



Higher Education at a Crossroads – Forum Readout and Next Steps

Dear Colleagues and Partners,

On September 22, Huston-Tillotson University through the Politics Lab of the James L. Farmer House hosted the opening session of *Higher Education at a Crossroads: Civic 2035 – The New Rosenwald Schools Movement*. With students, faculty, and civic leaders gathered on campus, the forum made visible a form of leadership our country urgently needs today.

What We Saw

The forum succeeded on three fronts: execution, drama, and turnout. Student leaders brought to life a civic politics marked by institutional leadership from the Black community, with young people stepping forward to build broad coalitions rooted in dignity, disciplined cold anger, and generosity despite the weight of our racial history. The politics once almost a norm today is almost counter-cultural and yet in desperate need of renewal. Student leaders gave life to the tradition, shifting perceptions in the room and showing what it means to carry something powerful like this forward. They also expressed dedication to a different kind of professional after they graduate, a “citizen professional” in the tradition of the Jeanes teachers who organized communities to build 464 Rosenwald schools in Texas, working for inclusive democracy through their professions and careers.

Seventy-three people joined us for the event, the direct result of student pledges and delivery. Names and numbers matter because they show commitments honored, and because turnout itself is a civic measure of leadership.

What We Heard

What we heard in the forum was not only the words from the stage but the voices that carried through days of conversation, preparation, and reflection. Students rose to the occasion – none more so than three emerging leaders who spoke during the forum: Alyvia Marie Rachal, Faith C. Mathis, and Yamun C. Hempstead, each a first-year student at Huston-Tillotson. Their efforts, alongside the work of many others, set the tone for the event and showed what is possible when leadership is claimed.

We also heard the framing contributions of Harry Boyte and Gerald Taylor. Their presence with us throughout the day set the stage. During the forum Harry reminded us of the civil rights tradition of “public work,” pressing us to see democracy as the everyday labor of people building institutions together. Gerald challenged us to recognize that the drama of democracy is a struggle over authorship, not simply advocacy. Their witness – in small group conversations with students and in their words to the full forum –

deepened the tension and promise that defined this occasion.

Taken together, these voices highlight the three dimensions of success that marked the forum: careful execution in planning and delivery, the drama and tension of confronting hard truths, and the turnout that made the forum matter as a shared public experience.

What We Commit To

The forum was only the beginning. In response to the call sounded that evening, Huston-Tillotson's Farmer House, together with the Texas HBCU Democracy Schools Alliance, will host follow-up conversations across institutions. We will convene sessions with Central Texas Interfaith, NAACP leadership, and others, while pursuing the invitations extended by Braver Angels to connect with their national network of contacts. These conversations will not be symbolic exercises but working sessions to strengthen the ties between higher education and democratic leadership in Texas and beyond.

Thank you to all who participated – students, faculty, and partners. Together we are authoring a politics of courage and responsibility, one that our institutions and our country need now more than ever.



Forum leadership (left to right): Yaman C. Hempstead, Alyvia Marie Rachal, Keliss Mishel Levone-Myers, Ja'Tavia White, Freeman Crawford, IV, Robert M. Ceresa, Travis Johnson (seated), Harry Boyte, Kasey William, Amarion Toliver (seated), Gerald Taylor, Jania Iles, Dakarai Jolan Dwayne Wiltz, Markeeta Flournoy, Juan E. Ceresa, Kennedie Williams, Lamar Clay.