

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

MICHAEL SORRELL

By Ndeh “Will” Anyu



“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure” (Williamson, 1992). These words exemplify what Michael Sorrell has done at Paul Quinn College. Throughout the school’s history, it has had its ups and downs. At the time Michael Sorrell took on the presidency, the institution had approximately 30 days’ worth of cash remaining, faced the ill fate of losing its accreditation, and had a graduation rate of less than one percent. But under his leadership, not only has the institution grown financially, it has also been recognized nationally as the first Historically Black College or University (HBCU) designated as a work college along with a list of numerous other accomplishments.

Unlike most college leaders, Michael did not have a background in education prior to becoming president of Paul Quinn. His career trajectory included law and public policy. Before becoming the 34th president of the institution, he spent the majority of his professional life in the private sector and government. When asked why he decided to leave the private sector to embark on a career in higher education, he simply answered, because he was asked. He went on to say that in taking on the position he thought he could make a difference. During his tenure at the institution, he has created change through a non-traditional approach. When asked about the greatest fear he had in his first

year on the job, he shared the following:

...You know my greatest fear was that we would fail. I mean I guess that I would... I would preside over the closing of the school. That the school would have been capable of surviving for over 135 years at that point but I couldn’t and my leadership wasn’t enough to transform it. because you know the hole was deep. I’m a guy with expertise in crisis management but this was absolutely the most challenging task that I’ve been assigned.

Michael attributes his success to his faith in God and the faith others had in him and his unconventional methods. Two initiatives that have come under the leadership of Michael are the Four “Ls” of Quinnite Leadership and the development of the work college model at the institution. Michael shares that upon arriving at Paul Quinn, the institution lacked guiding principles as well as words of inspiration in which students could take pride. As such, he decided to use pieces of his personal mission and incorporated the Four “Ls” of Quinnite Leadership; 1) Leave places better than you found them. 2) Lead from wherever you are. 3) Live a life that matters; 4) Love something greater than yourself.

Per the Paul Quinn College work program handbook, “the vision of the work program is to transform ability into action and potential into achievement by encouraging all students to embrace the ideals of disciplined work, servant leadership, and initiative in preparation for lives of financial freedom, community engagement, and outstanding character.” One important issue Michael realized upon arriving at the college was that many of the students were working two to three part-time jobs while enrolled in school. In doing so, students were falling behind in their educational pursuits. Many of the positions they held were not related to their employment desires. Thus, the work

<https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/content/msi-oral-history-project>

college model was established to not only give students relevant work experience, but also to enable students to graduate with less than \$10,000 in loan debt. In fact, the model has been so successful that Michael recently announced there are plans for implementation of this model at a national level.

Michael Sorrell has been awarded several awards and honors including the HBCU President of the Year (2016), Excellence in Educational Administration (2013), and The Root 100 (Top 100 Young Leaders in America). These accolades inspired me to seek his opinion on the current landscape of higher education and the issues that plague growing institutions. He shared that despite popular belief, the greatest challenge within higher education has nothing to do with education. Instead, many of the issues in higher education are a result of institutions' inability to acknowledge the implications of poverty on the student body:

The failure to address poverty will undermine everything. the idea that you can provide students a greater education and you send them home every day to a horrible life. Like the idea that this isn't something that we should devote our time and energy and resources into as institutions is ridiculous. I think that if folks really want to make a difference, I think that minority students from under-resourced communities should go out and make enormous amounts of money and take matters into their own hands. By helping their communities re-develop.

Michael's comment about the faith of our nation being in the hands of the young people was not only insightful but empowering. This belief sparked the "We over Me" mantra that the institution prides itself on. We over Me, is an appreciation for supporting one another as a collective and a community-first philosophy that drives connectedness among faculty, staff, and students at Paul Quinn. The work Michael and his team at Paul Quinn College have been able to accomplish is a true testament to what hard work, persistence, and faith can achieve.

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.