

The Importance of the Narrative - HBCU and Africana Studies

SNCC 60th Anniversary Conference

October 2021

Speakers include:

Wisdom Cole - Interim National Director of the NAACP Youth & College Division

Michael Lomax - President and Chief Executive Officer, UNCF

Josh Myers - Associate Professor of Africana Studies in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University

Noliwe Rooks - Chair & Professor in Africana Studies at Brown University

This discussion centers around the origins of Africana Studies and the importance of Africana Studies to organizing work. The discussion will also discuss the Historically Black Colleges and Universities that are important for the advancement of the black community.

Wisdom Cole: Good afternoon, and welcome to the 60th SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] 60th convention. My name is Wisdom Cole, and I am the National Director of the NAACP [National Association of the Advancement of Colored People] Youth and College Division. I have the esteemed privilege of serving as the moderator for this afternoon's panel. We are having an exciting conversation today with some incredible panelists on the importance of the narrative surrounding HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities] and Africana studies ¹ programs.

This discussion will center on preserving our culture, passing down a wealth of knowledge from generation to generation, and highlighting how essential and critical our Black institutions are. We aim to explore the vital role that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Black and Africana studies programs play in our development as a community. In this age and era, these institutions and programs are more vital than ever to our livelihood. We are constantly fighting for their survival and ensuring they can continue to exist, thrive, and support Black students and scholars.

I am very excited to introduce an incredible panel this afternoon, and I look forward to diving into this essential conversation. We'll begin by introducing our panelists one by one, allowing each to share a bit about themselves and their work. First, we have Michael Lomax, President and CEO of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF).

Michael Lomax: Thank you very much, Wisdom. It's an honor to be here. For the past 17 years, I have had the privilege of serving as President and CEO of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). In this role, I've worked with our 37 historically Black colleges and universities that are members of UNCF, as well as over 100 additional institutions.

¹Africana Studies- an academic field that studies the history, culture, and politics of people of African descent in Africa and the African diaspora

Just to share a bit of personal history, I am a graduate of [Morehouse College](#). I attended Morehouse from 1964 to 1968. When I first arrived at Morehouse as a freshman in 1964, the year of [Freedom Summer](#) the first place, I visited the SNCC offices, just a few blocks away from campus. It was there that I met [Julian Bond](#), whom my mother, a journalist, described as the writer of the best news releases in the civil rights movement.

I graduated in 1968, shortly after the assassination of [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and his funeral on the Morehouse campus. My college years were bookended by extraordinary moments in African American history and the freedom struggle. One of the defining aspects of my professional life has been my personal, educational experience at Morehouse during a time of civil rights activism, as well as deep reflection on the relevance of what we were learning in the classroom.

When I joined the faculty in 1969, we were actively debating whether we needed Black studies on Black college campuses. It's amazing to me that these issues remain alive and hotly debated today. I am delighted to join this panel with two extraordinary scholars to discuss the importance of understanding our past, preserving our history, and safeguarding our institutions.

Wisdom Cole: Thank you so much, Michael. Next, we have [Noliwe Brooks](#), Department Chair and Professor of African Studies at Brown University.

Noliwe Brooks: Hi, thank you so much. Like Michael, I am truly honored to be here and am very much looking forward to this conversation. For those of you just tuning in, you might not know that we've already spent the last 45 minutes engaging in both agreeable and, at times, heated debate on some of these topics. I hope some of that energy and passion is captured here today. It just reaffirms how essential these conversations are: conversations about Black institutions, Black students, HBCUs, and Africana studies programs.

I am a proud graduate of HBCU and the great-grandchild of an HBCU graduate. My grandmother attended [Bethune-Cookman University](#), and my father graduated from [Howard University](#). I initially tried to attend Sarah Lawrence College for a year but ultimately found my way to [Spelman College](#), where I graduated. Since Spelman, I've been part of predominantly white colleges and universities, but I've always felt deeply connected to the HBCU community.

Many of my colleagues with PhDs who teach in predominantly white institutions are also HBCU graduates. It's an incredible cycle and network that exists among people who attended HBCUs. These graduates often develop a profound and nuanced understanding of the politics of white supremacy. Even when working in different spaces, they maintain a close watch on what's happening at HBCUs.

No matter where we went, there was a collective pride and connection. For example, when we see what students at Howard are achieving, we think those are our students. When faculty at Spelman make strides, we feel *that those are our people*. It's a form of nation-building, a shared tradition, and a sense of responsibility that emerges from attending these institutions. I'm sure we'll share stories today about how HBCUs shaped us, as well as how Africana studies programs influenced us. But I also want to mention that I was raised by a community of SNCC activists. That upbringing gave me a unique perspective on the value and hopefulness that HBCUs bring.

When those SNCC activists talked about institutions like Talladega, Tougaloo, and the various A&M schools, it was clear how critical those institutions were. Without them, the freedom struggle of the 1960s, particularly in Mississippi and other parts of the South, might not have been possible. Even if these schools didn't always produce the leaders whose names we remember most often, they provided the foundation, the backbone, and the tradition that supported the movement.

I think it's notable that we should always remember how, in the United States, students often found their training ground in their efforts to make their institutions more hospitable to themselves. Through those struggles, they developed a certain politic and ethic, which they carried with them into their communities as a way of combating white supremacy. So, I would say that, both professionally and personally, as well as in what inspires me, this conversation about HBCUs and Africana studies is incredibly welcome.

Wisdom Cole: Thank you so much, Noliwe. And last but certainly not least, we have Josh Meyers, Associate Professor of Africana Studies in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University.

Josh Myers: Thank you, Wisdom, and thank you, Michael and Noliwe. I was part of the planning for this conference, and one of the things we wanted to highlight is how we take control of the narrative surrounding the civil rights movement or, perhaps more accurately, the Black freedom struggle and how it is framed. And, of course, this framing begins with us: with our institutions, our organizations, and the intellectual projects we have created. HBCUs and Africana studies are critical parts of this effort.

I was born in an HBCU setting in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I grew up in that environment, attended an HBCU for my undergraduate studies at Howard University, where I now teach, and earned my PhD in African American Studies from Temple University ever since I've been teaching at Howard in the Department of African American Studies.

My entire life has been shaped by African American studies and HBCUs. So, I'm very excited to engage in this conversation about how we act as intellectual insurgents at this particular moment. There are so many connections between our histories and the current iterations of our struggles. If we frame our histories correctly, we can better understand and actively participate in the struggles of today.

HBCUs, again, are central to these struggles. However, they often face significant challenges. On one hand, there's pressure for HBCUs to serve as finishing schools for the Black elite. On the other hand, there's a deep tradition of radicalism and insurgency within these institutions. These two legacies often coexist, but they can also conflict. Sometimes, the marketing departments of these schools attempt to present both identities simultaneously, saying, "This is who we are." Yet, as we know, those narratives don't always align.

Part of reclaiming the narrative involves understanding that HBCUs are inherently complex spaces where these legacies have always coexisted and clashed. This complexity is the focus of my first book, which examines the 1989 student protests at Howard University. Interestingly, as we speak, there's a 2021 student protest happening at Howard. I hope we'll have a chance during

this panel to discuss the meaning of this current moment and its connection to the historical narrative of the Black freedom struggle and SNCC.

SNCC, after all, was founded in many ways as a formation made possible by students at HBCUs. I wouldn't say "HBCU," but rather "people at HBCUs" because it was [Ella Baker](#), an alumna of [Shaw University](#), who said, "This is going to be the place y'all come." So, where were they coming from? They were coming from the Atlanta University Center, from Nashville, from the D.C. area, and from other Black institutions. There's something to be said about that. There's also something to be said about the mentors of these particular students, like Ella Baker, Sterling Brown, and many others, who, in many ways, were practicing a form of Black studies before the term even existed. I think that connection helps clarify not only the historical roots but also how we can continue in that tradition today. It's important to be clear about what that tradition looks like now.

Wisdom Cole: Thank you so much, Josh. I appreciate you grounding us in why we're here today. I recognize even my pathway to being here being mentored and influenced by the late, great. [Bob Moses](#). As a former math teacher like Bob and now in my role as an organizer, I get to work with so many HBCU students across the country who are doing phenomenal work, fighting for their rights, and shaping our future. Thank you for centering us on this.

I'd like to kick off this panel discussion by grounding us in what's happening right now. You mentioned the 2021 Howard student protests. Today, students are currently sitting in at the Blackburn University Center. They've been there for over 48 hours, protesting for better housing conditions, demanding representation on the board of trustees, and ensuring their voices are heard.

Their efforts also extend to federal demands. They're calling on the Biden-Harris administration to cancel student debt and release key memos. I'd love for each of you to weigh in on what's happening in this moment. HBCUs have increasingly been in the public limelight, with people discussing these institutions from various perspectives. While we've touched on these issues before, I'd like to hear your thoughts, starting with Michael.

Michael Lomax: Josh made an important point, HBCUs are complex institutions, and there isn't a single narrative. What we're seeing at Howard today is that this student activism is part of a long tradition of activism, particularly at Howard. Historically, activism in the 1920s through the 1940s was both student-led and faculty-driven, striving to ensure Black students were treated with respect and that these institutions weren't patriarchal in their treatment of students and faculty. These aren't new issues.

What's intriguing, Josh is that the media today doesn't fully convey what's happening at Howard. While I've followed this closely, I haven't seen much coverage about students' demands for canceling student debt or federal policies. Instead, the focus has been on housing and governance issues. What this shows is that students at Howard and other HBCUs are deeply aware of what's happening in the world. They're working to shape it, learning and building their activism skills on campus. In many ways, these campuses serve as safe environments where students can challenge the establishment and fight for their beliefs.

Noliwe Brooks: Yeah. I've shared this story before, but I think it relates to what Michael has said about HBCUs as unique training grounds. During my time at Spelman in the mid-1980s, I think I graduated in 1987, though honestly, I've kind of taken it out of my head, it was a transformative period. At that time, Spelman, a Black women's college, had always been led by either white or male presidents. When I was a freshman, the president was [Don Stewart](#). He seemed fine from what I could tell, but when he stepped down, [Johnetta Cole](#) was among the candidates being considered.

Somehow, word got out, I honestly don't remember how the board of trustees wasn't convinced that Spelman needed a Black woman as president. There was talk of appointing another male president instead. This sparked a quiet but significant collaboration between some faculty members and students. They didn't explicitly tell us what to do, but they made sure we understood the stakes: "We think a Black women's college needs a Black woman president. What does it say about our institution if the gatekeepers on the board of trustees don't realize that in the 1980s?" They let us know that we should have a say in this decision.

After that, they didn't give us marching orders or tell us what actions to take. Instead, they created a supportive environment, saying, "We're behind you, but it can't be too public for various reasons. If you need doors opened, information shared, or other support, we've got you." From there, we the students, organized ourselves.

I remember one moment vividly. [Paula Giddings](#), a visiting professor that year, was giving a speech at Sister's Chapel, where we had weekly convocations. We approached her and said we wanted to make a statement to the class by taking the stage. She responded, "I can't officially participate in any of this. That would be wrong. We've all been told not to engage in these 'unpleasanties' you're involved in. But... I suppose if, after I begin my introduction, you were to walk on stage, I might be so shocked that I'd have to sit down, leaving the microphone there for you."

And that's exactly what we did. My Spelman sisters and I took the stage, made our comments, and spoke our truth. It wasn't a national news moment. It didn't make headlines. But it was a moment of activism that Spelman students remembered, a moment that mattered to us.

The point isn't that we won some major victory though, yes, Johnetta Cole did become president, and it marked a shift. The point is the lesson we learned, If you care enough about something, it's worth standing up, defending, and defining. Not everyone at Spelman agreed with us. Some people thought we were just causing trouble. Others believed we should take a quieter, more polite approach. Black people in politics are complex; we don't all think the same. Even among Spelman's Black women, not everyone felt a Black woman president was imperative.

But Spelman was, and is, a place filled with people who care deeply, about us, about leadership, about empowerment, about voice. They linked those ideas to being Black and to being Black women, and that connection shaped us profoundly.

What we were regularly told is you are a Spelman woman, which means you come from a tradition of excellence and excellence is what is expected and required. Now people define that in very different ways. My point is not just a trip down memory lane. I know that we're talking

about 2021 and Howard University students. I do want to go back to that point I began with about how HBCUs create the conditions. It starts with segregated K through 12 schools.

I'll start there with the teachers in those schools, go through HBCUs, create a condition where black people believe, some black people believe that it's important enough for them to fight for a vision of those institutions as a stepping stone, as a way of, of thinking about the kind of world you want to create, the kind of world that you're willing to fight for and what black people and black identity and black politics have to do with that.

Throughout my life, I have found that there are precious few spaces for Black women that foster and nurture the conditions necessary to encourage a kind of insurgency or pushback. You can see this in Black institutions like the Black church, Black schools (K–12), and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

In many ways, I view what is happening at Howard now as part of a much longer tradition, one that predates the sixties and SNCC, yet is certainly connected to that legacy of student activism, Black spaces, and resistance. In these spaces, you first work to make them reflect what you need or speak out to challenge those in power about why these spaces don't meet those needs before you turn your attention elsewhere.

Wisdom Cole: That context is incredibly important because I think it shows how history repeats itself. We see these cycles where young people come and go, continually learning new skills and embracing new opportunities. But Josh, as someone who is on the ground working with students every day, I'd love for you to share your perspective on what's happening, what you're observing, and what's necessary to sustain the students there.

Josh Myers: Yeah. Well, I'm on the virtual ground, so I haven't been there physically yet, but we've been in contact, of course. We don't have time to fully discuss all the issues at Howard, but I do want to address the deeper context here. I don't follow or accept the idea that there was ever a golden age in higher education. Many people point to the era of Cold War funding in the fifties and sixties as an example, but I don't buy into that narrative.

At the same time, the current era is unsustainable. Neoliberalism ² is completely crushing higher education. Instead of being a space centered on learning and intellectual development, it feels like we're all being treated as subjects of market forces as if that's the only thing that matters in today's higher education environment.

We see how, in terms of practices of care, protection, and ultimately education, the very idea of reading, writing, and studying is often reduced to market forces. That's the broader context for what's happening at Howard. If there's a crisis in higher education generally, it's going to be even more pronounced at HBCUs. Specifically, the protests right now are centered on questions of quality of life, which have always been a significant issue in HBCU protests. Quality of life issues include concerns about housing and the condition of resources provided to students as part of their educational experience.

² Neoliberalism-a policy model that favors private enterprise and limits government intervention in the economy

Our students are going without basic necessities and are being subjected to the violence of living in unsafe conditions. That must be addressed because you can't study, you can't learn, and you can't truly live in such circumstances. Quality of life is a fundamental issue here. One of the key lessons from past HBCU student protests that we've studied and learned about, including the protests during the broader Black Campus Revolution, to use Marc Bayon's term is the need for student voices to be heard.

For so long, HBCUs, particularly in the 1960s, operated under the philosophy of *in loco parentis*, essentially believing that they were in the place of students' parents. Students were not seen as adults but as children. As a result, decisions about everything from curricula to judiciary matters and grievances were made without student input.

Students fought hard to be represented on every major committee that influenced their education and campus experience. This included committees at the college level within schools and colleges, university-wide committees, and even the highest levels of governance, such as the board of trustees. The concept of a student trustee originated directly from the student movement.

Before 1967, decisions about a student's future or destiny were often made by just two or three people without student input. The idea behind student governance was that students could be part of these committees, helping to build cases or advocate for their peers because they understood the student experience firsthand. However, this past summer, Howard University decided to eliminate that position.

Today, these students are fighting to have that position reinstated. I must also mention that alumni are advocating for the reinstatement of the alumni trustee position. Similarly, as a faculty member, I can say that the faculty are also fighting to restore the faculty trustee position because we believe in shared governance not just on paper, but in practice.

Another important aspect to consider is who is involved among the students. I want to highlight the Live Movement, an organization that advocates HBCUs. It is led by and includes members at Howard, including Anaya Vines, who, I believe, would consider herself the leader. She's the person you've likely seen with the bullhorn at the protests.

Its membership includes people from various HBCUs. This effort has historical precedents. In the 1980s, there was the National Black Student Unity Congress; in the 1970s, the Save and Change Black Schools Movement and the National Organization of Black and University College Students. These examples raise the question: how do you create an organization of HBCU students, and what will its core issues be?

That's where the issue of debt comes into play. Students in the Live Movement have been protesting about issues affecting HBCUs and higher education since the Trump administration. They even organized an encampment in front of the Department of Education in 2018 or 2019. They've continued to advocate for creating equity in the federal government's budget, specifically, the Department of Education's budget that allocates funding for HBCUs. I want to emphasize again that this goes beyond just Howard. Other HBCUs are also involved in that organization.

Finally, what is the connection to Africana? Every protest at Howard, including the most famous ones, such as the major protest in 1968 featured in ³*Eyes on the Prize*, has significant historical roots. This is personally meaningful to me because it was the Orangeburg Massacre in February 1968 that inspired a wave of Black protest activity and demands for African studies at HBCUs.

Most people point to April 4, 1968, as the moment that protests widened and spread further. However, Black students at HBCUs were already protesting in response to the Orangeburg Massacre, where three students were killed on the campus of [South Carolina State University](#). By the time you get to March 8, 1968, the protest adds a new demand: the establishment of Black Studies. In 1989, during the protest I cover in my book, *We Are Worth Fighting For*, there was a demand to support Africana Studies by creating a graduate program in the field.

What both of these protest movements recognized is that our ability to truly represent our community even, quote-unquote, “lead” our community depends on a deep knowledge of that community. HBCUs must be at the forefront of that mission.

In 1989, the protestors questioned why the African-centered or Afrocentric ⁴ movement did not prominently include HBCUs. They explicitly stated, “We want an Afrocentric campus.” In 1968, the demand was for a Black university. Ultimately, they realized it wasn’t enough to simply have a university with Black people it had to truly embody and serve the needs of the Black community.

It had to have a Black orientation. And that’s really what ties these conversations together. It’s also what tied the 2018 Howard University student protest to its demand for a different approach to the university. So, you’re right, these movements are all linked and connected. They’re also linked to what Black students are doing at other HBCUs, as well as what Black students have done at predominantly white institutions.

For example, students from Columbia came to Howard before launching their own protests in April of 1968. There are many connections here, and I think they all tie back to the idea that SNCC and other organizations believed that in order to empower people, they must be able to set the terms of their education, produce knowledge, and share it. It must be done on our own terms.

Wisdom Cole: No, I appreciate that, Josh, and there’s a lot of great contexts there. Thank you for highlighting the LIVE movement. Anaya [Vines] is a phenomenal organizer. Just a shameless plug, at the end of the month, from October 25th to 29th, we’re going to do a march from the Department of Education to the Capitol, demanding the cancellation of student debt, funding for HBCUs, and free college. They are also working with us and multiple organizations to make this happen, but the movement continues.

I want to draw attention to the point you raised, Josh, what are people learning at these institutions? What is the role of Black and Africana Studies in the movement? Each of you, as scholars, activists, and organizers, have contributed in different ways. And to the point you

³ Eyes on the Prize-tells the definitive story of the civil rights era from the point of view of the ordinary men and women whose extraordinary actions launched a movement that changed the fabric of American life, and embodied a struggle whose reverberations continue to be felt today

⁴Afrocentric-focusing on or influenced by Africa or cultures of African origin.

made, Josh, about SNCC and their work—it spread like wildfire, right? I grew up in California and can still trace the connections back to the organizations that helped shape me into who I am today. But I also recognize how crucial it was to have that political education, understanding, and knowledge. I'm really interested to hear from each of the panelists about the role that these study programs play in developing young people.

Noliwe Brooks: Yeah, one of the key aspects of the sixties, particularly within the Black freedom movement of which SNCC was a part, was the emphasis on studying what was happening and the need for context. Thinkers like [CLR James](#), for example, were crucial in understanding the African freedom struggle, as one country after another gained independence in the late fifties. This served as an important context. [The Chinese Revolution](#) and the revolution in Cuba were also significant.

At that time, there was a generation of Black people globally who saw that the same foot was on all of our necks in different ways. They were drawing strength from, but also reading the works about liberation and freedom movements happening around the world. It wasn't just about reading Black thinkers. It was about reading very broadly to figure out what we could take, what we needed to know, what the analysis was, and what the context was. How do we build on what came before, rather than simply parroting it? What do we take from each phase of the struggle that we're building?

Certainly, I think some of that thinking is encapsulated by the demands for [Black Studies programs](#). The analysis that underpinned the reading groups and thinking groups within SNCC was key. SNCC is famous for holding these day-long meetings, during which they would collectively decide what kind of action to take. Everyone would participate, and it could take hours, if not the entire day or even a couple of days, to ensure the analysis was right. At the core of the analysis was the question: What do you need to know about the world?

What thinkers do you need to be informed by? How do you take what people on the ground know and start to synthesize it with what we're reading to come up with something we can try in this phase, at this moment, and in this place, all organized around Black freedom?

As the demands from the fifties through the sixties into the early seventies grew, and as that reading and knowledge expanded, the backlash in the U.S. began to take shape in the 1970s. As COINTELPRO[Counter Intelligence Program] started doing its work and the backlash intensified, people still came into institutions of higher education with this understanding: we need to know this. People needed context, an intellectual roadmap. You have to know what happened before to understand who you are. I think that perspective ran through SNCC as a project and as an organization.

For those who came out of SNCC and founded institutions like the [Center for Black Education](#) in D.C. or Federal City College, which has since become something else (I forget its new name), they started an entire college. They recruited [CLR James](#) as one of the first intellectuals to be associated with it, aiming to figure out how to educate Black people in D.C. and beyond with a revolutionary mindset. Those elements of Black Studies, especially in the program I came from at Cornell and a few other places, really helped shape the field and the atmosphere of those institutions. The revolutionary fervor and the deep reading into revolution and Blackness in a

global context these elements influenced the field.

I think that ended up being a certain kind of training ground for thought, a form of pushback, and a specific kind of analysis. For a moment, it looked like these programs would truly span from the streets to the boardrooms, bringing people from whatever social space they were in.

The idea was to educate them about the U.S., about capitalism, about racism, and then, as they ascended to higher offices and boardrooms, they would bring that knowledge and perspective with them. It was about how to build institutions or make these institutions responsive to Black people and their needs, and how to understand the foot on the neck of Black people, oppressed people, and poor people not just in the U.S., but globally.

I think there's something incredibly hopeful about that moment when we see the founding of these programs. Some of them were incredibly transformational and hopeful, with the possibility of what could happen if we had a curriculum for Black freedom that most Black people could access, wherever they were. Imagine if we had teachers dedicated themselves to Black freedom in every place.

Michael, I'm sorry am I talking too long?

Michael Lomax: No, I just want to pick up on something that is both a theme in what you've been raising and also what Josh said. I do think one of the things we're hearing is a need to very intentionally go back and deepen our understanding of the past—what we've done in the past. I think one element of that is a deeper understanding of what HBCUs have done, the roles they've played, and what their identities have been in the past. Because I think we tend to rediscover elements of the past of HBCUs during moments of crisis, like the one we're in today, whether it's the quality of life issues or even the economic challenges facing Black institutions and our students.

I would argue that one of the things we do need is a center for the study of HBCUs, which would be both historical and pedagogical. It would help us understand what they have done, and how they've done that work at various times in our history, including in moments of struggle. I mean, the way we think about our students today, as Josh pointed out, is shaped by market forces, seeing them as a pipeline for workers in the 21st-century economy, preparing them to compete for those roles. So, their education is often viewed as preparing them for economic roles. But HBCUs also prepare them for their spiritual roles and for the roles they will play in the communities in which they reside.

They give them a sense of self-confidence and an understanding of themselves, enabling them to step up and challenge. I think we need to be much more disciplined and consistent in studying that. When I was a student at Morehouse in the 1960s, in SNCC and in close proximity to SNCC, we were not defined by their presence in our daily lives as students. We still had step shows. We were still figuring out who would be Miss Maroon and White. We still had homecomings. We were still doing all those things. In many ways, the campuses were insulated environments from the harsh realities of segregated Atlanta and the deep South. This was true across the South, where HBCUs were located.

It's interesting that there was a kind of separation between SNCC and us. They were over there, and we were over there. They were on the campus, coming over to check us out, trying to get us involved in demonstrations, but it was them and us. It wasn't always a "we." Then, in 1968, after [Dr. King](#) was killed, Morehouse students locked up the board of trustees. That activism began to incorporate the strategies used by SNCC activists into student action on campuses. And, oh, by the way, I think a point you were making, Josh, about Orangeburg, I believe it was 1969 when the massacre happened at Jackson State.

Another thing is that black students and black institutions are often seen as dangerous. They're not just preparing us for life as black professionals after graduation, but they're viewed as dangerous institutions and are attacked as such. Some of what you saw at Columbia in 1968 was preceded, as noted, by actions around governance who was on the board of trustees, who had a voice and protested against the war in Vietnam, the Poor People's Campaign, and other issues. These were present on campuses. I, for example, protested against Dow Chemical on the Morehouse campus when they were recruiting during my senior year. So, I think there's still so much we don't know about our history. We don't treat it as the rich resource it is, and I believe it's not fully informing how we think about the past, how we encounter the present, or how we prepare for the future.

Wisdom Cole: I think that's very profound. Even some of the questions we're getting in the chat really focus on history, right? A lot of people, though I try to challenge this notion, say that young people don't know their history. Part of this is because they don't necessarily have access to it, or they haven't been allowed to learn it. But how are we really pushing them to ensure that we're documenting those histories and experiences? The Howard protest is incredibly significant and needs to be documented in history so that people can look back at it. We've seen similar events happen repeatedly—how are we learning from them, adapting them, and moving forward? I'd really like you, Josh, to weigh in on this, especially regarding what the students are learning and how it's changing their lives.

Josh Myers: Yeah, let me just address the last point if anyone is listening and thinking about writing a check, please earmark that money for the libraries and archives. Because when you talk about that rich resource, it's just sitting there, waiting to be made accessible on a larger scale. It's all there. My colleague Lopez Matthews is doing a great job of digitizing the Howard story. I tell people all the time, this isn't just a Howard story. If you want to study 20th-century [Pan-Africanism](#), go to [The Hilltop](#), the student newspaper, because all of that was happening in D.C., and afterward, they covered it. They were at the [6th Pan-African Congress](#) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. So, any event of consequence will have some archival resonance, but we need to make that information widely available.

And that's one of the major threats as well, in terms of SNCC's digital archives. So, make sure to invest in the libraries too, and don't forget the libraries. My approach to Africana studies is to look at the Black experience through an Africana studies lens. My disciplinary orientation is Africana studies, or African studies as a discipline, which helps us understand the experience on its own terms. We use various approaches.

For example, in some of the classes I've taught, the focus has been solely on the history of

SNCC, analyzed through an Africana studies lens. I've also taught classes where we explored the Haitian Revolution using the same framework because our experiences are so vast that we can't just start from year one and move forward to the present.

I mean, that would take hundreds of semesters to fully cover. So, in my introductory courses, I focus on a specific segment. I use that segment to explore how we study Black people and the methodologies we should use to study them. This approach has been very rewarding because it allows me to engage with the development of the discipline in many ways.

I believe that the project and process are ongoing. But in the meantime, as we continue with this work, we're also learning about individuals like [Annie Pearl Avery](#), a member of SNCC whose household name isn't, or [Gloria Richardson](#), who is becoming more widely recognized. My students leave with knowledge of these figures, who they never would have encountered otherwise.

They wouldn't have gotten this knowledge had it not been for an Africana studies course. While other disciplines are improving, there's no guarantee that you'll learn about the Haitian Revolution anywhere else. It's not a given, and it's not necessarily part of the standard curriculum. So, what I was saying earlier about the idea that you can get Africana studies just by being at an HBCU, regardless of whether they have a department or not, is important.

One of the things we try to do at Howard is to be the methodological force that helps other departments approach the way they think about the African experience differently. We work with historians, sociologists, and political scientists, all while engaging with a methodological principle that affirms, that we can understand our lives and experiences on our terms.

That's the most important thing, right? From there, we can build on the topics and the subjects, but the methodology has to be in place. And that's why students supported African American studies at Howard. In fact, in the 1980s, Howard students led the fight to make African American studies a mandatory class for all students to graduate. And that requirement is still in place today. I tell my students all the time that no administration came up with this requirement that's on your schedule. It was the students who made that happen. Something was missing in the 1980s that they wanted to change in terms of how our students could go anywhere with that foundation. And that's where we are now.

Wisdom Cole: I think you see that at different HBCUs across the country. I remember in 2019, I was at Norfolk State University, and they require all their freshmen to take that course to ensure they understand that history to make sure that the foundations of what has allowed them to be here today are locked in. I think that's very vital and necessary, and it will continue to be necessary for the future of our HBCUs.

I want to remind folks who are paying attention and listening to this panel that if you have any questions, feel free to drop them in the Q&A. I'm going to go to one of the questions we received from Ferra A. Davis, PhD. She asks, "How are HBCU students, faculty, and administrators today modeling or expanding the work that Mississippi HBCUs, particularly

[Jackson State](#) and [Tougaloo College](#) students, the student body, and faculty engaged with SNCC and the NAACP to work for black freedom in the '60s?" I think I'll pitch this to Michael because I think you were kind of...

Michael Lomax: Oh, wait, you're going to pitch that to me. I run the United Negro college fund. I do not run black studies. So, I'm, I'm going to pitch it right back to Josh. Uh, my other colleague, because I do not, I do not have the answer.

Josh Meyer: Okay. Well, I think the question speaks about how Tougaloo provided a safe space for student organizers. I mentioned Johnnetta Cole earlier, and it made me think about the Institute of the Black World. One of the other students who came through the Institute was [Joyce Ladner](#), who got kicked out of Jackson State and came to Tougaloo. We were on an interview Wednesday, and Joyce said it felt like "dying and going to heaven" when she got to Tougaloo.

I think that's really interesting because one is a state institution receiving state funds, and the other is private. I think that has a lot to do with it. They were able to do things at Tougaloo that, I think, served as a model. If a student movement or a youth movement is happening, those students should be able to hold their meetings at HBCUs.

They should be able to have their training sessions at HBCUs, like Ella Baker in 1960 or Howard in 1963 when SNCC held its national conference at Howard University. From my perspective, we're not doing enough of that if any of that. Where did Black Lives Matter have their national convention? Wasn't that at an HBCU? There's something about that space you can feel when you're in it. I think it's an important haven, or we should be an important haven, for people who want to learn how to be activists. What goes into organizing?

Michael Lomax: If I may, I would say this: I believe that we are seeing, in the emerging new generation of Black leadership, that HBCUs are still producing extraordinary leaders. [Stacey Abrams](#), a Spelman alumna, is a prime example. Although I often hear people mention where she went to law school or where she got her master's in public administration, they don't talk as much about her attending Yale Law School, or initially, they wouldn't highlight that she was an alumna of Spelman College, where her parents are also alumni of Tougaloo.

I think that in her DNA, in the way she was shaped by her parents and at Spelman, you can see the influence that has led to Stacey Abrams today. Similarly, [Derek Johnson](#), the head of the NAACP, is a Tougaloo graduate.

He is living in Jackson, Mississippi, leading the NAACP. So, I do think that these institutions are still producing both what I would call subversive leadership and traditional leadership in the Black community. And they continue to produce examples like [Raphael Warnock](#), another case in point. He is deeply rooted in a very specific kind of activist theology that comes from Benjamin Mays and others, a tradition that exists at Morehouse. So, I believe that tradition is still there.

I also think, in terms of your point about investing in the libraries and archives, it's equally important to invest in the faculty. We need a new generation of faculty who are immersing

themselves in the history of our HBCUs and teaching that history through the Africana lens. This is not only crucial for preserving our history but also vital for preparing the specific kind of activism that emerges from the HBCU tradition.

Wisdom Cole: I think your point directly refutes the idea that going to an HBCU puts you in a bubble, that it's not how the world works or how you're going to get a job. The truth is, that this is a space for self-preservation, history, and culture. It produces strong leaders who are directing the country and doing phenomenal, amazing things.

The point you make connects directly to the history we've seen with SNCC, the NAACP, and local organizing work, ensuring that they engaged with young people at the heart of those movements. It's an honor to continue that legacy. We have another question...particularly thinking about how HBCUs can broaden civic education of students through black studies, um, so that the traditions of SNCC continue despite some of America's resistance to culturally diverse curriculum.

Noliwe Brooks: You know, I was just reflecting on some of what we've been discussing, and at least in my experience in African studies, this isn't specific to HBCUs, it's more about Africana studies at predominantly white institutions. One of the struggles I face is getting many of my students to want to engage with the community. If I'm being honest, even when I was at Spelman, this was a struggle. The idea of the community that surrounded Spelman at the time, and Spelman itself, was a bit isolated. Spelman had a wall that separated it from the surrounding community, which included public housing. Things have changed since then, but there was always a conversation about how to go beyond just tutoring programs.

College students, regardless of race, are often happy to participate in tutoring programs. However, beyond tutoring, what kind of sustained engagement is there with the poor and working-class people who live just outside the campus walls? This was a constant question. What should we do? And what I began hearing, and still hear now, especially as I reflect on the 1980s, is the idea that we can set ourselves up to be economically stable to ensure our families and ourselves are secure.

A lot of these individuals are still living paycheck to paycheck; they're not wealthy, and there's no substantial wealth in the bank working for them. My whole point with education, though, is that it shouldn't just be about personal economic advancement. It's not solely about thinking of ways to improve my own life but rather considering what I can do for the least of these, for other Black people, and what I can do to disrupt the various oppressive systems that continue to affect the diaspora.

I think there's still, in Africana studies, this lingering question about who you're teaching and what they will do with what they learn. I'm not sure if this is still true at HBCUs, but in African studies, we teach students about organizing, resistance, about intellectual history, and we give them tools. However, the tools we provide aren't necessarily those that students are thinking about using to better the conditions of other Black people.

If you're still talking about education in the service of others, you're often seen as a bit quaint, or

even old-fashioned. Some people might say, "I'm in service to my family." For them, improving their family's situation is the priority. If they get a job and help pull their family out of poverty, that's their focus, not necessarily pushing against political systems and ideologies to realign them. So, I don't have a clear-cut HBCU answer for that part.

Michael Lomax: I do have one thought, which is that there is an emerging sense among the 100+ surviving historically Black colleges and universities that have been discovered. We haven't discussed this, but they've been "discovered" by the outside world. In the conversations we're having internally, there is an increasing sense that this is an opportunity to strengthen what happens inside the walls and build bridges to the communities outside.

The notion we hear a lot about today is that we need to build wealth and assets in the Black community. I believe that work is done by individuals and organizations, but it is also done by institutions. If Black colleges remain closely connected to those communities, whether or not they have walls around them, they are still there.

I think we need to ask ourselves how we can creatively engage that proximity so that we are not just doing work inside the walls, but also doing work beyond the walls, building that sense of connection once again. I think that's something we've lost and something we need to embrace. If you go around many HBCUs, they often look like communities. They are purchasing the property, and redeveloping it for educational purposes or housing, but that housing isn't for the people who lived in those neighborhoods before.

So, I do believe deeply that education is one of the foundations of social and economic mobility, and that HBCUs have been powerful engines for economic mobility in the Black community, though they've been undervalued for that purpose. We need to be more intentional about this and develop strategies that are directly linked to the communities surrounding our institutions.

Wisdom Cole: Most necessary, most necessary. Well, we are getting close to the end of our panel, and I definitely want to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to give some closing statements. As we think about the future of our HBCUs and our Black and African Studies programs, I want to reflect on the question that was asked earlier.

We've heard some people say that programs like these or spaces like these make students angry, frustrated, and upset because they're learning the true history of America and their own people. But despite these challenges, there is a future for these institutions and these fields of study. So, I'll start with you, Josh. We have about two minutes per person, but I'd like you to share your thoughts on what the future holds for HBCUs and Africana Studies and Black Studies programs.

Josh Myers: Thank you. I really like the idea of a center for the study of HBCUs. Let's make it happen. How are we going to get it done? There's some scholarship coming, some work I've been part of, but also some scholarship that I know other scholars will be producing in the next few years. This isn't just about centering HBCUs but also about centering student activism at HBCUs.

It's going to be an exciting time in the scholarly world, but we need to make sure that this work

has a home, not just in academic associations but also in the freshman seminar classes. I think Janani Favors' book is being taught, I'm not sure at which institution, possibly FAMU, but with this new scholarship coming, I really like the idea of a center for the study of HBCUs.

As for Black Studies, I'm not entirely sure. I just had an article published in a significant volume about the life and work of [Andrew Billingsley](#), which was published by Black Classic Press. You can't miss it if you visit their website. Billingsley was one of our great institutional builders, connected to the student activism world and the history of Black Studies, and, just like Professor Latner, deeply connected to leadership at an HBCU.

His life is incredibly important. In that text, my article tries to think about the future of African Studies, but honestly, I don't know. I'm hopeful, of course, but I just don't know. Universities have a way of moving, and I will say this: African Studies outside of the university must be strong for them to be effective inside the university. I'm hopeful, but it needs strength on both sides.

Noliwe Brooks: I'll just say, thank you, guys. Mine is very quick. I am currently feeling distinctly pessimistic about the U.S. and the promises and protections of citizenship and democracy. As I look at what's happening and try to broaden out, I'm waiting to see what happens with voting rights protections. I'm also waiting to see what happens with some of the other critical issues that need to be addressed. But, honestly, I believe we're heading backward. It feels like we're back in the 1950s in some ways.

I'm always reminded of the historian Timothy Snyder, who writes about fascism in Europe. One of the things he discusses in relation to Germany in the late 1930s is how a group of people decided they needed to pick an institution and defend it with their lives. I believe that HBCUs and educational institutions are at that point now. We need to pick them, defend them, understand them, and keep them safe because I fear that trouble may find us sooner than we think.

Michael Lomax: So, I guess I'm next. Mm-hmm. I'm going to say that, yes, it's easy to be pessimistic, but I believe it was *For Limón* whose slogan was *La Lucha Continúa*, the struggle continues. I just think we're still in the struggle. I want to say to Josh that I'm ready to join you at the Center for the Study of HBCUs. I think connecting that to the work of the *IBW*, and I remember Andy Billingsley during his heyday, I'm so delighted that his name is being lifted in this conversation.

This is a moment for HBCUs. They're getting a lot of attention. We have a vice president of the United States who is an HBCU graduate. Over the last year, we've received billions of dollars in federal funding invested in HBCUs, making them more financially secure than they were at the start of the pandemic.

I am all for the economic security of HBCUs. I work for that and fight for that every day. I fight for public policies that will address the issues of student debt. But I also think we need to be strong advocates for the souls of HBCUs for the content of what these institutions have done, what they're doing today, and what they must do in the future. So, I believe that part of any study of Black life, Africana studies or otherwise, must include the study of these institutions, to remind us of what they've done and, most importantly, of what they are doing today and the

challenges they will face in the future.

Wisdom Cole: Amazing. Amazing. Thank you so much, Michael. Thank you so much, Neely. Thank you so much, Josh. This has been a phenomenal panel. As an organizer, I love that we have action steps things are going to happen and move forward from this incredible conversation. So, thank you all so much for joining. I want to thank the SNCC 60th planning committee for putting together this amazing conversation, and I'm very excited to continue the work we are doing in this movement.