

Advocates for Social Justice:  
A Unique Identity for Philander Smith College

Concept Paper  
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## Background

Over the course of the past two years, the Philander Smith College community has engaged in numerous discussions and focus groups to assist the new administrative team in determining the current status of the institution. Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community organizations all participated in these conversations. Most were led by the president of the College, and were held during the spring and summer of 2005, the spring of 2006, and the fall of 2006. The *Thoma Thoma* firm conducted focus groups in December of 2005.

These conversations have attempted to capsule the traditional elements of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. The goal of these conversations has been to develop an updated strategic plan for the College to cover the period from 2006 to 2012.

The draft overview of the strategic plan was mailed to members of the Board of Trustees during the summer of 2006. Only six responded, but significant feedback helped to modify the strategic plan. One of the respondent's comments raised a more central issue for the College, and although not asked directly, the question was this: What is the unique identity of Philander Smith College?

This question related to the branding work that *Thoma Thoma* began during the spring of 2006 with select college leaders. During their retreat, we were asked to list 100 facts about the College. Next, we were asked to identify those items which were unique, sustainable, and a competitive advantage. The vast majority of the items listed were removed, and we were left only with several broad concepts: progressive, relevant, collaborative, creative, adventurous, and energetic.

During the focus groups held the last week of September 2006, the participants were provided with an updated strategic plan, with the first objective being to develop a unique identity (brand or niche) for the College. As a part of that conversation, participants (about 35 people) were asked to identify our unique identity, meaning something that only Philander Smith College could claim.

In every group, no one was able to offer a unique identity.

The president presented his perceptions of unique identities. Table I lists those schools in Arkansas with a unique identity.

TABLE I  
Unique Identities in Arkansas

University of Arkansas	Flagship, SEC Athletics, \$300 million Walton gift; \$1 billion campaign
Hendrix College	Odyssey program; alumni prominence; well known UMC ties
University of Central Arkansas	Center of Learning; Honors College

There are several colleges in the state that have lesser known identities, and they are listed in Table II. These are listed separately because the identity is either in its early stages of development, or not fully recognized by the average citizen.

Table II  
Weaker Unique Identities in Arkansas

Philander Smith College	Choir; new buildings
UAPB	Business incubator; only State HBCU
Henderson State University	Public liberal arts college
Lyon College	Scottish heritage; high percentage of professors of the year
UALR	Urban commuter; Cyber College

Philander Smith College fits in this category. During the first focus groups held in 2005, the strengths of the college were consistently two items: the choir, and the new buildings. Several unique aspects of the College that were identified during this process have subsequently been determined to be inaccurate. The creation of the Black Family Studies program in the late 1990s was billed as the first minor in the nation, when in actuality the first was at Niagara University in 1989. The college also has claimed that 9 of 10 students approved for medical school have been admitted, yet recently we determined that possibly only one PSC graduate in the past eight years has entered medical school.

The environmental scan also included other HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities). Table III lists HBCUs with strong identities.

Table III  
Unique HBCU Identities

Morehouse College	Morehouse man; Morehouse Mystique; only all male HBCU in nation
Spelman College	Spelmanite; one of two all female HBCUs in nation
Howard University	The Mecca; most visible HBCU; government-funded HBCU; Middle class, prominent families;
Hampton University	Middle class, prominent families; high achievement
Tuskegee University	Booker T. Washington; George Washington Carver; vet school; engineering
Florida A&M University	Business and pharmacy programs; Marching 100
Fisk University	Jubilee singers; WEB DuBois
Xavier University	Medicine and pharmacy

There are other HBCUs with fairly strong identities that they promote. Clark Atlanta University promotes Atlanta. Southern University and Grambling University benefit from the NBC coverage of the Bayou Classic. Bethune-Cookman College benefits from the legacy of Mary McLeod Bethune.

However, the majority of HBCUs like Philander Smith College have no strong, unique identity. Schools like Rust College, Wiley College, Texas College, Voorhees College, Tougaloo College, Lane College, LeMoyne Owen College and Edward Waters College all sell the same experience to potential students. The same buzz words and phrases include “small, family atmosphere,” “one on one, personalized attention,” “everyone knows your name,” “take you where you are and get you to where you want to be,” and “we provide access and give kids a chance.”

This was made clear as our new director of recruitment and admissions completed a West Coast HBCU recruiting trip. During several of the stops, each school presented their case. Most schools, including PSC, relied on the same buzz words. Those with an advantage were the schools with strong identities. Our director returned with a pointed question: “What do I sell?”

Philander Smith College is clearly at a competitive disadvantage against better known HBCUs with strong identities such as Xavier and Howard. In addition, the massive resources used by predominantly White institutions have further intensified the competition for Black students. As the recent AP news story regarding HBCUs indicated, today, only 12% of Black students attend an HBCU. Just fifty years ago, that number exceeded 90%.

## **The Idea**

At the September 2006 meeting of the Council of Presidents for the Black College Fund of the United Methodist Church, the report of the General Secretary raised prevalent questions being asked in the denomination. The presidents were asked what about their curricula or experience creates a graduate that clearly is the product of an HBCU affiliated with the United Methodist Church. The consensus from the group was that there was no such distinguishing experience or curricula. The overall concern is that support for the Black College Fund may be waning, and it would be more important to show the relationship these institutions have with the United Methodist Church.

In reviewing the history of the church, one must notice the emphasis on **social justice**. One the website of the church under the category “social principles,” it indicates:

The United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Its members have often taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles. Early Methodists expressed their opposition to the slave trade, to smuggling, and to the cruel treatment of prisoners.

These social principles include the natural world, as well as the nurturing, social, economic, political, and world communities. A detailed explanation can be found in the *Book of Discipline*, as well as a stand alone document on these principles.

The 1922 text, “Methodist Adventures in Negro Education,” Jay S. Stowell provides solid detail about this link between early Methodism and HBCUs. After a meeting in August of 1866, the Methodist Episcopal Church established the Freedmen’s Aid Society to assist in educating recently freed slaves. The original name of Philander Smith College, Walden Seminary, was named for one of the secretaries, Rev. J. M. Walden.

By November of 1866, the Board of Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church issued a statement regarding this work. In part, they stated

The emancipation of four millions of slaves has opened at our doors a wide field calling, alike for mission and educational work. It has devolved upon the church a fearful responsibility. The time may come when the States in the South will make some provision for the education of the colored children now growing up in utter ignorance in their midst. But thus far they have made none, nor perhaps can it soon be expected of them. Christian philanthropy must supply this lack. We cannot turn away from the appeal that comes home to our conscience and hearts. Nor can we delay. The emergency is upon us, and we must begin work now. (Stovall, p. )

Walden Seminary was formed in 1877 at what would become Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church, and it became Philander Smith College in 1882 after the donation by the widow of Philander Smith. It is clear that the foundation of Philander Smith College is tied intimately with the social justice mission of the United Methodist Church.

### **What Is Social Justice?**

Social Justice is a concept that has been loosely defined by a number of organizations and entities. In a concept paper regarding diversity and social justice at Goddard College, they define it as “the equality of human rights for all which includes access to the freedom of speech, employment, pay and benefits, resources, information, economics, power, and voice within an institution and society” (Brown, 2005).

From a legal perspective, the Labor Law Talk dictionary indicates that social justice “is the principle that all persons are entitled to “basic human needs”, regardless of “superficial differences such as economic disparity, class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, or health”. This includes the eradication of poverty and illiteracy, the establishment of sound environmental policy, and equality of opportunity for healthy personal and social development” ([http://dictionary.laborlawtalk.com/Social\\_justice](http://dictionary.laborlawtalk.com/Social_justice), accessed October 10, 2006).

The Social Justice Center at Washington University in St. Louis is a student-led movement to address these issues. Their website provides a strong, operational definition for social justice.

[Social justice is] the pursuit of equity for populations, who are, currently and historically, marginalized, exploited, disempowered, or violated based on their social group membership. These manifestations of oppression are the pervasive existence of social inequality woven through social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. Rooted in civil rights movements of the past century this includes the rights of the following: people of color; people with diverse religions; women, people with disabilities; homosexuals and bisexuals; the poor and working class; and younger and older adults (<http://sjc.wustl.edu/aboutsj.shtml>, accessed October 10, 2006).

Very few institutions of higher education have a focus on social justice. Several institutions, such as the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Boston College, and Brandeis University, offer some form of social justice major. The law school of the University of California at Berkeley has a center for social justice. It is reasonable to project at this time that fewer than twenty schools address issues of social justice, and no HBCU is presenting this as its primary image. Therefore, this becomes a tremendous opportunity for the College to create a strong, unique identity that strengthens both our history as an HBCU and our relationship with the United Methodist Church.

The idea of social justice is consistent with the research on the millennial generation, which includes our students today through those entering for the next decade or so. In “Generations at Work” (2000) by Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, the authors in describing this generation (also called Generation Y or Nexters) born between 1980 and 2000, have as their core values optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, morality, street smarts, and diversity. They write

By the time they’re ten, they know about divorce, drugs, AIDS, anorexia, gangs, and guns. They are exposed to serious adult issues on daytime TV talk shows.... Having learned in school about recycling, global warming, the destruction of the rainforests, and acid rain, this generation is, and will probably continue to be, the most concerned and actively involved group of advocates for the environment (p. 136).

This generation is in general interested in social justice issues, and a focused program to empower these students would be very attractive to them.

### **Why This Works Only For PSC**

The key for an identity for the College is that it must be as *Thoma Thoma* suggested, “unique, sustainable, and competitive advantage.” In sharing this idea with each focus group during September of 2006, there was overwhelming consensus that this is a great idea for the college, one that could generate excitement by all as we seek to create a unique identity that will draw both students and benefactors.

In our conversations, Bishop Felton May, dean of the Harry R. Kendall Center and retired United Methodist bishop, enthusiastically indicated the strength of this identity in achieving our need for uniqueness. He further indicated that this would provide “an environmental laboratory that could not be duplicated.”

The strength of his statement is proven when we continue the environmental scan to determine what resources exist in Little Rock that are unique to this community, and that would provide legitimacy to this new endeavor. The following organizations and entities would be significant partners in selling this identity.

### Central High School

The desegregation of Central High School in 1957 was an international event as it became the first substantive test of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. Activist Daisy Bates, for which the street that borders the main entrance of the College is named for, worked closely with the Little Rock Nine throughout this turbulent time. Oral history of the Central High crisis as it is called includes numerous accounts of Philander Smith College faculty providing tutoring for the Little Rock Nine as they were treated as second class students during the 1957-58 school year. PSC alumnus Dr. Ozell Sutton recently shared his experiences supporting these claims with the College president (Personal communication, September 15, 2006).

The integration of Central High School is a prime example of social justice at work. The legacy of this event has included the historic site, and the recently dedicated statues of the Nine on the grounds of the State Capitol. The links between the College and the school are numerous, including the architect who designed Central High also designed the Cox Administration Building. With Central literally two miles away from campus, this historical landmark provides a plethora of learning opportunities for students interested in being grounded in social justice. In addition, the National Parks Service has already expressed an interest in a closer relationship with Philander Smith College related to Central High School.

### William J. Clinton Foundation

According to their website, “the mission of the William J. Clinton Foundation is to strengthen the capacity of people in the United States and throughout the world to meet the challenges of global interdependence.” Located literally 10 minutes from Philander Smith College, this international association provides many opportunities for students to engage in activities designed to better our world. The College has a special relationship with President Clinton in that the choir sang at his inauguration in 1993, and the opening of the presidential library in 2004.

Programmatically, the Clinton Foundation is interested in health security, economic empowerment, leadership development and citizen service, and racial, ethnic and

religious reconciliation. Additionally, the Foundation has programs addressing HIV/AIDS, the climate, and health. There are numerous opportunities in these areas for our students to be actively engaged.

### Clinton School of Public Service

With the inaugural class beginning in the fall of 2005, the Clinton School of Public Service is a creative and unique academic offering. It differs from traditional public administration and public policy programs, as indicated on the website:

[T]he Clinton School's focus is more on building global leadership in issues related to equity - such things as community and economic development, social change to improve the lives of local residents, civic engagement to give voice to those who remain powerless, and enhancing the capacity of people to work across disciplinary, racial, ethnic, and geographic boundaries.

The Clinton School has enriched their program, and the community, with their dynamic distinguished visitors. Already, Philander Smith College has partnered with the Clinton School on two speakers, Dr. Thomas Shapiro and Dr. Cornel West, who both addressed social justice issues. Both were participants in the *Bless the Mic* lecture series started in the fall of 2005 at PSC. Dr. Shapiro spent an hour with Clinton School students before his PSC lecture. We are also planning to connect the students with Dr. Jonathan Kozol for his January 2007 lecture at PSC.

### City Year

Founded in 1988 in Boston, City Year is a unique service organization linked with Americorps (which was an initiative of the Clinton administration). City Year opened in Little Rock in November of 2004. The City Year corps members, aged 17 to 24, spend a year in community service, leadership development, and civic engagement. City Year's mission is to build democracy through citizen service, civic leadership and social entrepreneurship.

The vision of the organization speaks clearly to issues of social justice. In fact, it has a social entrepreneurship vision, declaring “the world at large requires ‘social entrepreneurs’ to act on their idealism to offer breakthrough solutions to pressing human needs, develop new civic and social institutions, and reinvent and reinvigorate the public and civic sectors.”

### Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

The Rockefeller Foundation has three main goals: education, economic development, and economic, racial, and social justice. Clearly all three are directly related to the history of Philander Smith College, probably more so than with any other entity in our immediate proximity. The foundation “views education, for example, as the fundamental strategy in pursuing not only economic development but also economic, racial, and social justice. None of the three exists in isolation from the others.”

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation actively promotes social justice, and all of its literature expresses this unashamedly. They write that they “engage institutions and individuals in the struggle for pervasive justice in the lives of all Arkansans, building effective communities that can sustain and improve quality of life for all.... Our vision is Arkansas as a state where economic, racial, and social justice is universally valued and practiced.” As a side note, the Foundation made a \$2 million gift to the College to establish a book endowment for the new library which opened in 2003.

### Heifer International

Simply stated, the mission of Heifer International is to end hunger and poverty. With the new world headquarters opening in 2006 in Little Rock, the organization has a strong base by which to expand their operations. Through their program of “pass on the gift,” by sharing the offspring of animals, people around the world, including the United States, learn skills for self reliance. Eradicating hunger is clearly a social justice issue.

### Mosaic Templars

Founded in the late 1800s, the Mosaic Templars was a fraternal organization that provided services to Blacks during the era of extreme segregation. The organization was able to establish services such as burial and life insurance, banking, newspaper, nursing school and hospital. This was one of the largest Black owned businesses during that time. The current site is being rebuilt and renovated after fire destroyed it. Located just a few blocks from the College, this would be another great partnership for this new initiative.

### Others

While the organizations listed above would be seen as major partners in this initiative, there are many other community based agencies and organizations that would be interested in a College that has social justice as the core value, one that educated its students to be a force for positive change in their communities and not simply degree-bearing consumers interested solely in personal wealth accumulation.

In terms of educational institutions, the Bowen School of Law and UAMS would be significant partners. The law school would be a terrific feeder for students interested in legally defending the rights of the disenfranchised. Just recently, the law school announced a collaborative program with the Clinton School. UAMS is expanding its program in public health. Two PSC alumni have completed this program in the past few years, as public health is certainly an important role for this kind of initiative.

Many local organizations would serve as great partners. Black Community Developers, the Martin Luther King Commission, NCCJ (whose name will change soon) and the NAACP are several that speak to issues of racial justice. National agencies such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Boys and Girls Club, and United Way all would provide opportunities for students (as well as faculty and staff) to become acquainted with the need for social justice. Many other organizations would be fitting partners as well, as this list is just a sample of the possibilities.

### **Call To Action**

Philander Smith College is at a critical point in its history. From 1936, with the ending of primary and secondary education and the sole offering of college level courses, until 1966, PSC was an institution of the highest standards, often called the little “snooty school” for the high caliber of students enrolled there. The higher education landscape changed greatly after *Brown v. Board* in 1954, and the aggressive pursuit of Black students by formerly exclusionary institutions, impacted HBCUs immensely. Again, prior to the *Brown* decision, 90% of African Americans with college degrees had attended an HBCU.

Seeing the changing landscape, a faculty committee at PSC met and revised the admissions standards, now admitted C students. This would eventually evolve the College into a completely open admission institution, with a significant bulk of the students having marginal high school credentials. The mission of the college became one of access to students disenfranchised by substandard primary and secondary institutions. This became the strategy of many HBCUs, especially private schools. But despite this tactic, in 2006 only 12% of all Black college students attend any HBCU.

Forty years after this major shift in mission, the College finds itself detrimentally labeled as a school for students who can't gain admittance anywhere else, a label that has damaged the academic reputation of the institution. In this new era of higher education, open admission four-year institutions have struggled, and many HBCUs in this category have lost their accreditation trying to operate with the least prepared students.

The rise of community colleges in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided poorly educated high school graduates with an inexpensive alternative to achieving higher education. Therefore, the private (and more expensive), open admission, four-year college has become virtually irrelevant in this new millennium.

**In order to thrive in this new millennium, Philander Smith College must forge a new, unique identity.** This new identity would be important in attracting new students by giving the College a competitive edge in the fierce competition for students, particularly high performing Black students. Just as important, this new identity would have the ability to excite donors, potential donors, and the community to significantly raise their level of financial investment in the College.

Social justice is that unique identity. Students and parents today are sold a constant diet of highly ranked colleges based on how brilliant their incoming students are, their wealth, and how successful their students become after graduation. Very rarely if ever does a College indicate that it empowers young people to take up causes of the marginalized, the exploited, the disenfranchised and the disempowered.

As a historically Black college affiliated with the United Methodist Church, located in Little Rock, a hub of social justice organizations and activities, Philander Smith College is uniquely positioned to graduate men and women who will be advocates for these kinds of causes. Initial discussions with over 40 current faculty and staff generated great enthusiasm and excitement about this possibly becoming our identity. In fact, several faculty members began revealing their involvement with programs like Habitat for Humanity and the VISTA program and how this would match their interests. Further conversations with PSC students, Board members, and alumni, as well as key city leaders, will further determine the efficacy of this initiative.

Now is the time for this kind of mission. In fact, if we don't take advantage of this particular once in a life time moment in the history of this city, we may in fact lose a golden opportunity. In 2007, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School will shine an international spotlight on Little Rock. By January of 2007, Philander Smith College should begin positioning itself as the new cradle, the mecca for social justice advocates. This new identity would match well in with all the events during that year, and would serve as a great recruitment tool not only for students, but scholars both established and new to seek Philander Smith College as their destination.

## REFERENCES

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