

## Whites at Black Colleges

Morehouse's first white valedictorian puts spotlight on non-black HBCU students

by Aisha Jefferson

May 29, 2008 -- Joshua W. Packwood's graduation from Morehouse College this month has received national attention. Sure, Packwood is smart-his 4.0 GPA as an economics major helped secure his standing as class valedictorian. He's also landed a job with New York-based investment firm Goldman Sachs. He is now part of a legacy of notable Morehouse alumni, including Martin Luther King Jr., Maynard Jackson, Spike Lee, and Samuel L. Jackson.

However, a particularly notable accomplishment for this Kansas City, Missouri native is his history-making moment as Morehouse's first white valedictorian since its establishment in 1867. For more than 50 years, the Atlanta-based college has had white students, and about less than a dozen were enrolled when Morehouse president Robert M. Franklin Jr., Ph.D., recalls being a student there in the 1970s.

At Morehouse, Packwood was one of about 112 of the non-African American students who represented about 4% of the historically black college's 2,800 students, Franklin says. He anticipates some growth in that percentage, given that the school has "committed itself very strongly to internationalizing [its] campus." A trend he adds that the college has had for years, especially with welcoming African and more recently, Asian, students to the campus.

While Packwood's distinction may make him an anomaly, he's not alone. The two top-performing graduates with 4.0 GPAs this semester at Alcorn State University were white students from Russia, according to Napoleon Moses, vice president for academic affairs. The Mississippi university for the past decade has been a destination for several Russian undergraduate and graduate students.

Alcorn State's status as a land-grant university enables it to receive state and federal funding to conduct research, and its extension related to agriculture and rural development plays a role in its attractiveness to international students, explains Dovi Alipoe, director of global programs. In 2007, Alcorn State entered an agreement with Voronezh State Agricultural University in southwest Russia where students from that country are expected to join Alcorn State this fall. The university's nursing and MBA programs are also heavily attended by non-African Americans.

According to Moses, about 10% of Alcorn State's 3,100 population are students from Russia, Africa, South America, Asia, and the Caribbean, Moses says. In the next decade or two, Moses

believes the demographics of the university will become more diverse, also reflecting its region which has demographics of about 50/50 blacks and whites.

Of the 373,548 total students attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in 2005, blacks comprised 264,381 of students, or about 71%, while whites comprised 54,358, or 14.5%. Latinos comprised 31,571, or 8.4%; Asian/ Pacific Islanders, 8,325 or 2.2%; and, Native Americans, 998, or 0.2%. Also, nonresidential aliens comprised 7,730 or 2%, and 6,188 students or 1.65%, didn't list their race, says Lezlie Baskerville, president and chief executive of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), referring to data gathered by the U.S. Department of Education and included in NAFEO's publication, *The State of America's Black College*.

Baskerville says HBCUs were always open to others, calling the institutions the "quintessential equal education opportunity facilities" compared with predominantly white institutions. "They have at all times been more diverse than their white counterparts."

Franklin agrees. "To black colleges' credit, we've always been non-racist intuitions by contrast when white institutions were discriminating black colleges were." While he is proud of Packwood's achievement, as well as the successes of all the college's graduates, he says Morehouse doesn't have a specific agenda to recruit white prospects and is instead focused on enrolling "the best and brightest who will fit in Morehouse culture, academic excellence, moral character, and community service." Franklin adds that a number of white Morehouse graduates such as Howard Zehr, a professor of Restorative Justice at the Center for Justice & Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, have become "ambassadors" for equality among all people. "We are able to educate the leadership of the white community that will ultimately benefit the black community," he says.

HBCUs employing better marketing techniques that highlight various academic successes and strengths continue to add to the variety of reasons why non-African Americans are enrolling in those institutions. For instance, as one of only two pharmaceutical schools in Louisiana, Xavier University's College of Pharmacy is a popular choice for those wishing to enter the field. At the start of the 2007-2008 school year, non-African Americans and non-resident aliens made up 49% of the college's 679 students, according to Treva A. Lee of Xavier's planning and intuitional research office.

Other top deciding factors are that HBCUs provide smaller, nurturing environments, a diverse campus experience, and affordability. They are proportionately priced lower than their predominantly white counterparts. On average, private HBCUs cost \$10,000 less than predominantly white private institutions, and public HBCUs cost about \$1,000 to \$1,500 less than predominantly white public institutions, Baskerville points out.

Packwood says his decision to attend Morehouse was no different than why many other students chose to go there: to get the Morehouse experience. "I can empathize but I don't truly know the experience of being a black man in America...I do share the Morehouse

experience. I owe a lot to this institution."

Packwood, who has siblings of mixed-race, says he feels a real connection with his Morehouse brothers and is proud to be a part of the same legion as the likes of a Martin Luther King Jr. He has gained a lot from his Morehouse experience, including a unique perspective that he wouldn't have gotten if he'd attended Harvard University or Columbia University, which he says were strong considerations.

Baskerville, along with Franklin and Moses, believes African American students will be able to get "the real black college experience" even as more non-blacks continue to populate HBCU campuses. "Those things that are part of the culture and tradition tend to remain intact," says Baskerville, who strongly believes HBCUs are absolutely still necessary. "There are no indications that as more diverse students attend, that you are losing the rich tradition and culture of the HBCU experience."

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