

## **MARY McLEOD BETHUNE: FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY HBCU PRESIDENTS**

### **ABSTRACT**

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) remains one of the most notable figures in African American and women's history. Several biographies chronicle her humble beginnings, sociopolitical contributions, and the founding of her school (now known as Bethune-Cookman College). However, the published literature lacks explicit examinations of factors that enabled Bethune's fundraising effectiveness—that is, exactly what made her successful in securing financial support for the birth and sustainability of the college she originally founded for young African American women? These attributes and approaches are examined in this paper. Also included are with implications for contemporary presidents at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), particularly those leading institutions that presently face similar financial challenges as did Bethune's college in the early to mid-1900s.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Educator, political activist, national spokeswoman, and college president – Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) remains one of the most notable figures in African American and women's history. Her contributions to the educational, social, economic, and political advancement of African Americans are still prevalent, as the historically Black institution she created over 100 years ago (Bethune-Cookman University) still serves as an educational home to thousands of African American students and living alumni.

Several biographies detailing Bethune's life have been published over the past 50 years (Peare, 1951; Holt, 1964; Metzger, 1979; Kelso, 1993). Each chronicles her humble beginnings, sociopolitical contributions, and the founding of her school. Bethune is also profiled in several books on women and African Americans (Daniels, 1923; Noble, 1978; Solomon, 1985; Anderson, 1988), as well as essays written specifically about her life (Ross, 1975; Smith, 1980; McCluskey, 1994). While providing a multidimensional look at her life and the nature of her achievements, the published literature lacks explicit examinations of factors that enabled Bethune's fundraising successes—that is, exactly what made her successful in securing financial support for the birth and sustainability of her institution? Given the legendary success story of Bethune turning a vision and \$1.50 into a thriving postsecondary institution, her work as a fundraiser merits further scholarly exploration. These attributes and approaches will be examined in the proposed paper. It will conclude with implications for contemporary presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), particularly those leading institutions that presently face similar financial challenges as did Bethune's school in the early to mid-1900s.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This historical study is important because it reveals how an African American presidential giant founded and advanced a postsecondary institution in an era of limited available financial resources for the education of Blacks. Given their ongoing funding challenges, we believe contemporary HBCUs could benefit from having their leaders employ some of the strategies that enabled Bethune's success. Effective fundraising among modern-day public HBCU presidents is presently needed to make up some of the persistent shortfall associated with funding inequities in the states. Public Black Colleges founded under the Morrill Land Grant Acts in the late-1800s were forced to operate with fewer resources, inadequately trained faculty, and substandard instructional facilities in comparison to public predominantly white institutions (PWIs) established in those same states (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). As was the case with the distribution of funds associated with the Morrill Acts, public HBCUs still receive disproportionately lower state appropriations than do their predominantly white counterparts (Brady,

Eatman, & Parker, 2000; Minor, 2008). Like public HBCUs, many private Black Colleges have long struggled with fiscal inadequacy since their early establishment, hence the enduring need for increased effectiveness in fundraising (Gasman, 2007).

The effects of the current economic recession have strained resources for some HBCUs, forcing many to layoff faculty and staff, ignore much-needed physical plant improvements, and decrease institutional scholarships for low-income students (Clark, 2009; Shieh, 2008). For this reason, it continues to be important for senior leaders, specifically HBCU presidents, to be effective fundraisers who garner external donations to offset funding shortages and increase capacity building. Perhaps a better analysis of Bethune's strategies might prove useful to contemporary Black College leaders.

### **DATA SOURCES AND METHODS**

The following research question was explored in this study: What strategies enabled Mary McLeod Bethune's success in fundraising? An examination of historical evidence allowed us to pursue explanatory insights into Bethune's effectiveness. Specifically, primary documents (namely letters, newspaper articles, and speeches) authored during Bethune's leadership comprise the main data source for this paper. McCluskey and Smith (1999) edited a volume containing 75 primary documents that Bethune either authored or helped construct; the editors maintain that the documents are authentic and appear as they were originally authored by Bethune (including some spelling and grammatical errors). We rigorously employed procedures prescribed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for Conventional Content Analysis, which led to the identification of overlapping patterns in the documents that were ultimately clustered into four themes that provide instructive insights into Bethune's fundraising approach. Themes were also augmented with examples from published Bethune biographies.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

An analysis of Bethune's documents, coupled with examples cited in published biographical accounts, reveal that she was politically engaged, politically astute, shameless, and skillful at building strong relationships – these attributes explain her fundraising effectiveness.

#### **Politically Engaged**

Perhaps Bethune's strongest asset was that people knew who she was and the sociopolitical causes for which she stood. She passionately championed several social justice issues through speeches and essays that were circulated nationwide. In "Certain Unalienable Rights," one of her most powerful political statements, "Bethune deftly iterated the importance of challenging the status quo of White supremacy, even as she sought interracial alliances" (McCluskey & Thomas, 1999, p. 4). Although commentaries such as this would have typically been seen as counterproductive to one's efforts to garner financial support from the people being criticized, Bethune's firm stance brought her respect and recognition as a national spokeswoman for Black issues. As her school began to enroll more students and gain stability, she became more and more involved in political issues and worked tenaciously to influence legislation affecting African Americans, especially Negro youth and women.

Although she spoke frequently in support of full citizenship for African Americans, Bethune corroborated her words with social and political action through leadership in her school and community, as well as in several women's organizations. In the school's early year, she faced down the Ku Klux Klan when they invaded her campus one night in opposition of her efforts to get more Black voters registered (Metzer, 1979). Following the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, she also led a group of Negro women to the polls to vote. Bethune wrote a heated

letter to the Florida Governor in 1939, standing against the acquittal of two White men tried by an all-White jury in the murder of a Black taxi driver (McCluskey & Smith, 1999).

In addition to her social and political action locally, Bethune became President of the Florida Federation of Colored Women in 1917; President of the National Association of Colored Women in 1924, at that time the highest national office a Black woman could assume; and in 1935, she formed the National Council of Negro Women to take on the major national issues affecting Blacks (Noble, 1978; Metzger, 1970; Kelso, 1993). Bethune also served as director of the National Youth Administration's Division of Negro Affairs (1936), Vice President of the NAACP (1940), and served on President Truman's Committee of Twelve for National Defense (1951). She worked under presidents Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Theodore Roosevelt on child welfare, housing, employment, and education. In June of 1936, she was named Director of the Division of Negro Affairs and became the first African American woman to serve as head of a federal agency.

Bethune's political engagement brought her into contact with a widening circle of influential people, which eventually included the Roosevelts and other well-known philanthropists. Subsequently her recognition as a leader and trusted spokesperson in the African American community, and her affiliation with the architects of the New Deal reform program, led to her service as Advisor on Minority Affairs in the Roosevelt administration (Flemming, 1995). Smith (1980) submits that as the highest ranking African American official in the Roosevelt administration, Bethune leveraged her access to the first family to win concessions that often included monetary appropriations for African American students and Black Colleges, of course including her own.

### **Politically Astute**

Throughout her years of service to many political organizations, Bethune became skilled at political gaming. That is, she knew how to maneuver her way through unpopular decisions and communicate in a way that convinced social elites and others to follow her lead. Her politically savvy demeanor was apparent in her personal, professional, and political lives. For example, "Although they never divorced, Mary Bethune's apparent uneasiness about how the social ramifications of marital failure reflected on her image led to her being listed in the 1910 U.S. census as a widow even before Albertus died in 1918" (McCluskey & Thomas, 1999, p. 5). McCluskey (1994) also reports that Bethune pretended to be a widow long before her husband's death. The upkeep of her own personal reputation was of utmost importance as Bethune endeavored to keep her school afloat.

Newsome (1992) posits that Bethune's involvement as a lay board member in the hierarchy of the Methodist Episcopal Church was more political than religious. Since her school was governed through the Methodist church, it was extremely important for her to make strategic political moves and decisions to ensure support for the advancement of her political agenda. Perhaps the most noteworthy case of her political astuteness was her affiliation with different political parties. Because Bethune had created such credibility for herself through a wide range of political activities, she was highly sought after by leaders of both political parties. She did not deny or turn away opportunities from one political party simply because she was affiliated with the other. For her, garnering financial support for her school and organizations and ensuring equal opportunities for Negro youth and women were paramount.

### **Shameless**

An examination of Bethune's letters and papers reveals that she was courageous and shameless in her communications to and interactions with philanthropists. She was upfront about the financial hardships threatening her school and was not ashamed to ask high-profile philanthropists, social elites, and even strangers for seemingly ridiculous amounts of money. In December 1915, she wrote a short letter to Mr. Julius Rosenwald, a potential donor, with whom she had not established a significant past relationship. Yet, she shamelessly admitted to him that her school was facing tumultuous financial times and politely asked for \$2,000. Dozens of similarly crafted short letters in the Bethune archives told exactly how much money the school had in its treasury, how far in debt they were, and asked for a specific amount of money.

### **Relationship Builder**

Bethune formed meaningful bonds and friendships with a variety of influential people. Some scholars (e.g., Metzger, 1979; Kelso, 1993) note that her ability to charismatically charm and communicate with people compelled them to support her causes. During her years in politics and educational leadership, Bethune became associated with banker Maggie Lena Walker and African American hair care entrepreneur, Madame C. J. Walker. McCluskey and Thomas (1999) suggest, "Through such alliances, Bethune built a constituency that transcended class lines, as well as gender and race" (p. 7). She also met and established relationships with countless others through her active involvement in women's organizations and the Methodist Episcopal Church. The sum of these relationships garnered financial support for her school and other social causes.

Perhaps the most significant of Bethune's relationships was formed with the Roosevelts. At a social gathering at their home, Bethune quickly fostered a relationship with Sara Delano Roosevelt, mother of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Kelso, 1993). Bethune's collection of papers includes several letters sent to Eleanor, the president's wife. In April of 1941, she appointed Eleanor to the Bethune-Cookman College Board of Trustees. The following November, Bethune wrote to President Roosevelt: "We are now in desperate need of funds. My nights are sleepless with this load upon my heart and mind. I must have help. I believe there are friends who would want to help".

### **CONCLUSION**

In the conference version of this paper, we will offer a more expansive description of the four attributes and approaches that contributed to Bethune's success as a fundraiser – these themes will be substantiated with key verbatim quotes and extracted statements from the historical documents we reviewed. Furthermore, we will offer a set of practical implications for modern-day HBCU presidents who must contend with a history of funding challenges, funding inequities from state governments (at public Black Colleges), and the present effects of a weakening American economy.

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**Please note that historical studies typically do not include theoretical or conceptual frameworks. Thus, we believe it would be improper to deduct points from our proposal for the absence of a framework.**

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