

Imagining a “New Morehouse”

By the Morehouse Collective Statement Lead Authors¹

“Love everybody and tell the truth.”²

The current state of Morehouse is unsustainable and if present trends continue—societally, financially, educationally and organizationally—the College will fail to be viable one day. The question is not *if*, but *when*. Every year the cost of higher education is rising as the pool of college-ready black males is decreasing.³ Beyond that, Morehouse finds it more difficult to attract the top young students that it did in the past. This is in part because elite universities are competing for top black students in a way that they did not in years past; they are offering top high school seniors scholarship packages that are hard to refuse. Meanwhile, Morehouse’s inflation-adjusted endowment today is less than it was 10 years ago.⁴ We have an operating margin of negative 4.0%, which means that, operationally, every day that we open the doors we lose money.⁵ Our credit rating has just been downgraded by Moody’s with the dire warning: “Outlook is Negative.”⁶ The factors Moody’s cited include a 45% decrease in liquidity over the past two years and a 16% decline in matriculation rate over the past five years.⁷ Additionally, many of our best professors may be gone within a few years, due either to retirement, to pay disparities or to organizational frustration. Lastly, a long-standing culture of nepotism, inefficiency and poor service are pervasive.

The Board of Trustees should level with us who care—the alumni, students and faculty—by talking *honestly* about the severity of the problems the College is facing so that we can work together towards solutions. *We are all adults and need not be treated as though we wouldn’t understand or can’t handle some bad news.* By inviting us in, we are able to help fix what is wrong, financially and otherwise. Our problems exist in the real world, and they are not therefore going to be solved in a vacuum. Morris Brown was once a vibrant institution and today clings to life.⁸ Now is the time for all people concerned about the future of Morehouse to act while there is still time.

To survive as a vibrant and relevant institution, a bold re-imagining of Morehouse and the value proposition it offers students is required. It is helpful to revisit the original founding spirit and ethos behind Morehouse and schools like it. Morehouse’s founders—abolitionists and freedpeople—were deeply concerned about the marginalized and voiceless people of their day, our ancestors. Today those same spirits would recognize, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁹ They would be committing their lives to being advocates for human and civil rights, raising their voices and taking action against injustice and oppression wherever it appears. Translating that founding ethos means asking: “*Who are the oppressed, marginalized and voiceless whom we should be serving today?*” It means being concerned about the child in Sierra Leone whose arms have been cut off because of the diamond trade; the Ghanaian farmer who can’t get fair prices for his products due to U.S. farm subsidies; the Chinese worker

blinded in an iPad factory; the victim of human-traffickers; the child born into literal modern-day slavery; and yes, the great grand-children of slaves in this country—the black American underclass—who still suffer disproportionately. Today those founding spirits would not be so limited or provincial in their world-view to limit their concerns to just these shores.

One way to imagine a “New Morehouse” is to transform the institution into the paragon of Social Justice and Human Rights, just as MIT or Stanford is to Computer Science or Harvard or Yale is to Law. *Morehouse could be the place where all people concerned about the disinherited come from around the world, regardless of their background or ultimate intended vocation, wanting to overlay and undergird all of their planned life’s work with a deep commitment to addressing injustice.* That is a modern-day articulation and manifestation of the spirit in which our beloved College was founded. Instead of struggling to meet recruitment goals, *imagine bright young men from all around the world competing for coveted spots at such a special place.* Howard Thurman foresaw that: “...community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them—unknown and undiscovered brothers.”¹⁰

To bring about such a modern, sustainable vision, and a return to our founding principles will require institutional “soul-searching” and deep new commitments: to democracy over autocracy, to meritocracy over nepotism; to transparency over secrecy; to inclusion over exclusion; to institutional mission over personal agenda; and to sensitively addressing faculty and curricular imbalances. It seems very clear: *To not become an anachronism, Morehouse must become a Thought Leader.*

Real change must begin at the Board level. The question must be asked: *Precisely to whom is the Board accountable?* If not to the alumni, students, faculty, staff and parents, then to whom? If the answer is, “No one,” that itself is a problem. Recall that the Board has refused to even *meet* with a delegation of the 250-plus concerned faculty, alumni and students who are signatories to our Collective Statement to the Board.¹¹ The rationale given is that meeting with us would “slow down” the presidential selection process and that it is “outside the established search process structure.”¹² However, respectfully, this is merely a convenient excuse. Who other than the Board *established* the “established” structure? Further, it disregards that we have clearly stated our concerns go *far* beyond just the selection of a new president and are *institutional* and *structural* in nature. Without a democratic selection process, term limits or accountability to stakeholders, the Board has become closed to outside voices with some members serving for 20-plus or even 30-plus years. Morehouse cannot be a beacon of democratic values in the world unless we are in fact living by those values ourselves. In a spirit of hope, we look forward to the many ways in which we can share the vision of a “New Morehouse” with the Board and with other leaders of the school. At the same moment, we pledge our own best efforts to participate in the hard work that will transform the vision into a vibrant reality.

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¹ Imar Hutchins and others, “Collective Statement to the Board of Trustees of Morehouse College and to all people of conscience within the Morehouse community, June 26, 2012,” <http://www.morehousenation.com/collective/> (accessed September 7, 2012).

² Ram Dass, foreword to *One Soul, One Love, One Heart: The Sacred Path to Healing All Relationships*, by John Welshons (Novato, California: New World Library, 2009), xi-xiv.

³ Ernie Suggs, “Males a distinct minority at HBCUs,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 1, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/males-a-distinct-minority-1321880.html> (accessed August 16, 2012).

⁴ Morehouse’s IRS Form 990’s for the period 2002 - 2012 are available at: <http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/99ofinder/>. Morehouse’s current endowment is \$128.9 million according to Wikipedia/U.S. News and World Report. In 2002 it was \$112.36 million according to its 2002 IRS Form 990. The 2002 endowment adjusted for inflation would be \$143.09 million in 2012 dollars. Inflation calculator available at http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

⁵ Moody’s Investor Service, “Moody’s downgrades Morehouse College’s (GA) long-term rating to A3 from A2; outlook is negative,” Global Credit Research, http://www.moody.com/research/Moody-downgrades-Morehouse-Colleges-GA-long-term-rating-to-A3--PR_251543 (accessed August 16, 2012).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. “Forty-five percent reduction of unrestricted monthly liquidity to \$23.7 million in FY 2011 from \$42.7 million in FY 2009. FY 2011 monthly liquidity is the equivalent of 95.4 days of operating expenses.”

⁸ Ernie Suggs, (gust 16, 2012).wes employees thousands,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 29, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/morris-brown-owes-employees-thousands/nRPBx/> (accessed September 4, 2012).

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963,” http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed August 16, 2012).

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, *The Search For Common Ground; An Inquiry Into The Basis Of Man's Experience Of Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 104.

¹¹ Hutchins and others, “Collective Statement.”

¹² Robert C. Davidson, Jr., letter to Imar Hutchins, July 9, 2012, http://www.morehousenation.com/collective/hutchins_davidson.shtml (accessed September 7, 2012).