

June 22, 2009

**An Open Letter To:
Chicago State University's
Board of Trustees, President Dr. Wayne Watson,
Students, Faculty, Staff, Administrators and
All people of concern and good will from**

**From:
Haki R. Madhubuti,
University Distinguished Professor
Chicago State University**

I am a poet and write as such. I am also a concerned member of the Chicago State University family. In September of 2009, I will start my 25th year as a professor at Chicago State University (CSU). I arrived in September of 1984 from the University of Iowa with an unstated purpose to support CSU students by spearheading the critical in-depth study of African and African American contributions to American/World literature and culture. The idea was to develop the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing, bring Gwendolyn Brooks to the University as a distinguished professor, convene an annual Writers Conference in her name that would attract world class writers, develop the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, start a journal for the dissemination of Black culture and ideas, and help in developing the first Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing in the world that is centered around the canon of African/African American Writing, i.e., Black literature. All of this has been done, but is incomplete.

I have, along with my colleagues, paid close attention to the process that has now provided the CSU community with its new president. Until now my voice in the current debate on the occasion of selecting a new leadership for CSU has been silent for several reasons:

1. I know all of the participants from the University's Board of Trustees to the two finalists for the position, some of them for over thirty-five years.
2. I wrote a letter of recommendation for one of the five finalists who did not make the cut and did not want to seem duplicitous, dishonest or self-serving.

3. One of the defining lessons I learned from Gwendolyn Brooks, other than to each day try to be a fine poet and person, is that integrity, good work, good name and quality production will, in the final analysis, define you and travels faster than the speed of light throughout one's community. These are more effective than fine words and images from the best public relation firms. She always reminded me, and others, to speak on your own terms if you wish to change and influence the conversation. She writes, "truth-tellers are not always palatable. There is a preference for candy bars."

I have served under the leadership of three presidents and two interim-presidents. Each of these presidents arrived with goodwill and I believe good intentions. However, within two to three years of their presidencies, they ceased being collaborative and open and each became the President: secretive, selective and ineffective. All three of the presidents left the university under what has been described as a cloud. Actually, each of them was forced out and left under a storm raining buckets of negative press, each exiting while leaving CSU in worse condition than they found it. However, this is not to leave the impression that excellent work was not done during each of their terms. Yet, it can be successfully argued and I am certain history will show that each achieved a mixed record. I can easily elaborate, but this is not the place.

I have remained at Chicago State University because I care deeply about the institution, its mission and its students. I am sure that an overwhelming number of faculty members feel the same way. We also share a commitment to ensure that students succeed. Over 56 percent of our students are Black women, many with young children. Most of our students are first generation university attendees; most of them work part-time or full-time jobs while completing undergraduate or graduate degrees. The often stated six-year graduation time period is in light of these students trying desperately to study, attend class and maintain a healthy and disciplined environment and home for their families. I, like many of the faculty members, am aware of and accommodating to the unique situations that may arise to challenge a student's academic schedule. I did not consider it unusual or inappropriate for a student, who could not find a sitter, to on occasion bring a child to class. I am from this community and I understand firsthand such hardship. I am also encouraged by the university's efforts to increase the enrollment and retention of black male students. Currently, Black men are 33 percent of the student body (the additional 11 percent of the student body are Latino, International or non-Black).

Chicago State University is a fine university. Its recent academic expansion includes adding advanced degree programs in the Colleges of Education, Pharmacy and Arts and Science's Department of English. Even though the university is under serious financial restraints, it recognizes that this type of expansion is imperative if we are to be a competitive, inviting and progressive institution. CSU can also claim that its faculty is first rate and

can easily rival other regional and national institution in preparedness and academic excellence. I am particularly pleased with the College of Arts and Sciences and our own Department of English. I can categorically state that the Department of English is one of the most effective and creative in the nation. I comment on this only because recently the quality and dedication of CSU's faculty have been questioned.

I am particularly troubled that this questioning or attack of several of our faculty members coincides with their questioning or audacity to challenge the selection process for the new president. Nevertheless, it is evident that the process was flawed since thirteen of the fifteen members of the Campus Advisory Committee charged with the selection process oversight resigned from the committee acknowledging in a joint statement that, "we feel it would be inappropriate to legitimize a less than transparent or participatory process by recommending either of the two finalists for the position of Chicago State University President." This process was further damaged by the CSU faculty senate's unanimous vote of "no-confidence" in the Board of Trustees and its call on Governor Quinn to halt the selection process and to remove the current Board and appoint a new Board of Trustees.

My position as University Distinguished Professor does not grant me any more privileges than any other CSU faculty member, however, it does increase my personal obligation to voice my concerns for the growth and future of this university. During my twenty-five years at CSU, I have taught many of the courses in the English Department excluding British Literature and Linguistics. I have served on over twelve search committees for new faculty openings in the Department. Additionally, I have observed Chicago State University and other universities' selection process of new presidents and leadership. These experiences have provided me with insight on the criteria to evaluate the overall process and make recommendations on the requirements for leadership for a university president and other high administrative positions. These are some of those recommendations:

1. He/she must be a scholar of national note, with significant peer review publications and books in his or her field. There must be no doubt as to his/her standing in the community of scholars. This would also include a history of the candidate's participation in the appropriate professional organizations.
2. He/she must have served with distinction as the administrative head of a major unit within an institution of higher learning or at the important position of Provost and/or Dean. Of course, prior service at the presidential level is preferred.
3. He/she must have a documented history of raising significant monies from the private and public sectors. At most major and research one universities it is not unusual to expect the president to come with a

plan to raise in excess of half a billion dollars or more in the first few years.

4. The prospective president must have a consensus buy-in from the faculty, students, administration and staff, therefore, arriving with a unity mandate to lead by joining a University community that has bought into his or her vision for the future.

Did our Board of Trustees apply such criteria? And, what state unit watches, directs and evaluates the Board? Whatever the answer, we have a new president, legally selected by the Board of Trustees of CSU; and if we are to continue to remake our university into a better place, we must give him a chance to prove that he can do the job and have at the top of his agenda the healing of the university. This is no small matter. Whatever his agenda for change is, it must be shared with the Chicago State University community and not with a few “movers and shakers.” To that end, in consultation with my colleagues, I offer ten suggestions that need immediate attention.

1. The university's tarnished image and the tarnished image of the incoming president is fixable; the lack of integrity that already pervades the entire institution affects all of us, as well as fundraising. No one is going to give money to an institution with little financial integrity. This must be given immediate attention and the highest priority.
2. Appointment of a Vice President for Finance, one of the most important positions at any university: in light of the serious audit findings and lack of formal processes and procedures in financial affairs, this position should have been filled during the tenure of the interim president.
3. Strong academic leadership is needed to provide confidence for faculty and direction for the development of academic programs and policies. The Board of Trustees needs to understand that the Faculty Senate and the union are not enemies of the university. They play a pivotal and legal role in protecting the rights and advocating on behalf of the faculty, staff and students.
4. Enrollment growth: a knowledgeable Enrollment Management Specialist is needed as well as staff members who know recruitment strategies and how to implement them. Direct funding to provide academic support to the large freshman student population with poor skills is also needed.

5. Staff training as well as training for supervisors on developing workable processes and implementation: staff needs to understand how to do follow-up and assess where problems exist and what to do to solve them.
6. We need key, knowledgeable people in these areas: provost; financial operations; technology; and facilities grounds and plant operations. There is a great need for a knowledgeable Director of the Physical Plant who understands how to address the needs of the academic areas within the context of a neglected infrastructure. A major problem for the university is the number of incompetent employees who were hired because of political connections, friendships and family relationships. Therefore, little if any recourse for bad practices exists and we are stuck with nonfunctioning individuals and entities.
7. The next president should have an understanding of four-year comprehensive universities based on experience and how to improve efficiency and effectiveness. The individual also should be a “futurist” who reviews the current situation (in a variety of arenas) and plans for next steps. Chicago State University is not a community college. Do not make it one. Keep the hiring of community college personnel to fill administrative or faculty positions at a minimum. The university graduated its first two doctoral students two weeks ago. We need faculty with the Ph.D. and research experience.
8. Compared to other universities, there is inadequate support for grantsmanship for both governmental and private (corporate and foundation) agencies and entities, and a lack of effective leadership for fundraising. As one of the oldest universities in the state system, it is shameful and embarrassing that CSU virtually has no endowment.
9. The Board of Trustees does not seem to understand the board's role and has inserted itself in day-to-day operations because concerns about the previous President's leadership were apparent. The trustees also do not seem to understand their role as major contributors to the university.
10. Faculty and student support. There needs to be funds available to boost academic programs and departments. Funds are needed for conferences, research, student assistantships, graduate assistantships, work-study, etc. There is a need for an understanding that the university should encourage freedom of speech and open discourse, which have traditionally been the

hallmark of the academy. I believe it was George Orwell who wrote “in a time of universal defeat, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” We need to stop spinning the truth.

Finally, and this is very personal, I suggest to the “powers that be” to consider naming the new academic library after one of the greatest poets in any language at any time, our former distinguished faculty member at Chicago State University, Gwendolyn Brooks, and, on this important occasion initiate *The Brooks Lectures in Poetry*. This, along with the acquisition of the *Brooks Papers* will finally, I think, make Chicago State University a destination for students, scholars, and researchers rather than an afterthought.

All of our actions or non-actions will surely be revisited by history. Our quest should always be for human intellectual emancipation. I am a son of the sixties and seventies; that is, I cut my teeth on the streets of Detroit and Chicago. W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Burroughs, Gwendolyn Brooks, Hoyt W. Fuller, Frantz Fanon, Ella Baker, Dudley Randall, Rosa Parks, Lerone Bennett Jr. and Patrice Lumumba were all contemporaries and heroes of mine. The one ingredient that they all possessed is that they unconditionally loved Black people; people of African ancestry and by extension all people of goodwill and good actions. And, they all acted, not purely for themselves, but for the betterment of the majority rather than the elite few.

To betray a trust is to cut yourself off from being trusted. Who really represents the students of CSU? Who speaks for them? They come to us with open minds and bright eyes only to be blinded by the deals made in the night. Chicago is clout city and anybody with half a brain knows that backroom stuff happened, and to not acknowledge it is to place one in the room with cowards and small people afraid of their own shadows. How does the university spend \$75,000 in this down economy to find two candidates who live less than seventy blocks from the university? Were there other candidates who were exceptional but overlooked because they were not from Chicago or the state of Illinois? The culture of corruption that blankets this state is an embarrassment. The “clout lists” that have been exposed at the University of Illinois-Champaign is only symptomatic and a microcosm of our problems—from Wall Street to Main Street.

What I have learned in my short time on this earth is ultimately that which is greater than family, friendship, children, status, fame, wealth and strawberries is *truth*. Remember, if a person can be bought for \$50.00, he/she can be bought twice for \$100.00. To dance with liars in this culture, partners are always available. However, to go subsurface for greater meaning and substance, especially in the service of the disadvantaged poor (the majority), is to experience an aloneness that few, other than artists understand. It is the confined distances that separate those who read a great piece of literature rather than cliff notes.

The beauty and intricacies of an author’s insight can make us whole and better people (that’s what art does). We become more critical, insightful, well rounded, opened for discussion and objection, democratic, human, intellectually

independent allowing us to sleep full nights, positioning us to rise early each morning expecting in this world to *run toward fear*. Gwendolyn Brooks positions us to do best with this conscientious directive:

Warning, in music – words
devout and large,
that we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.

Let the healing begin. I remain in the service of the university.

Respectfully,

Haki R. Madhubuti
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University Distinguished Professor,
Professor of English,
Founder and Director Emeritus of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center,
Founder of the Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Writers Conference,
Founder of *Warpland: A Journal of Culture and Ideas*,
Co-Founder of the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African
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As poet, publisher, editor and educator, Haki R. Madhubuti has been a pivotal figure in the development of a strong Black literary tradition, emerging from the Civil Rights and Black Arts era of the 60s and continuing to the present. Over the years, he has published more than 28 books (some under his former name, Don L. Lee) and is one of the world's best-selling authors of poetry and non-fiction, with books in print in excess of 3 million. His ***Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: The African American Family in Transition*** (1990) has sold more than 1 million copies. Selected titles include ***Don't Cry, Scream!*** (1969), ***GroundWork: New and Selected Poems 1966-1996*** (1996), ***HeartLove: Wedding and Love Poems*** (1998), ***Tough Notes: A Healing Call For Creating Exceptional Black Men*** (2002), and ***Run Toward Fear*** (2004). His poetry and essays were published in more than 65 anthologies from 1997 to 2007. His latest release is ***YellowBlack: The First Twenty One Years of a Poet's Life*** (2006), a memoir of the people and places that were a part of his early life.

Professor Madhubuti is a proponent of independent Black institutions. He founded **Third World Press** in 1967 with a \$400 honorarium he received from a poetry reading, a used mimeograph machine, and other individuals committed to the local and national Black Arts and empowerment movements. He is also a founder of the **Institute of Positive Education/New Concept School** (1969), co-founder of **Betty Shabazz International Charter School** (1998), **Barbara A. Sizemore Middle School** (2005), and **DuSable Leadership Academy** (2005), all of which are in Chicago.

An award-winning poet and recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, American Book Award, the Studs Terkel Humanities Service Award and others. Professor Madhubuti is also a founder and chairman of the board of the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. In 2006, he was awarded the Literary Legacy Award from the National Black Writers Conference for creating and supporting Black literature and for building Black literary institutions. He received his third honorary Doctor of Letters from Spelman College in May of 2006. In 2007, he was named Chicagoan of the Year by *Chicago Magazine*. In May of 2008, Professor Madhubuti was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from Art Sanctuary

of Philadelphia. In 2009, named one of the “Ebony Power 150: Most Influential Blacks in America” for education.

Professor Madhubuti earned his MFA from the University of Iowa. His distinguished teaching career includes faculty positions at Columbia College of Chicago, Cornell University, University of Illinois at Chicago, Howard University, Morgan State University, and the University of Iowa. Currently he is the University Distinguished Professor and professor of English, founder and director-emeritus of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center and director of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program at Chicago State University.

Poet, Publisher, Editor, Educator, Activist.