

Rapid Response Transcript – Mary Schmidt Campbell (September 2021)

“How to lead for enduring impact”

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It's a startup for us. I think that's been one of the benefits of the pandemic. We've been forced to revise, to revision, to invent, to try something new.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, president of Spelman College, the all-women's HBCU in Atlanta.

As this school year began, the Spelman faculty threatened a last-minute boycott over COVID uncertainty. Dr. Campbell was able to quickly defuse the situation, averting any crisis.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Mary because since the pandemic hit, she's shown an extraordinary capacity for staying calm amid uncertainty – and finding opportunity within it.

Mary was a guest on this show last summer after George Floyd's killing roiled the country's social fabric, and as schools tried fitfully to re-open. It could have been a season of setbacks.

But instead, despite the disruptions, she's held the Spelman community together, while activating new partners and resources to enhance the college.

From record fundraising to rising U.S. News ratings for Spelman, Dr. Campbell has demonstrated how consistent leadership builds confidence and resilience.

Schools aren't often thought of as startups, but each school year is effectively a new beginning. The lesson she's been teaching is that you can both lean on your strengths and build new ones. An effective rapid response isn't just about urgency in the moment. It's about creating a legacy that endures.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian. And I'm here with Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, the president of Spelman College. Mary, thanks for joining us again.

CAMPBELL: It's good to be here, Bob. Thank you for inviting me.

SAFIAN: So, when we talked last year, we were all hoping, maybe assuming, that COVID-19 disruptions would be resolved by this school year, but that hasn't been the case. There are a lot of topics that I'm eager to dig in with you, including your announcement that you'll be stepping aside in the spring, but I have to start with the faculty revolt, I guess you'd call it. I'm not sure what you'd call it.

CAMPBELL: No, I don't call it a faculty revolt. In fact, I'm very sympathetic to the faculty's concern that they expressed. And their intent was to make sure that we understood the severity of their concern. And that is to make sure that they understood all of the precautions that we were taking as a college to protect them. Once they learned what those were, they immediately withdrew and came back to campus. And I would also point out that they didn't go on strike, but they did stay remote – or some of them did. Some actually came in.

And I understand that concern. They're coming into an environment in a city where the infection rate is high, where the hospitalizations have been high, and the deaths continue to take place here in Atlanta and in Fulton County. So, I completely understand the need for them to see in great detail what the college has done to make sure that they stay safe.

SAFIAN: I mean, it seemed to me like I heard the news about this sort of threat to boycott, and then it was resolved quickly. So, when did you realize that this was happening? And then what did you have to do to jump in to sort of resolve it so quickly?

CAMPBELL: Well, we had been working on documenting everything that the college was doing. And that was a lot. We wanted to make sure that we were careful and meticulous and absolutely accurate and correct before we made that public. Between the very short time that we got that information out and the time they released their intent, we were able to get that guidance to them because we had been working on it for so long.

SAFIAN: Vaccination mandates have brought out a lot of historical issues and some political ones as well. How have you thought about the issue of the vaccine mandate?

CAMPBELL: Spelman College is part of a consortium of colleges. In addition to Spelman, there's Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morehouse School of Medicine. So, as we have been thinking about the protocols that we want to put into place, we have thought of those not only in terms of what we will do here on the campus of Spelman, but throughout the AUC because, in fact, our students take courses across campuses. And so, whatever we do on one campus has to be replicated elsewhere.

And very early on, as the AUC, looking at the science, looking at the statistics, looking at the rate of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID, we thought that the best way to protect our community was to have students, faculty, and staff vaccinated. We notified our community early in the summer and gave them the information that they would need in order to come to campus. Now, we did permit exemptions, medical and religious exemptions. But as of now, we have almost 94% of our student body vaccinated at Spelman College. And we have over 90% of our faculty and staff who are vaccinated.

SAFIAN: And are the COVID numbers on the campus at levels you anticipated, you expected? I have a son who's at college, and the numbers on his campus are not looking that great right now. And I'm wondering if things have worked better on your campus?

CAMPBELL: We are very pleased with the fact that our positivity rates are less than 1%. We have 2,400 students who are coming for in-person instruction, and add to that the 500 or so staff and faculty, and we've had a tiny, just a tiny fraction of positive tests.

SAFIAN: I know you made an early decision to cancel some homecoming activities, even though that's not until October.

CAMPBELL: Yes. We've modified virtually everything. "How can we do this safely?" And if we can't say how we would do it, then we'd have to modify it. And if we couldn't modify it, we'd have to pivot to virtual.

SAFIAN: Yeah. You mentioned that some of the faculty were teaching remotely. And obviously, there was a lot of remote teaching that went on over the last year, since the last time you and I talked. Have we learned anything meaningful about remote classes, remote learning, what works, and what's lost?

CAMPBELL: We've learned volumes. For one thing, faculty are very conscious of the fact that they have to design their classes specifically for remote teaching, that simply translating what they do in person to a remote environment is not enough.

With our students, here's where we learned how deep the divide was, for those students who did not have computers or laptops or tablets, who did not have wifi access, who may have had environments that weren't conducive to having a quiet room.

But at the end of the day, we've learned that what our students really value are the relationships that they forge when they're here in person, peer-to-peer, student-to-faculty, student-to-advisors.

SAFIAN: And so, it's not likely that remote would remain a part of the Spelman experience even once we move past a COVID world.

CAMPBELL: Oh, I think there will be a role for remote. I think there are ways to think of it where certain courses might work well taught remotely, where there might be instances where a mix of hybrid, of online, and in-person, might work. So, I think the next set of conversations are going to be really very exciting for us to think about when we want to absolutely retain the in-person experience, and when we can start to inflect that with some remote opportunities as well.

SAFIAN: Experimentation, it will continue.

CAMPBELL: Absolutely. I think that's been one of the benefits, honestly, of the pandemic. We've been forced to revise, to revision, to invent, to try something new.

SAFIAN: When we talked last time, it wasn't long after the George Floyd demonstrations that were rippling across the country. It's not clear what the level of progress has been since then. How is the campus perspective at Spelman now about criminal justice reform and policing?

CAMPBELL: So, one of the interesting things about Spelman College is that before there was what I'm calling this racial reckoning that came about after George Floyd's death, Spelman had long had a very deep engagement with social justice issues. So, if you come to Spelman, you are required to take a year-long course called African Diaspora in the World, which really introduced our students and reinforced with them the cultural contributions that Africans have contributed to our modern world and our modern life.

We have a suite of first-year courses called the Big Questions Colloquia. And this is when faculty can take whatever subject they're teaching, whether it's biology or computer science or history or political science, and they can teach from their perspective of racial issues in our communities.

So, when this racial reckoning came, it simply shined a light on how much Spelman was already doing.

SAFIAN: Mm-hmm. And Georgia, where you're based, has been a key locale around voting rights as well. Some businesses got involved. It's been another sort of new flash point for you to navigate.

CAMPBELL: Well, I'm glad you mentioned voting rights because it was a Spelman alumna, Stacey Abrams, who galvanized so many voters to register them even before the elections took place and to get the vote out and to keep front of mind the need for us to exercise our voting rights. And the outcome was pretty transformational for this country and for the state of Georgia.

SAFIAN: But going forward, Georgia's voting rights situation is a little more high-pressure, right?

CAMPBELL: Yes, yes. There definitely has been a backlash. And the voter suppression efforts in Georgia are alive and well. And it just tells us that we continue to have work to do. But I'd like to point out that it was on the campus of Spelman that we incubated one of the major voices in the efforts against voter suppression.

SAFIAN: There were a lot of words and promises from businesses a year ago about investment in the Black community and Black talent. Have those words been matched with action from your perspective?

CAMPBELL: To a great extent, yes. And, as you know, there were many HBCUs that were the recipients of very major investments in the form of scholarship funds, unrestricted funds, efforts to help us build our internship capacity. And we're continuing those conversations.

And what I think has come out of those, in the most productive of them, is that we understand that we each have something to learn from the other, that we as HBCUs bring a great deal of wisdom to the table. And so, working together, we actually can begin to chart a realistic path to make sure that our students go into the workplace and go into the workplace in a way that makes them competitive, making sure that they have the expertise at their fingertips that's going to keep them excelling in the 21st century.

SAFIAN: Before the break we heard Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, the president of Spelman College, talk about faculty conflict, COVID-19 adjustments, and racial reckoning. Now she turns to the role of entrepreneurship on campus, plus the top lesson from her tenure, and the business leaders she admires most. And her take on the next generation of students – and why their solutions and inventiveness inspire her.

There are a lot of entrepreneurs among our audience, and you launched a Center for Black Entrepreneurship with Morehouse College. How did that come about? And why entrepreneurship?

CAMPBELL: For the past five or six years at Spelman, what we've been witnessing is a growing interest on the part of our students in entrepreneurship. And as you may know, the businesses of Black women are some of the most underfunded and undercapitalized businesses. But we saw a great interest and energy. We had something called Spel-preneurs. And we would just host literally over 100, 150 women who were interested in understanding what would it be for me to start my own business? What capital would I need? How would I market this? How would I distribute it? How would I sustain it? How would I scale it up? In the meantime, Morehouse College was also seeing a similar surge of interest.

And an organization called the Black Economic Alliance, approached both of us. And this is a group of Black entrepreneurs, extremely successful, who said, "You know what? Spelman and Morehouse should launch a Center for Black Entrepreneurship." And when we went out into the market to sell that idea, we found enormous interest. Bank of America made a major investment. MasterCard just announced a major investment. Blackstone LaunchPad. We have had investment from Ford Foundation to mount an online version of what we have on campus. And we are at work now developing that entrepreneurship minor, strengthening all the co-curricular programs we have, and setting up an online component that will really establish the Spelman-Morehouse program as the central place for the development of Black entrepreneurs.

SAFIAN: As you're describing this, I'm reflecting, as you're saying, "We had to go out and sell that idea," that even though people may look at an academic institution as not necessarily being entrepreneurial, that to start a program like this, you yourselves have to be because this is a startup for you.

CAMPBELL: It's a startup for us. There's so much energy that's been brought to bear. And there's so much expertise that has offered to assist us in the development. We plan to make connections with programs elsewhere at Babson, at Brown University, with other HBCUs. We really expect this to be a hub and have a network of connections that reach out across the country.

SAFIAN: I should congratulate you on Spelman's high showing in the recent U.S. News college rankings.

CAMPBELL: Thank you.

SAFIAN: How important are those? Some people say they get outsized attention. Although I guess when you're on the positive side of things, that's not so bad.

CAMPBELL: We do pay attention to them – not exclusively. But it's a way of saying, "What does the world think of Spelman College?" And we know that they look at things

like your six-year graduation rate. Ours is 75%. And we know the national average for African-Americans is 30 percentage points less than that.

We know they look at things like your teaching capacity. And so, we were so pleased to see that our undergraduate teaching was ranked in the top 25.

They look at the endowment. Our endowment has grown. Just in the time that I've been here, it's grown from \$342 million to almost \$500 million.

They look at how you're placing your graduates, and what they're doing in 5 and 10 years. And we came out number four in the nation on social mobility. So, I think there's enough in those rankings that is based on some quantitative measures that make them worth paying attention to.

SAFIAN: You announced not long ago that you will be retiring at the end of this school year and that it's not connected to the COVID environment. But you've reached the goals that you wanted to address?

CAMPBELL: Yes. I am so gratified. This has been the most extraordinary community to be a part of. We started four years ago with a capital campaign. And we intended to raise \$250 million in five to seven years. And in four years, we had not only raised that amount, but we're now up to \$274 million. So, I feel very good about that.

And as a result of that, we've been able to hit a lot of the goals that we were trying to hit. So, we'll be able to renovate our fine arts building. We'll be able to build our first new academic facility in 25 years, the Center for Innovation and the Arts. We started a whole slew of new programs, a Center for Quantum Computing with IBM, a data science initiative with the rest of the Atlanta University Center, this Center for Black Entrepreneurship, we strengthened our food studies program, our social justice program. So, we have been able to accomplish so much in terms of just continuing to strengthen our academic content and continuing to develop the college to be able to move forward.

SAFIAN: Are there key moments or key decisions from your time that you think were particularly important that you look back on?

CAMPBELL: I have a personal favorite that I love and I like to talk about. And that is a program that we started about three years ago called SpelREADS. I hosted a group of local principals. And I said to them, "Now, what can Spelman College do to be helpful to your schools?" And to a person, elementary, middle school, and high school, they said, "Teach our students to read." I was stunned.

We have a specialist in family literacy, Dr. Nicole Taylor, and we were able to put together a tutorial program for about 150 students in fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. And we attracted over 100 Spelman student volunteers.

In the course of two years, they were realizing increases in the reading assessments that went anywhere from 9% up to 21%. And we were able to get funding from the federal government this year to expand what we're already doing.

And I love this idea that what we're generating is the intellectual capital of our students, the intelligence, the commitment to community service, the love of reaching out, take that and leverage that in our local community in a way that brings that next generation forward.

SAFIAN: There's such a range of issues. You're talking about that and, of course, the fundraising. I was looking back and thinking of your decision to admit transgender females to the school in 2017, which must've been a difficult decision.

CAMPBELL: I won't say that it was difficult. It was one that took a lot of deliberation. We did a lot of listening sessions, a lot of consultation with different campus constituents with our alumni. We benchmarked against other women's colleges all over the country. So, we came to that very intentionally and very deliberately.

SAFIAN: Are there key lessons that you've learned during your time at Spelman, lessons that others could borrow?

CAMPBELL: So, what I've learned is that you are as good as your ability to work with your community. So, everything that we have done, we have done in a process of consultation.

Setting our strategic plan goals. You talked about transgender. When we launched our capital campaign – every single constituency on the campus had a role. Determining what our medical protocols were going to be here on campus for COVID. We had a 50-person task force made up of faculty, students, staff, and a trustee.

I know there's a feeling sometimes that, "Oh, this is a slow, deliberative process." But I feel that when we have all of the voices and all of the wisdom from all over our campus involved in these big questions and big issues, the solutions we come up with, I think, are ones that end up being good for everybody.

SAFIAN: Mm-hmm. When we talked last time, you recalled your early days on the job and you said you remembered thinking, "Why are we a secret?" Is Spelman still too much of a secret? Or has that part of the challenge been shifted?

CAMPBELL: Well, Bob, I'm very pleased to say we're much less of a secret now than we were then. Thanks to conversations like the one I'm having with you, we are reaching more people. I think the narrative around racial reckoning caused people to turn and look at HBCUs in general. We had a record 11,500 applications this year. And I can't help but think that's the result of more people knowing more about our narrative.

SAFIAN: Yeah. At the very end of our talk, when I asked you about what was at stake for Spelman, you talked about guiding students through a difficult time and maintaining fiscal sustainability. And then you also said this. You said, "When we sit down to plan, we don't know what's going to happen a week from now. That level of uncertainty has kept us very much on our toes. We just have to be alert all the time." Is that uncertainty still as high? Is the organization equipped differently to deal with it?

CAMPBELL: I would say the uncertainty is still there. We all started this semester thinking that we had taken all of the precautions that we could possibly take. And then the Delta variant surged. And we saw the rates go up in our city. We had to change our protocols. And so, the answer is yes. We have had to keep that alertness high.

So, I think we discovered in the past 18 months, a new resilience. I mean, Spelman's always been resilient. Always had a lot of grit. That's one of the things I love about the college. But I think we've found deep reservoirs, deep pools of that, that perhaps we didn't know we had.

SAFIAN: Mm-hmm. And with a world that is as uncertain as this, do you think about preparing your students differently because the world they're going into requires that? How does that change things?

CAMPBELL: I sat in on a meeting of one of our organizations called P.U.L.S.E. And these are the group of students who organize social events around the campus. I was so impressed with how inventive they were. They organized a Welcome Back Jam. And they said, "Well, usually, we have it all together on the oval. This time, we're going to do three different sites. And we're going to have this kind of activity because this will enable us to do social-distancing." The ability that they are finding in themselves to be inventive and imaginative and responsive, I think is uplifting. I really enjoy watching them come up with the solutions.

SAFIAN: Mm-hmm. Well, thank you so much, Mary. I have one, I guess, last area I wanted to ask you about. And because there are so many business people who listen to this show, are there business people out there that you look to, that you get inspired by?

CAMPBELL: I'm especially inspired by our board chair, Roz Brewer, who's the CEO of Walgreens Boots Alliance and a Spelman alumni because she's in a field right now that has as part of its remit vaccination. And watching her and watching how they get the

word out has been inspiring. So, yes, I certainly can say that Roz is somebody in the corporate world that I admire.

But honestly, I admire all the companies that I see that are making the kinds of changes that are necessary in order to keep the economy going, to take care of their workforce, and to be open to the kinds of changes that need to be made in order to keep people lifted and keep their spirits high and keep them productive and moving forward.

Again, I just want to stress, every day, when I walk around campus, I just marvel at the students who are here. And I know that they too, our community, African-American communities, have been particularly hard hit by COVID. We have a disproportionate number of infections and deaths and hospitalizations. Economically, we have been disproportionately impacted by COVID. And what I see is a real determination to be here, be together, support each other, and to really develop themselves in a way that can uplift and develop their own communities. And I have to say, walking around this community each and every day is an inspiration.

SAFIAN: Well, Mary, thank you for sharing your experience and your time with us. Again, I really appreciate it.

CAMPBELL: I appreciate being here, Bob. Thank you.