what we then characterized as unnecessary busy work. When I became a dean, I realized how the “busy work” had equipped me with the lived experience of gathering essential data to survey and understand the institutional landscape to make informed decisions.

The lesson learned from this—and the Bought Wisdom I offer you—is study your leaders and become a student of their protocols and processes. Ask yourself questions about what was done and why it was done. Ponder how you might improve upon tools and resources once you occupy a similar seat. More than anything, be open to ways you can develop your capacity to know your institution deeply, sharpened your ability to lead teams, and sustain partnerships.

### **A Change is Gonna Come**

As I entered my eighth year at the institution, I noticed a shift in dynamics and opportunities. Kansas was different now. Advancement opportunities dwindled. Meaningful professional growth had reached an apex. *Was it time to leave Kansas? Could I rekindle my flow with job-embedded professional learning and growth? Was I equipped to make the transition to Oz?* It was time; however, was I ready?

For about six months I wrestled with where to go and what to do next. A mentor suggested that I look at a Historically White Institution (HWI). Some colleagues echoed that sentiment. They felt I should “challenge” myself and “broaden my exposure” by going beyond Kansas to an HWI. I had not previously taken their suggestions seriously. I intensified my search and looked at other HBCUs for leadership opportunities. I researched more and explored a number of positions. I noticed a common thread as more and more opportunities came my way: every available opportunity was beyond Kansas!

Up to that point, my entire higher education career had been rooted in Kansas. If I wanted to advance, I had to be open to going where the right