Future of the Land Grant Universities: Challenges and Opportunities

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Thanks Dr. Hill and good morning to the 73rd PAWC audience. My original plans were to talk about the rich history of the 1890 land-grant universities. I was planning to discuss the importance of the 1862 Morrill Act and the equally important 1890 Act, which recognized the need to educate recently freed slaves and their descendants. However, Drs. Maw and Lyons have done an impeccable job of explaining this, so I will save some time and move on. I would like to emphasize that the primary academic focus of these institutions was on the predominant profession of the times: AGRICULTURE. These schools also emphasized mechanical arts, home economics, and general education, but clearly, agriculture received the most emphasis. In fact, agriculture was a part of the official name of the majority of these schools. Today, it still remains a part of some institution’s monikers (e.g., Alabama A&M, Florida A&M, North Carolina A&T, and Prairie View A&M), but I encourage all of the 1890s to keep a vigorous focus on agriculture.

As a third generation farmer, an agriculturalist, a researcher, the Outreach Lead for Monsanto Company, and a citizen concerned with maximizing productivity for all agriculture, I submit to you that your continued emphasis on agriculture is critical. Because now, the emphasis should be on increasing agricultural productivity in a world where resources will continue to diminish, diet preferences will continue to get more complex, and food safety can not be compromised. Accomplishing this goal will require more production from all sectors of the agricultural industry: large AND small farmers, Black AND White farmers, animal AND plant producers, producers of genetically modified organisms AND organic foods. Monsanto recognizes the importance of the 1890 schools in this equation AND, we also (assembled here) should recognize the importance of the 1890 schools in this equation.

I realize that several of you know my educational history. You know that I hold three degrees in Agronomy, all from 1862 land-grant schools. I earned a BS and MS degree from the University of Arkansas, and a PhD from Iowa State University. You may not know that my mother was a 1945 graduate of J.C. Corbin High School, which sat on the campus of Arkansas AM&N College in Pine Bluff, AR. AM&N later became the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and continues to serve as the state’s historically black land-grant institution. This is another of those institutions that I encourage to keep the emphasis on AGRICULTURE, even though it is no longer a part of its official name. I also remember my father, joining with several other Black farmers from rural southeast Arkansas, attending the annual Rural Life Conference on AM&N/UAPB’s campus. This conference was the place where these farmers gathered to get trusted information on ways to improve their farms, and ultimately their lives. So while I did not attend an 1890 school, I stand before you this morning as a beneficiary of their work.
Throughout the year, I have worked with the 1890 leadership to celebrate the 125-year anniversary of these institutions. The celebration culminated in a week long ceremony in Washington, DC this past July. In celebrating this anniversary, I had the distinct pleasure of co-chairing a committee to acknowledge the importance of the agricultural industry to the 1890 schools. Along with Dr. Mark Latimore of Fort Valley State University in Georgia, we led the committee’s charge to pull together a cluster of companies to discuss this important alliance. Now, I want to take a point of personal privilege and gloat a little, because the event was highly successful and well received by all.

On Tuesday, July 14, 2015, Dr. Latimore and I moderated a panel of six of the leading agricultural companies who have strong relationships with your institutions. Those companies included DuPont/Pioneer, John Deere, National Crop Insurance Services, Tyson, Walmart, and one other company. What is the name of that other company? Oh! it was Monsanto. Seriously, it was Monsanto and having the responsibility of coordinating the company’s activities was indeed one of the highlights of my career. My manager, Ms. Melissa Harper, was our representative on the panel. She serves as the Vice President of Global Talent Acquisition, HR Compliance, and Chief Diversity Officer for us. All of the companies did a great job of detailing the importance of these institutions in helping to maintain a diverse workforce for world agriculture. While this effort originated as a celebration of things that had already occurred, there were several of us that took this as a challenge to create stronger alliances between the 1890 schools and the agricultural industry. So instead of a culmination, we took it as an initiation.

One might wonder, “What are some of the key components of such a partnership?” I’m glad you asked. You see, in agriculture, there remains a critical shortage of qualified candidates to fill vacant positions. This shortage is especially acute among minority students, especially Black students. Done correctly, such a partnership would put in place a system where the top talent from the 1890 schools could compete for the wide array of careers in the agricultural industry. Additionally, the agricultural industry could collaborate with 1890 faculty and staff to evaluate criteria and academic programs so that investments could be made to address deficiencies. For example, Monsanto recognizes the need for well-trained agricultural scientists with experience in biotechnology.

We also rely on plant breeders to develop high performing varieties via both traditional methods and through transgenic technologies. Therefore, Monsanto joined with USDA in investing in the Plant Breeding and Biotech program here at Tuskegee and making a donation to assist with the construction, equipping, and staffing of the Henderson Hall of Agricultural Life Science, Teaching, Extension, and Research. Annually, we host the 1890 Student Leadership Event at our world headquarters in St. Louis where we interview selected students for various intern and co-op positions in the company. We invest in undergraduate scholarships for 1890 students and have recently expanded this to include scholarships for 1890 students in graduate school.

This partnership could also facilitate relationships with other organizations and institutions to help train talent for the agricultural industry. For instance, Monsanto is a Sustaining Member to the National Black Growers Council (NBGC). NBGC is an organization whose mission is to improve the efficiency, productivity, and sustainability of Black, row-crop farmers. I had the
pleasure of moderating a panel of these growers on yesterday’s program, where we discussed their usage of biotechnology. Thanks to those of you who attended that very informative session.

Recently, NBGC launched its Agricultural Apprenticeship Program, which is designed to help train future talent for agriculture and is supported by their Sustaining Members. Through this program, NBGC growers agree to host students as interns, scratch that, apprentices, on their farms. The students are given hands-on, on-farm experience and are trained as if they are going to operate their own farms in the next season. They learn everything about running a modern farm: equipment operation, planting, harvesting, crop rotation, fertility, marketing, crop insurance, financing, USDA program usage, etc. At the end of this experience, the students return to your schools to complete their education. They are not required to commit to the company that supported them; rather, they are free to compete for various available positions. However, they are now better trained and the barrier, perceived or actual, of not having on-farm experience is removed.

But back to the broader relationship that could exist between agricultural companies and the 1890 universities. Ultimately, the goal is to have a “family” kind of relationship. You see, in a family, you are comfortable enough to tell someone if they have spinach in their teeth or if their zipper is undone. You are more likely to tell them to clean their teeth or zip their fly before they go into an important meeting. Similarly, in the potential relationship between industry and the 1890 schools, we need to be comfortable enough to tell each other of shortcomings. More importantly, we need to be committed enough to dialogue with each other and work out solutions to overcome these problems. As I said earlier, the celebration this past summer will, hopefully, be an initiation to keep this process moving forward.

Thank you and I appreciate your attention.