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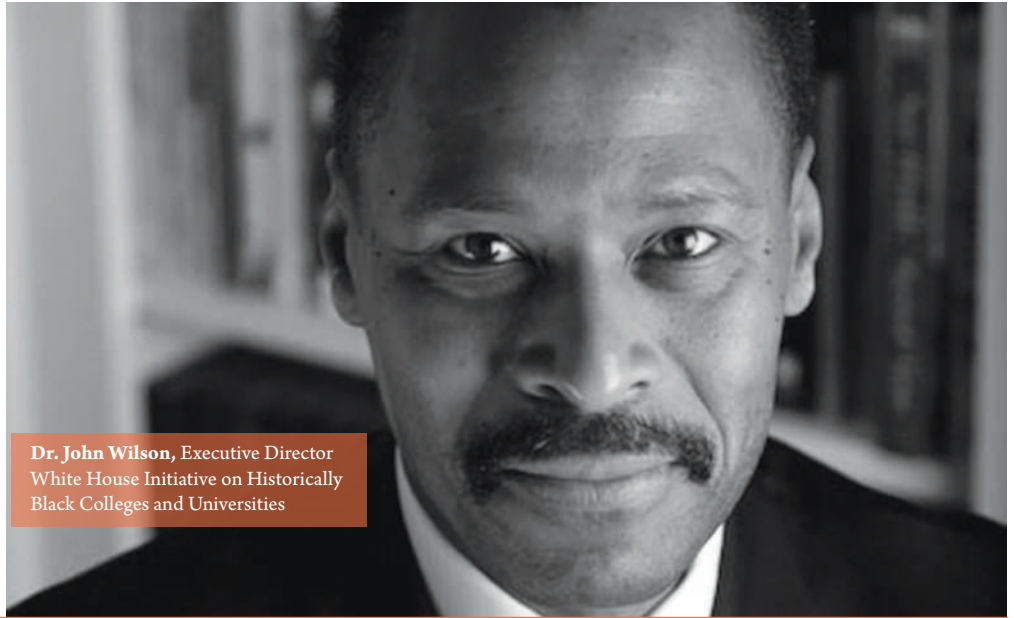


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Dr. John Wilson, Executive Director  
White House Initiative on Historically  
Black Colleges and Universities

# HBCU *Non-Cents*

# {Nonsense}

By: William Period

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Astute Magazine had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. John Wilson, Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), to discuss his own HBCU experience and President Obama's 2020 goals for HBCUs, including how he intends to meet them. A proud Morehouse man, Dr. Wilson understands his greatest challenge is to stop what Astute refers to as the “non-cents.”

There seems to be a missing link between the pride HBCU graduates have in their alma maters and the lack of alumni support these institutions receive. Dr. Wilson asserts that he has years of anecdotal evidence that speaks to HBCUs living up to the Latin meaning of alma mater – “nurturing mother.” However, despite countless HBCU graduates attributing their foundational development to their undergraduate institutions, Dr. Wilson admits these words fail to “match the current monetary support many HBCUs receive from their alumni.” This “non-cents” issue is one of great concern that Dr. Wilson's office works daily to reverse.

Wilson noted that alumni-giving nationally is 13% for all institutions of higher education, but that number falls to 2-3% when you look at some HBCUs. He believes this disparity in giving is relational to the negative perceptions of HBCUs. In response, the initiative's main objective is building HBCU capacity and changing perceptions of HBCUs is only one of five overall objectives.

When asked about his decision to attend Morehouse for his undergraduate education, Dr. Wilson humorously referenced his childhood pastor. He joked that the minister “preached Morehouse as much as he preached Jesus.” His pastor, an ambassador, apparently not only of Christianity, but Morehouse as well, inspired a contingent of young males from the church to join the storied Morehouse tradition.

Dr. Wilson referred to his time at Morehouse as “psychologically wholesome.” When probed about the meaning of the term, Wilson reflected on a younger American nation, more racially polarized and divided than today. But, at Morehouse, he stated, “It was our world... We lived in W.E.B Dubois Hall, worshiped in King Chapel, and ate in Benjamin E. Mays Hall.” He was certain that his experience at Morehouse was one most HBCU students shared and as evidence of his institution, spoke of a special type of camaraderie and kinship



attended HBCUs outside of his.

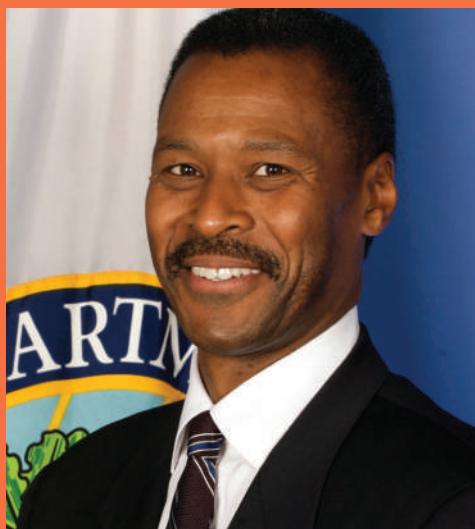
However, in present times many ask whether HBCUs are still relevant. This is a polarizing question that has served as a catalyst for countless charged debates over the credence and role of Black colleges today. However, it is a question that Dr. Wilson finds little relevance in. In his opinion, "the question itself is completely off the table... Instead, I'll tell you we have a 2020 goal; by 2020 we want to have the best-educated, most diverse education system in the world... In order to be number one, we need to graduate more than 54,000 black graduates each year from HBCUs (as opposed to the current rate of 35,500, an increase of more than 65%)." To be clear, this isn't just Dr. Wilson's goal. The initiative to increase the capacity of HBCUs is an integral component of President Obama's charge to improve the educational level of all of America's citizens. Dr. Wilson pointed out, "You can go on our website and see... We [Office of the White House Initiative on HBCUs] have an executive order and it's the blueprint for what we are doing. There shouldn't be any ambiguity of what the White House Initiative is about."

The HBCU executive order has led Dr. Wilson's office to develop four non-negotiable goals: capital enlargement, which he considers first and foremost, consists of pushing more money into the schools; campus enrichment, through various initiatives; strategy development, to help HBCU leaders innovate; and the last, overarching one is perception enhancement.

The perception of HBCUs is definitely a sensitive topic within Dr. Wilson's political environment. In fact, due to its precarious political positioning, Wilson informed us that some individuals wanted his office to simply serve as a "cheerleader" for HBCUs. This executive director, however, has no time for vapid celebratory tactics, stating that, "We have to talk about HBCUs in a truthful light... how can I meet challenges if I don't talk about and acknowledge them?"

It is imperative to note the following two points in view of Wilson's experience in addressing issues of alumni funding and perceptions of HBCUs. First, although Dr. Wilson has graduate degrees from Harvard and has spent much of his career working for institutions like MIT and George Washington University, he considers himself a Morehouse Man. Second, according to the Department of Education website, Dr. Wil-

"... By 2020 we want to have the best-educated most diverse education system in the world ..."



son helped to raise nearly \$3 billion dollars for MIT, when working as its director of foundation relations. Considering his past experiences and the two most salient challenges facing his office, it is clear that Dr. Wilson was no pom-pom-holding hire.

As our time with Dr. Wilson came to a close, he flipped the script, asking us how much money we would guess the federal government puts into HBCU's yearly. Having done our homework, but not completely confident in our uncaffeinated minds we bid a little low, wagering \$700 million. "Way low!" Dr. Wilson responded. "Five billion dollars every year goes to HBCUs. Eighty-five percent of that money," he explained, "is in the form of student financial aid and institutional aid." The remaining portion of the money goes to funding research projects and other academic institutes.

Preserving and developing the impact of these moneys is yet another focus of Dr.

Wilson's. He has worked to increase the fiscal support HBCUs garner from federal agencies like FEMA and the Department of Defense. The advantage of pursuing money from these agencies that are unrelated to the Department of Education is clear. In our current economic climate, the Department of Education is constantly threatened with cuts and therefore pursuing funding from various agencies has become a prudent practice. In addition to this eclectic approach to acquiring federal funding, Dr. Wilson's team is working to increase the amount of funding HBCUs successfully attain from large non-government funding groups such as the Lumina Foundation.




At the close of our interview, the Astute Team asked Dr. Wilson what words President Obama had for him upon his appointment as the executive director of the White House's Initiative on HBCUs. Dr. Wilson said the President's message was simple: Change. He added, "[President Obama] has always understood that HBCUs are important, but many of them are substantially challenged right now. Consistent with his perspective on America, a lot of the improvement we desire is within the province of our control. There are things that we can do to get better. So let's figure out what those are, and let's get going."

Finally, let us revisit Dr. Wilson's position on the question that many take time to debate. Are HBCU's still relevant today? Understanding past and present, endless and vital contributions of HBCUs to students, society and our world, prior to taking the question off the table, Dr. Wilson emphatically defined the irrelevancy of such a question in one word, "Nonsense!"



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