

Proposal Narrative
The 2014 Mellon/Moorland Summer Faculty Scholars Award Program Application

Gravity & Grace of the Gridiron Queen: The Legacy of Miss Howard University

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This research will give a historical view of the coveted title of “Miss Howard University,” formerly known as the “Gridiron Queen.” The selection of the woman chosen to represent Howard University has evolved into a heralded position that has impacted the culture and mores of “The Mecca” and the Black Experience from Reconstruction through the New Millennium. This project will explore the selection and role of Miss Howard, noting specific moments in the political history of the university and the country, and examine how these women represented the university. It also will explore the legacies of these women before, during and after their undergraduate matriculation and examine their scholarship and service. Finally, it will demonstrate how the chosen queens influenced culture, style and beauty, and show how they served as the paradigm which reflected the changing trends and definitions of beauty in the Black community.

In the early 1920s the importance of academic acumen combined with social grace was redefined at Howard by its first Dean of Women, Lucy Diggs Slowe. Slowe, a founder of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and a pioneering advocate for women, believed “The New Howard Woman,” was to be “intellectually alert, spiritually alert, and

of extreme culture and refinement.” Thus, *Miss Howard* was both polished and popular. In its beginnings, The Bison yearbook held the queen competition to help raise funds. Mazie Hubbard was the first to wear the crown. The student body elected her in 1929. The selection process changed in 1937 to incorporate the football games, which from the onset, have been a popular pastime at Howard. Hence, the title “Gridiron Queen” was introduced. Ada Deans Chapman, a member of AKA Sorority, was selected as the first “Gridiron Queen.” Many years later, Chapman became the first librarian of Howard’s School of Engineering and Architecture. She also made history as foreman of the federal grand jury that investigated the 1972 Watergate Hotel break-in and indicted former U.S. Treasury Department Sec. John B. Connally. Chapman was followed in 1938 by Marjorie Adele Davis of Hartford, Conn., who was a student of Dr. Alain Locke and Dr. E. Franklin Frazier. She became a member of the first class of the Howard University School of Social Work, and enjoyed a life and career of service. When both of these women passed away, their titles of Howard Gridiron Queen were aptly noted along with their other accomplishments in their published obituaries.

In November 1987, I became one of the fortunate women to continue this legacy. I was selected at The Miss Howard Pageant at Cramton Auditorium with other women from the various schools and colleges. Representing the School of Communications, I was chosen by a panel of judges. The pageant was one of the opening events for Homecoming and was unforgettable. My parents, family and friends were there to witness the pomp and circumstance of Homecoming, which culminated on the Saturday of the game against Morehouse College. There were many significant moments. I was greeted by Bill Cosby at halftime, was featured with him as a “Photo of the Week” in Jet

Magazine, had the event mentioned in The Washington Post, and my crowning was the first in-color front page of The Hilltop.

However, it was “The Former Queen’s Reception” that left an indelible memory. I met women, some in their 70s and 80s, who proudly carried the same title. They greeted me with warm hugs and sound advice for “making them proud.” They shared their memories and humbly thanked the organizers for welcoming them back home. During my tenure as Miss Howard, I wore the sash and crown with pride, as I became an ambassador of sorts for the university. I participated in the fight against apartheid and represented Howard within the community and at formal events. More than 25 years later, fellow Bison, many of whom I don’t know, remember my reign and comment how proud they are that I served them well. The unique experience made me desirous to learn and do more.

Thus began what has been my preliminary research on the history and impact of the Gridiron Queen. I have searched issues of The Hilltop, and the Bison yearbook, to examine the tone of student life during different decades. I was led to The Afro American newspaper, Jet Magazine and Ebony Magazine for more retrospect on the cultural and political occurrences of the time. What I found was a very deliberate and serious regard for a high standard of excellence among women at Howard University. This was highlighted as I began additional research into the career of Lucy Diggs Slowe. As I read more about the women who assumed roles of Miss Howard and Gridiron Queen in the late 1920s and early 1930s, I felt compelled to further explore how the socio-political role of the position was shifted during the Civil Rights, and Black Power

movements. It also led me to examine how Miss Howard represented another central facet of college life.

In addition to being heralded as a leader in academic excellence, Howard University also holds the legacy of being in the forefront of fashion and style, making unique contributions to trend-setting, and in many cases redefining the standards of beauty. In this regard, Miss Howard, as a representative of the university, greatly influenced those trends. However, despite serving as a consumer, contributor and muse, many believe African American women have historically been ignored by the billion dollar fashion industry. The research and pictorial collections obtained from the MSRC's extensive collection of The Hilltop and Bison yearbook archives, as well as articles and information from its renowned Black Press Archives, will help underscore this concept and demonstrate how the queens' standards and panache impacted the social, political and cultural dynamics of the Black experience.

Despite the glory, there were and perhaps still remain questions of the necessity of what some consider an unavailing aspect of college life. With Howard being the exemplar of academic research and representation, should it even hold such pageantry? What is the true definition of "black beauty?" Is such tradition outdated and sexist? My research also will explore these questions and discuss how the position of Miss Howard not only contributed to the history of the institution but also how it has evolved into an important aspect and opportunity for student ambassadors of the university.

To examine these issues, I plan to reference additional Howard publications, such as "The Howard Alumnus," and "Howard University Record," and use ethnographic

techniques-- primarily interviews, with former queens and relatives of those who are deceased. I intend to share the information obtained from Moorland-Spingarn Research Center in a published article. I would also like to have the research included as a unit of a cultural women studies curriculum at Howard (and possibly other HBCUs). Finally, I ultimately plan to use the research from this project for the basis of a book on the subject.

This is an area of cultural research that I find not only fascinating, but multifaceted and personal. I graduated from Howard University in 1988, spent more than two decades as a journalist, and have now returned as a faculty member-- only to realize the magnitude of this honor still remains. As a former queen, I am a torchbearer of this legacy. The 2014 Mellon/Moorland Summer Faculty Scholars Award Program will afford me the opportunity to justly document and share the narratives of these dynamic woman.