

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

DAVID WILSON

By Dillon Payne



David Wilson, currently the president of Morgan State University, came from very humble beginnings. He grew up in a shanty house in Marengo County, Alabama. The house had no electricity, plumbing, or modern day technology that most people rely upon today. The proud son of sharecroppers, Wilson was the youngest of ten siblings and the first to attend college. He knew from an early age that he had to work hard to achieve his dreams and that he did not want to lead the life of his family—though he remains proud of his parents and his upbringing. It was a different time in this country, especially for African Americans. At this time, there was no requirement from the law for African American children to attend school, which influenced his father's decision not to send many of Wilson's siblings to school. He recalls that many of his siblings remained illiterate, well into adulthood. However, Wilson and his siblings closest in age were permitted to go to school once his father developed a system. A system in which they would alternate attending school week by week. The first week the eldest of the remaining five children would attend school and two would stay behind, then the next week those who did not have the opportunity to go to school would then have their chance. At this time, they were attending a Rosenwald School and continued their rotation all the way through high school. Rosenwald Schools were built primarily for the education of African American children in the South in the early 20th

century. The project was the product of the partnership between philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington, an African American leader, educator, philanthropist, and President of Tuskegee Institute. Wilson's school held grades 1 through 5 in one room, and although these conditions were not ideal, it afforded Wilson and his siblings the opportunity to seek education.

Wilson recalls being motivated by growing up in his circumstance. Being raised in poverty motivated him to make sure he did not live the rest of his life in poverty. He sought education as a means to improve upon his current situation. His own words were, "my parents were very, very poor and that motivated me in a different kind of way. I knew that was not the kind of life I wanted to lead. I did not want to pick cotton my entire life and have nothing to show for it." He also shared his love for his family and how they remained close, stating, "you don't have to have a lot of money to be rich. My family was rich with love." Wilson regards the hardship his family faced and the love they shared as a valuable lesson.

As a young man, Wilson decided that he would not go the way of his father and brothers and started his journey to college at historically Black Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University. It was not until Wilson set forth to go to Tuskegee that he left Marengo County, Alabama. It was Wilson's high school shop teacher who first introduced him to Tuskegee. Wilson visited and was inspired by the statue of Booker T. Washington lifting the veil of ignorance from his people and leading them towards progress. Wilson decided on that trip that Tuskegee Institute was the only university for him. He wanted to be a part of the institution and wanted to be on the ground that those influential people had walked.

Additionally, Wilson attributes his amazing friends and family to the time he spent studying at Tuskegee. Specifically, he remembers a tough Advanced Composition professor who had a reputation of not giving “A’s.” Wilson knew that his success in this class would mean that he would be able to write extremely well. He attributes his experience in this class, with this special professor, as an experience that woke him up and made him realize that, “I can’t bullshit my way through college.” He realized this after the instructor made an example out of him in front of the class and vowed that he would work harder throughout his college career.

Since graduating from Tuskegee Institute, Wilson went on to study at Harvard University where he earned an Ed.M. in Educational Planning and Administration and an Ed.D. in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy. Wilson, now, has more than thirty years of experience in higher education administration. He has held many positions in leadership at universities all over the country. Wilson made history as the first African-American to obtain a senior administrator position at Auburn University, a predominantly White institution, as the Vice President for University Outreach. He made history again as the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, Extension and the University of Wisconsin Colleges from 2006-2010, making him the first person to lead these institutions simultaneously.

Of all his experience, Wilson regards his work at Morgan State as “the most satisfying... I never have a bad day at Morgan.” He mentions an intense level of satisfaction from working at Morgan State University and seeing the students recognize their power, competing on a world stage—and winning. Wilson believes in the potential of his students to be leaders in the world.

When asked how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) can contribute to the greatest issues of our society, Wilson has this to say, “HBCUs can offer their campuses.” Wilson believes that we need more spaces for people of different cultures and backgrounds to come together and learn from each other. Especially, in educational spaces where students are often sharing their thoughts, philosophies, and feelings. This will foster an opportunity for individuals of many different backgrounds to grow an authentic appreciation for one another. In light of current times, it is more important now than ever before for students to step out of their comfort zones, and HBCUs to create a space for diverse minds to interact.

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.