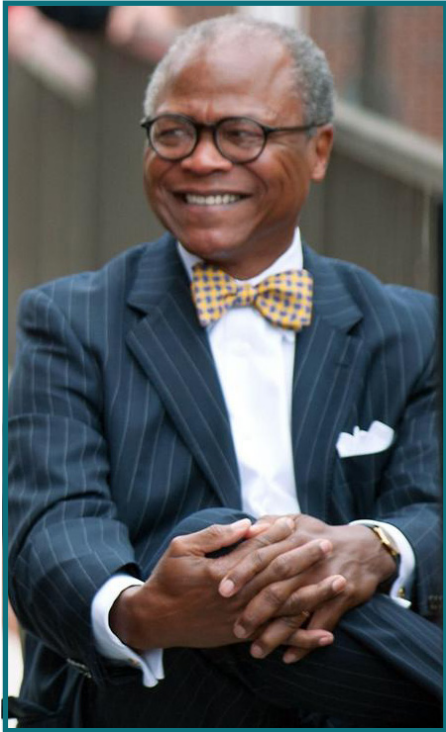


MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

ALVIN SCHEXNIDER

By Dillion Payne



Born and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Alvin Schexnider wanted to be a labor negotiator as a child. Inspired by the work of his father who represented his union by negotiating contracts, Schexnider thought that this too would be his future. He grew up in a large Catholic family with seven siblings, of which he was number six. Alvin attributes his aunts and uncles, who were school teachers, as being big influencers in his early education. They encouraged him to study something other than teaching in college. Alvin pursued political science in his undergraduate years.

Having two siblings who attended Xavier University of Louisiana, the only Black Catholic college in the country, Alvin did not want to follow in their footsteps. After some self-discovery and exploration, He found himself returning to Louisiana and attending Grambling University. In Louisiana, at this time, there were two Black public institutions. Grambling being one, located in the northern region of the state, and Southern University, located in Baton Rouge.

Alvin was a leader among students on campus, holding various leadership positions and advancing his studies in political science. In his junior year, he completed a summer internship with the Social Security Administration in Baltimore. Alvin cites the possibility of such an internship as the result of

opportunities opening for African Americans at the time. During the late 1960s, many more opportunities were available for African Americans outside of the realm of teaching, social work, and nursing.

Following graduation, Alvin was drafted into the Vietnam War and served one tour. In those days, armed services allowed a reduction of tours if admitted to law school, graduate school, or medical school. With an admission offer to Northwestern University, Alvin was allotted an early dismissal from his tour in Vietnam. Days later, he enrolled in his graduate program. Alvin would go on to earn a master's and Ph.D. from Northwestern in political science.

Naturally, it was a challenging adjustment, leaving an active war zone for graduate school. Alvin was forced to move from a highly structured environment to a more abstract graduate program. With support from his graduate advisor, he could succeed. He says, "I've never been shy about needing help; I've never had too much pride to say listen I don't know, can you help me with this?" He considers his willingness to listen and learn from others to be one of the key factors of success in a career in higher education as well as surrounding himself with capable and intelligent people. While attending graduate school at Northwestern, Alvin helped to develop the university's first "Afro American" studies program. Northwestern was determined to create a program that was of good quality.

Alvin dedicated 10 years of his career in higher education to improving and making a difference at HBCUs. Alvin served as the president of Winston-Salem State University and interim president of Norfolk State University. In his words, we have HBCUs to thank for the creation of the Black middle class. If it had not been for HBCUs educating the African American population in diverse subject fields, so much would not have been possible for

the progression of this group.

Finally, when asked what are the biggest problems facing our nation and how can HBCUs contribute to a solution, Alvin responded, “The cost. It is getting beyond the grasp for people to afford...and the challenge for colleges and universities to produce students who can compete globally.” These two points are important to the future of higher education in our country. The cost and return on investment of a particular institution can be detrimental to the future of students. The amount of debt that students leave with will have a great impact on their ability to invest and generate wealth. Secondly, students are not competing amongst their peers anymore, they are competing on a global scale in a global economy. So we need to make sure that we are doing all that we can to support students and prepare them for the future.

By making these larger issues a part of their mission and curriculum, HBCUs can contribute to the solutions needed in higher education. Alvin also calls attention to the importance and implications of race on these campuses. He believes that there is absolutely a need for HBCUs to address the different views and different ways of learning among students on their campuses. It is imperative that institutions recognize that change is constant and the need to adapt is necessary. Therefore, HBCUs need to continuously change to meet the demands of their students.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled “Understanding Minority Serving Institutions,” in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.