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HUFF POST COLLEGE

The Virgin Islands Miracle

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The word *miracle* is one of the most overused words that falls from the mouths of religious leaders and laypersons. Any occurrence that cannot be easily explained or that average people or institutions are not able to replicate is given this celestial label. The academy has its doubt as to whether this label is ever appropriate since it demands that every act, occurrence and phenomenon should be subject to scrutiny and a plausible and rational explanation provided. Yet there are times when even the most avid scientist is willing to bestow this title upon the actions of an event within an educational institution because the accomplishment defies the standards by such a great margin. Some feel that the label is appropriate when something is "statistically unlikely but beneficial." I describe the achievement below as a "miracle," not because it can't be explained, but because I challenge other institutions to replicate it.

During these challenging economic times, universities and colleges are struggling to maintain and grow alumni contributions and secure other philanthropic support. Alumni contributions provide more than financial resources; they are a compelling indicator of how the institution is viewed and valued by those who possess its degrees. Major ranking systems, such as *U.S. News and World Report*, use alumni contributions as an important indicator in their calculation of the best colleges and universities in the country.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have struggled to engage their alumni in a manner that induces them to make annual financial contributions. Many find themselves able to persuade less than 10 percent of their graduates to contribute on an annual basis. When I became president of the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) in 2009, the institution's alumni giving rate was at 6 percent. UVI is a liberal arts, land grant institution; the only university in the Virgin Islands, and the only HBCU outside of the U.S. mainland. The present student body is approximately 2,500, with close to 5,500 reachable alumni. Through a very concerted effort, the alumni giving percentage increased by over 100 percent, from 6 percent to 13 percent over a two year period. Though this is noteworthy, it is not a miracle. The miracle occurred this past year as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of this unique institution in the heart of one of the most beautiful places in the world.

During a meeting of the Board of Trustees' Development Committee towards the end of the 2011 fiscal year, our Vice President of Institutional Advancement, Ms. Dionne V. Jackson, proposed a goal to increase alumni contribution to 16 percent, which would have placed UVI at a very respectable level for many HBCU's and ahead of many of our peer institutions. One of our Committee members suggested that we at least strive for 20 percent since we were entering our 50th anniversary and our graduates would probably be more responsive to our solicitations. I liked the idea but felt that his suggestion didn't go far enough. I suggested that we commence a *50 for 50* campaign for 2012 where we encourage 50 percent of our graduates to give back to the University during the institution's 50th anniversary year. The Committee agreed that this would be an aspirational goal for our Development team.

The idea had a nice, simplistic ring to it, and something everyone could easily remember. What surprised me more was how enthusiastically our director of Annual Giving and Alumni Affairs, Ms. Linda Smith, responded to this challenge when I made her aware of the Committee's decision. Instead of explaining why this was not possible, her response was one of calm determination. I knew that no other HBCU had reached this level, though I soon learned that Claflin University in South Carolina was on the verge of reaching the 50 percent mark and was already at 45 percent. This gave us an even greater incentive. We wanted the University of the Virgin Islands to make history by becoming the first HBCU to reach the 50 percent mark.

What occurred in the next 12 months is the miracle. The slogan "50 for 50" became a mantra that was promoted and recited at every 50th Anniversary event and through numerous communications to the public. Our alumni seemed emboldened by the prospect of making history, and being part of something that had never occurred.

Miracles are by definition unexplainable, but our miracle can be explained. The tremendous success we achieved occurred because of the following factors, and I share them because I want other institutions, especially HBCUs to create their own miracles. The UVI miracle had three earthly characteristics.

First, alumni, like all human beings, need a challenge and a reason to respond to that challenge. Though all alumni understand that their university needs money, for those who are not in high income brackets, they may need the money even more than the university. If they are going to part with resources during challenging economic times, it makes a difference if there is a special challenge facing them and the institution. Sometimes this major challenge is when, at a fundamental level, the existence of the institution is at stake. What is encouraging about our miracle is that it had nothing to do with an economic challenge facing the

University, but with a positive challenge of being the first to achieve something great. This challenge also tapped into a dormant pride that many graduates possessed about the institution which needed to be awakened. The University of the Virgin Islands, based on its location outside of the mainland in the beautiful Caribbean, is often overlooked and unrecognized for its academic excellence and achievements. Our graduates are proud of the institution because they know that UVI is not a household name outside the region, yet they also know that they received an education that is comparable, if not better than the one received by so many of their colleagues and peers. The *50 for 50* campaign gave them a way to express this pride and unrecognized exuberance in a concrete and meaningful way. This miracle manifested itself on the physical plane because it first took root in the fertile ground of the spirit of our alumni. A spirit trapped by unrecognized potential.

Second, our Development staff realized that the traditional approaches for this miracle campaign had to be challenged and expanded. Though the standard solicitations through the mail and "phonathons" continued, we decided to do more. We implemented a more comprehensive, wide reaching calling program and followed up with our alumni between phonathons. More importantly, our staff realized that they could not wait for our graduates to come to us, but we had to go to them. Fortunately, a large percentage of our alumni reside on one of the three islands that make up the U.S. Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John). There are traditional community events that attract large groups of individuals from all three islands and from other locations in the Caribbean and the mainland. Our staff and students were present at Carnival, the Agricultural Fair, jazz concerts, performances at our Reichhold Center for the Arts, and any other event that attracted a sizeable crowd. Together staffers, alumni, and current students approached individuals to ascertain their alumni status, and then solicited their support of the *50 for 50* campaign. As president, I began to hear from people that they could not escape our students and staff at these events. Clearly, they did not attend the events to make a contribution to the University; however, they were present at events with money in their pockets and checkbooks in hand because the various functions required payment to enter and often included vendors and merchants promoting their merchandise. This strategy not only allowed us to reach more of our graduates through a face to face experience, but it also allowed us to reach them when they were in a spending mood. Development activities must replicate the strategies of holiday merchants instead of trying to defy their wisdom. It does not cheapen the University's appeal because we are present in the marketplace; it just reminds our graduates that there is a different purchase and investment opportunity. When they give to UVI, they are, in essence, purchasing from us a sense of connection and good will, a sense that they belong to something greater than themselves. They are purchasing a moment to revisit a part of their lives that may be more enjoyable than their present reality. They are investing in and solidifying the longevity of their alma mater, thereby extending their pride in the sense of belonging to the institution. Their contributions are given with the understanding that the University will use the added resources to enhance the experiences and memories of those who come after them. We have something to offer them in the marketplace that many merchants cannot offer and we must move out of the shadows of our institutions and into the center of activities in our towns and cities. Miracles do not happen in the closets of our minds, but in the sunlight of our everyday experiences. The miracle of connecting with those who we need occurs when universities take the bold step of creating the space and encounters where the "statistically unlikely" event can occur.

Third, we accomplished this miracle with a very small staff. Our Annual Giving and Alumni Affairs Office is staffed by one full-time employee. This miracle would not have occurred if we expected everything to be done within a department of this size. The entire Institutional Advancement component, which also includes Public Relations and the Reichhold Center for the Arts, all made the *50 for 50* campaign part of their priority activities. Individuals in other areas of the University volunteered to work on the *50 for 50* campaign. We had alumni class leaders who challenged themselves and those in their respective classes to make history. Our students gravitated to this challenge, eagerly embraced the opportunity to have an impact, and served as exceptional solicitors in the market place. It is difficult for graduates in a face-to-face encounter to say no to a student who is now walking in their footsteps. Miracles are not determined by the number of people creating the miracle, but by the depth of faith and authenticity that exist within the people who are engaged in the process. The miracles of which we speak do not fall from the sky; they are fashioned by the faith and hands of those who walk on earth.

We did not achieve our goal for the *50 for 50* campaign. Our books closed for FY 2012 on September 30th with 42 percent of our alumni contributing to their alma mater. So the miracle is not that we were the first HBCU to secure a 50 percent alumni contribution level, but that we are the first university in history to raise its alumni contribution percentage from 13 percent to 42 percent in one year. This is an increase of 223 percent. Even the most well-endowed colleges and universities who have been in existence for hundreds of years have never achieved this feat. This 42 percent places UVI among some of the most prestigious institutions in the country in regards to alumni contributions.

Miracles do happen. They happen when people are given a challenge, and when we use our creativity and people to stretch beyond the norm and create a new normal. Miracles can happen in under-resourced universities when faith overrides fear, when the challenge is more enticing than the circumstances that consume us. My challenge to other HBCUs and other small colleges and universities around the country is not to replicate the UVI miracle, but to create one of your own. The same way that we can transform alumni giving we can transform our retention and graduation rates, and all of the other challenges that we face in this complex and demanding world. With the wind from this exceptional experience at our backs, UVI is now on the path to creating greater miracles.

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