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## **Argonauts, HBCUs, and the Brain:** The College Campus Experience and Its Cultivating Environs in Mississippi

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### **Our 2020 Year, Greek Mythology and Aspiring Adventures**

Indeed, it is that wonderful time of the year as many if not most prepare for the upcoming reflective Easter season. In addition to using this time of reflection to prepare for the coming season, college bound, high school students and their families are preparing for college applications, campus considerations, and the beginning of the higher learning journey. During this once-in-a-life-time of contemplation, I would like to offer some words of wisdom gained from my more than three decades of higher education experience, and encourage non-African Americans to very seriously consider applying for, enrolling in, and embracing the liberal arts and humanities college experience at one of Mississippi's five historically-Black colleges or universities. This commentary is about Argonauts, and academic aspirants and their environments. As you read this commentary, I ask that you have an image of college experiences organized around concentric circles of environs with the brain as the center for a college aspiring Argonaut. The Classical mythological definition of an "Argonaut" is a member of the band of [men] who sailed to Colchis with Jason in the ship Argo in search of the Golden Fleece" (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/argonauts>), but the modern interpretation, for purposes of this commentary, is one who is an adventurous, courageous, and quixotic student in higher education aspiring toward the upward, wider, and deeper understanding of God's globally diverse humanity. To this end, the same resource defines an Argonaut as "a person in quest of something dangerous but rewarding; adventurer..." Socrates, known for mythological self-reflection, would encourage higher learning to be a place reflection and a space for exploration -- bridging what Cornell West has framed as "inner wilderness" with what we capture on the college campus by, with, and through "external environs." The American college experience on the historically Black university and college campus can be rewarding, engaging and reflective exposure for *all* students, including non-African American students, particularly as related to the exposure within the new emerging college environment and the divisive climate we all live in off the campus. HBCUs, as reported by the University of Georgia, "play a major role in the economic success of their graduates by enhancing their education, training and leadership skills" ([UNCF.org/HBCUsMakeAmericaStrong](http://UNCF.org/HBCUsMakeAmericaStrong)). Today's college experience, and the surrounding environs for that experience for "self-reflection," should be adventurous for the aspiring student, providing higher as well as "wider" learning. The experience should ignite thought leadership, entice the brain's neurons, excite the student's soul, and anchor, then sustain, the lifelong liberal arts learning journey for the Argonaut.

### **The HBCU as its Unique College Environment**

Recently, I was quite moved with sentiment, mesmerized with reflection, and motivated with insight by an earlier text sent to me by my late brother in the Bay Area of California. He basically said that he believe that he should have gone to an historically Black College or University (HBCU). Although I did not probe further, I suspect this was the result of mounting occurrences and escalating events that he, like many of us in the world, is experiencing relative to the relativity of human diversity. You see, we are African American and grew up on a liberal arts anchored HBCU campus (Fisk University) and we both, along with my other brothers, recognized then and now our "first and most" treasured human experience in early and higher learning. As we grew older, we moved away from the HBCU experience and attended widely proclaimed "culturally diverse" universities in California. While our experiences were impressionable because we were in "wider" order environments where everyone looked different, we somehow thought our experiences might have been just as rich, or perhaps richer, if we attended a university where everyone looked the same.

After all human diversity, if engaged in the mind first, is everywhere, not just where everyone looks different. I will make my point on this later. But that was then and this, hopefully, alluring invitation is about now. I want to encourage Whites, as well as Blacks like my brother, to attend an HBCU - anywhere after finding the right fit - not just at the five fine ones we have in Mississippi. Especially if you are a truly adventurous Argonaut seeking intellectual discovery, in search for authentic meaning of life, want to position yourself in diverse discourse that can unite versus divide, and want to position yourself to know one of the true purposes for being blessed to live on our precious planet. Let your first and most important experience in higher education be in an "other-race" space and let your emancipating brain do the rest. The brain's God-given gifts will engage you, empower you, enlighten you, and navigate you. This will be part of your critical thinking process, growth, maturity, and mindful manifestation. In this holiday season of thankfulness, we should thank God for one of his most treasured and underutilized gifts -- the human brain.

### **The Courage, the Adventure, and the Brain**

I often think people fail to engage in the true human phenomenon of higher education diversity for authentic, courageous and genuine intellectual enlightenment. After years of reflection, I believe true authenticity, verity and confidence in human diversity begins within the brain no matter where the brain finds itself trying to navigate its neurons, networks and circuits. That said, it is less courageous, or let's say less ambitious in intellectual depth and breadth, when diversity's definition is confined to how highly heterogeneous the higher education environs may be. Indeed, it would be more courageous, ambitious, and enlightening for one to attend -- and cognitively engage -- in and on a campus where everyone looks the same, except yourself.

If you believe diversity from this perspective, your academic journey will be more rewarding as the result of brain's neurons being navigated, taxed, and disrupted and worked overtime. HBCUs offer incredible experiences in terms of, not only general intellectual development, but also in terms of specificity about "other" culture, history, human behavior, socialization, and other areas about our magnanimity. Some may argue that college is about getting a job and starting a career but anchoring the mind for human diversity will be fundamental to this no matter where you land that job and launch that career. I have lectured on intellectual diversity at several places in many states using the earlier work Phillip Harris and Robert Moran in *Managing Cultural Differences*. The authors suggest that true cultural awareness is instilled by building "capacities." I think these capacities are worth building for those who aspire to be Argonauts at an HBCU. They are:

- The **capacity** to communicate respect-to transmit, verbally and non-verbally positive regard, encouragement, and sincere interest.
- The **capacity** to be nonjudgmental-to avoid moralistic, value-laden, evaluative statements, and to listen in such a way that the other can fully share and explain self.
- The **capacity** to personalize knowledge and perceptions-to recognize the influence of one's own values, perceptions, opinions, and knowledge on human interaction
- The **capacity** to display empathy-to try and understand others from "their" point of view, to attempt to put oneself into the other's life space, and to feel as they do about the matter under consideration.
- The **capacity** for role flexibility-to be able to get a task accomplished in a manner and time frame appropriate to the learner, and to be flexible in the process for getting work done.
- The **capacity** to demonstrate reciprocal concern-to truly dialogue, take turn talking, share the interaction responsibility, and in groups, promote circular communication.
- The **capacity** to tolerate ambiguity-to be able to cope with cultural differences, to accept a degree of frustration, and to deal with changed circumstances and people.

Our God-gifted brains grow, nurture, and feed off this type of mindfully-anchored phenomenon for high-maintenance capacity-building and hard cerebral work. Diversity at places like California State University where I attended, or the University of California where my brothers attended, is impressive if the measured benchmarks are demographic indicators to reach accreditation standards, mission proclamations, or enrollment milestones for expanding revenue streams. But it is not if students are seeking a deeper, richer, and interestingly, "wider" understanding of "other-race" as well as "same race" human diversity and the rewarding experience from human co-existence on God's planet.

First, an other-race yet *thought leadership* developing environment may be more likely to do that. Second, that's what seeking "higher education" is truly about in the greater scheme of things on the God's given planet.

And, third, that's why God gave us the brain to navigate our human journeys -- to leverage, and even overwork, those wider-order neurons for optimal, genuine, and maximal cerebral capacity and subsequent deeper cognitive discovery from the college's environs and beyond throughout the world. The journey may be uncomfortable at first, and it will certainly push the human feelings of inconvenience, but the cerebral dividends from the intellectual growth that feeds the human brain and fuels intellectual thoughts will be overwhelmingly rewarding to anyone on the treasured HBCU campus. To the true Argonaut, this should outweigh usual comfort and related conveniences. In today's higher education on the college or university campus, we call this critical thinking, and beyond the campus, we call this thought leadership. Indeed, in today's growing divisive environs, we need more mindful thought leaders coming out of our colleges and universities.

### **The Magic, the Marvel, the Magnificence, and the Mind**

When I served in a leadership role at Jackson State, several researchers at the institution had planned to conduct a study of the qualitative "lived experiences" by Whites who attended the University during the 60s and 70s. During my JSU tenure, I also encouraged more non-African American college aspirants to attend, embrace and engage in the HBCU college experience and its rewarding environs for wider, as well as higher order thinking. Most recently, another group of JSU faculty and friends are launching a statewide project called, "*FirstMost; FourMost.*" We are calling this because we believe the first four years of liberal arts thinking is the most important for higher learning. I encourage others to get involved in both ground-breaking initiatives on behalf of Mississippi and Mississippians. I hope that they complete the historical study and that the findings support my advocacy for treasured HBCUs, so that all Argonautical college-seekers can enjoy the marvel, the mystery, the magnificence and the *magic* of higher education in their *first* and *most* important higher learning experience over four years. During the adventurous experience, and through the journey of the mentioned capacity-building, students might use the following framework for building critical thinking, especially nowadays with information being driven and anchored from so much easily misleading, emotive, inaccurate and non-constructive social media:

- Differentiate between fact and fiction; examine causes, effects and remedies; recognizing and assesses cultural bias and rhetoric;
- Determine accuracy, appropriateness and completeness of information – especially in social media;
- Recognize logical fallacies and faulty reasoning by comparing conflicting points of view;
- Apply force-and counter force analyses for balance and counter balances in applicable mindful matrices for deeper decision making and modeling;
- Seek cultural awareness and, if possible, emotional intelligence within campus groups, local communities and global groups – using circular communications;
- Make sound assessments and evaluations for drawing logical conclusions; and
- Integrate, surmise, and synthesize information based the results of "thoroughly-thought-through" vetting, validation, verification, and trustworthiness with, if possible, empirically-based evidence.

Do these things and you will discover that you may come to higher education as one person, especially at an HBCU, but you will leave another with a true sense of other-race cognitive completeness, insightful fullness, appreciation for intellectual diversity, life-long personal reflection, and internal mindful manifestation. These are the cerebral rewards of God's gifted brain – from whence we all come to anchor our critical thinking of the diverse world we all live in amid planet's diverse human wonderment. I encourage the courageous, the adventurous, and the venturesome to come and to join the quest for something mind-boggling yet humanly rewarding; -- consider attending, and intellectually engaging within, the American HBCU campus experience. Seeking truth, one of the purposes of higher learning, and answers may challenge you to more questions, but that is part of the journey for human purpose, true meaning, and self-identity in a vast wide and deep sea of lifelong other-race and other-space phenomena. In this season of spiritual reflection, we should thank God for one of his most treasured and too often underutilized gifts -- the human brain. Let's all consider leveraging, marshaling and galvanizing the brain to secure a rewarding place and reflective space at one of Mississippi's tremendously treasured HBCUs.

I recommend that aspiring academic Argonauts look at and engage in one of Michelangelo's below creation to capture the genesis for their personal, intellectual, academic, and spiritual journey.

