

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

WALTER KIMBROUGH

By Kelly Lewis



The late sixties were a historical time of change in American culture—social movements sparked policy discussion to end bigotry against the Black population. During this time Black people faced issues such as unequal treatment, unequal opportunities, and the constant pacification of their experiences by white society. Despite the glaring racism, ambitious and determined Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were determined to fight for their rights and social change. These institutions were vital in producing some of the most influential leaders and organizations of the Civil Rights Movement— Martin Luther King Jr., the members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Thurgood Marshall, and the Greensboro Four to name a few. Though the efforts of HBCUs extend beyond the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to the 1970s, their relevance and significance are essential to the world today. Even sixty years after the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans are fighting against police brutality, systemic oppression, and racial discrimination in the political and professional world. These institutions continue to fulfill their rich and proud history by preparing the next generation of change agents.

Walter Kimbrough, who came of age in the eighties after the Civil Rights era, was born on April 22, 1967. He is the husband of Adria Nobles Kimbrough and father of two children: Lydia Nicole and Benjamin Barack. Throughout our interview, we discussed factors and experiences that lead him to become the leader he is today. To begin, I inquired about his life growing up in Atlanta, Georgia. Unlike most children, Walter’s father was a prominent United Methodist minister. “He was the pastor of two large churches that [had] 7500 members, so you sort of grow up in a situation where everyone knows your dad. We share most of the same name; we have two different middle names. So, everyone knew whose child I was.” Little did Walter know at the time that his experience as the son of a pastor would directly apply to his later roles as a president of Philander Smith College and Dillard University.

Almost two decades after the start of the Civil Rights Movement, an underground movement known as Hip Hop began to develop as a way for African-Americans to illuminate their political and social conditions. Walter was in his teenage years at the peak of the Hip Hop era. Though he was young and had not experienced many of the hardships described in the music, Hip Hop left a lasting impression on his life. Keeping to the spirit of Hip Hop, teenage Walter didn’t stray away from addressing issues he noticed. Young Walter was as candid then, as he is now. For him, “some of that is natural...some of that is growing up in Atlanta. Especially in the hub of the Civil Rights Movement, some of that rubs off. Some of that is [from] [...] Joseph Lowery... co-founders of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) with Martin Luther King Jr....reading a lot about King’s mentor Benjamin Mays... and when you add all that together, you create this.”

In addition to his outspokenness, Walter was a scholar. He attended one of Atlanta’s esteemed magnet schools for math and science, Benjamin Mays High School, where he served as the student body president, president of the National Honor Society, and a Cornell National Scholar. Cornell Scholars are an elite group of students

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

who demonstrate an outstanding degree of leadership, academic excellence, and a commitment to serving the communities in which they live.

Walter's dedication to academics and service did not cease when he enrolled at the University of Georgia. His commitment was showcased by the organizations he chose to join. In 1986, he joined Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. at the University of Georgia. He recalls being, "...a very active member of my fraternity taking on leadership positions. I was on our national board senior year... going to national conferences..." Walter Kimbrough's devotion to this fraternity awarded him the honor of becoming the Southern Region Assistant Vice President and Alpha Phi Alpha College Brother of the Year for the Southern Region.

Walter's college campus experiences inspired the decisions to work in student affairs and obtain a master's degree from Miami University in Ohio in Student Personnel Services. He continued his scholarly efforts by earning a Ph.D. in Higher Education from Georgia State University and defended a dissertation focused on Greek life. Following his commencement, Walter became the coordinator for Greek Life at Emory University, later receiving the 1994 New Professional of the Year from the Association of Fraternity Advisors, due to his devotion to students. After leaving Emory, Walter transitioned into various roles before finally becoming the Vice President of Student Affairs at Albany State University at the notable age of 32.

Four years into Walter's tenure as the VP of Student Affairs at Albany State, he was approached with several opportunities to become a college president. He had dreamed of this day after, "reading a lot about Benjamin Mays ...I realized I wanted to be a president from learning more and more about Mays." He was encouraged to apply for the Philander Smith College presidency, while also being recruited to become the next president of Albany State. "The president where I was at Albany State didn't want me to take the position [at Philander Smith College] because she had known she was retiring. And she thought that I was going to be able to stay there." But Walter wanted something Albany State could not offer, "I wanted to go somewhere that was a small school and church-related." After months of researching and navigating the college president recruitment process, Walter Kimbrough was named the president of Philander Smith College at the age of 37.

Upon entering his first presidency, Walter was able to rely on the knowledge gained from past experiences. Philander Smith College was entrenched in turmoil; the school was experiencing declines in enrollment, financial mismanagement, and low graduation rates. Walter was under the spotlight. He notes, "That wasn't new for me, I grew up like that. You know, it makes it easier for me at times to deal with some of the additional scrutiny." As a young president, Walter used his student affairs background to put students first. "Students come up to him on the campus for a hug, a handshake, or to joke around. He talks with them like a cool older cousin who likes the same rap music and television shows." Similar to Hip Hop, he used progressive methods in marketing and branding. "Generation X is the Hip Hop generation, and for me, that means doing things in an unconventional way...social media came out during my first presidency. So being able to use social media helped". Walter is often referred to as the "Hip Hop Prez." While @hiphopprez is a cool Twitter handle and nickname, it symbolizes the thought-provoking and radical spirit he wants his students to possess.

Today, Walter Kimbrough is the president of Dillard University and still has a progressive student-centered presidency. "I have a student group that I sort of advise... teaching a class at least once a semester...to engage the students that aren't the usual...student leaders." In an effort to foster an inquisitive and risk-taking milieu, Walter continues to provide thought-provoking lecture series on campus to get his students to actively "fight the power", much like the influential Hip Hop group, Public Enemy. "I can always invite the safe speaker that everyone always agrees with but that's not a lecture series...I mean you try to challenge everybody." He used these different methods to build the social, emotional, and academic readiness of his students.

Walter's past influences and experiences, social media savviness, and character have made him influential in a new movement for freedom. Parallel to the Civil Rights Movement, it will take a new generation of unapologetic change agents to propel the Black community forward. HBCUs remain a hub for such revolutionary talent. Although the Black community remains engulfed with police violence, social and political discrimination, the actions of Walter prove that with the right level of love, commitment, and innovation, Black students are ready for the battle.

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.