Historically Black Colleges and Universities & the Research Agenda on the Oil Drilling Disaster and Sustainability in the Gulf
8 September 2010
Dillard University--New Orleans, Louisiana

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview
On September 8, 2010 at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, NAACP convened a meeting of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the five Gulf Coast states (Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, and Texas) to discuss the engagement of HBCUs in planning and executing a research agenda on sustainability in the Gulf region. The meeting had four primary aims: 1) Provide an opportunity for HBCUs to come together and determine priorities for our communities regarding the Gulf oil disaster and sustainability in the Gulf, as well as draft strategies to advance those priorities; 2) Provide a forum for HBCUs to learn about the various opportunities available to support their engagement in addressing the Gulf oil disaster and sustainability in the Gulf region; 3) Showcase to federal agencies and BP the assets and capabilities of the HBCUs as potential partners; and 4) Explore options for combining complementary assets in creative partnerships amongst HBCUs and with federal, state, and corporate partners to execute a Gulf region sustainability research and policy agenda.

The 42 participants included representatives from 12 historically black colleges and universities, NAACP membership and leadership, as well as representatives from Zion Travelers Baptist Church, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, the National Institutes for Environmental Health Sciences, the United States Coast Guard, BP, the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), BP, and the White House Initiative on HBCUs.

Grounding Us in Community Realities
Consistent with the aim of grounding the research agenda in the communities it seeks to serve, these proceedings commenced with a foundation in community perspectives. Reverend Tyrone Edwards, Pastor of Zion Travelers Baptist Church in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, spoke on behalf of the many community groups with whom he works. Reverend Edwards painted the picture of communities yet to recover from Hurricane Katrina and now besieged with another disaster. He described issues of distrust of BP and, to some degree, also federal agencies. For affected communities, these concerns have plagued the response to the oil drilling disaster since the beginning. He spoke of the imperative for independent research, conducted by trusted entities. Referencing the elevated death rates that have plagued the Hurricane Katrina affected region, Reverend Edwards warned that if swift action is not taken on engaging in appropriate, community-responsive, and effective research now, the scenario might be similar years down the line.

Charting an HBCU Gulf Research Agenda
The discussion on the HBCU vision for research in the Gulf region was framed using the following categories: Social Sciences; Public Health, Environmental Science, and Environmental Justice. NAFEO provided an extensive overview of the
research and public policy assets and capabilities of HBCUs, in the referenced categories. A few of the research questions that participants identified include: a) What makes the impact of the oil spill different on communities of color than other populations?; b) What is the cumulative impact of a community already under stress recovering from Hurricane Katrina?; c) What is the impact of the oil spill on sustainable living environments?; and d) What is the fate, effect and impacts of the dispersants?

Dialogue with Potential Partners
EPA, NIEHS, NOAA, the US Coast Guard, BP and the White House Initiative on HBCUs joined the meeting for a discussion on existing and planned research underway in the Gulf and the opportunities for participation of the HBCU Consortium. BP described their five research priorities that will frame the upcoming $500 million RFP and they clarified that this fund and decisions around it will be governed by an advisory council. NIEHS shared their plans to examine the long term health effects by working with the clean-up worker cohort of 10,000 people. NOAA and the US Coast Guard shared a brief overview of their respective roles and plans. While the Coast Guard has been more engaged in the immediate response, NOAA is examining the short and long term impact of the oil spill in the ocean. The EPA spoke of an upcoming $2 million RFP they will be releasing to evaluate the effects of the dispersants. The White House Initiative representative spoke in very affirming terms about this effort to organize the HBCUs and promised his support in moving this work forward.

A Proposed Structure for HBCU Collaboration
HBCUs collectively have extensive research capacity in a wide variety of areas. The socioeconomic, basic, and applied research needs in the Gulf region are many, not only due to the Gulf Oil Drilling Disaster, but also in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Communities of color and low income communities in the Gulf region face a plethora of social, health economic, and environmental threats. In addition to their technical acumen, HBCUs are uniquely positioned to carry out community-based participatory research (CBPR) and translate research findings and implications because of their history and relationships with most impacted communities. The framework of the HBCU Gulf Coast Sustainability and Public Policy Research Consortium is rooted in the “Communiversity,” a community based participatory research, education, and outreach model which is a collaboration between HBCUs, community members, civil rights/non-profit/legal organizations, environmental justice centers, and other stakeholder, that engages in research that combines community experience with academic knowledge and theories in a non-threatening environment. The deliverables of the Consortium would include generation of transferable experiential knowledge in the areas of indicators of community and ecosystem health and resilience, and integrated interdisciplinary decision tools.

Agreed Conclusions
1) Trust is an issue as it relates to the research agenda in the Gulf. It is not just the message. It is the messenger. HBCUs are uniquely positioned to mitigate this challenge.
2) Community participatory models are critical to the success and integration of sustainability and public policy research in the Gulf region.
3) Human dimensions and impacts of the oil spill and other environmental and health threats in the Gulf region must be addressed and serve as the objective and endpoint of the research agenda. Considerable shifting of emphasis and re-prioritization are needed in the current and forthcoming research initiatives.
4) Most affected communities are missing from decision making forums and this must be remedied in order to have an effective response, recovery, and restoration plan, as well as a long term sustainability plan. Inclusive review panels/advisory boards/commissions specifically recognizing HBCU investigators must be established at all levels of these processes.
5) Institutions holding the trust and respect of impacted communities (communities of color are among the most impacted groups and underrepresented at the decision making forums) must be prominently engaged in developing and executing the Gulf research agenda.

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