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Is university ranking part of discriminatory systems?



By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - September 29, 2020 @ 12:25am



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BEFORE we turn to the latest result of The Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education (THE) College Rankings 2021 (focusing only on the US) released last week, it might be instructive to have a glance at the list of nine "Big Name Colleges" that was published by Atlanta Black Star (ABS), posted by Taylor Gordon (December 2014).

It may seem a little dated, but it matters given the context with respect to the current protests involving the youth of university-going age. The ABS listed big university names that "Benefited From Slavery" — an issue that is very much alive despite some of the sordid history that is well camouflaged and gone unnoticed until today. In other words, it will still be relevant for a long time to come as the cry of 'Black Lives Matter' gets louder day by day.

What is more, it is claimed that "the US table, which is fuelled by data from THE, measures institutions' student engagement, student outcomes and learning environments". So, what about the role of slavery at US colleges and universities as an indicator whose time has come to be "reconciled", academically speaking. It is significant that the top five are all implicated in slavery.

According to Alex Carp's *Slavery and the American University*, from their inception, "the American university and American slavery have been intertwined, but only recently are we beginning to understand how deeply". Some are promoting "scientific racism". Indeed, The New York Review of Books, in one sweep, highlighted how rampant the situation was based on surviving records.

"The first enslaved African in Massachusetts was the property of the schoolmaster of Harvard. Yale funded its first graduate-level courses and its first scholarship with the rents from a small slave plantation it owned in Rhode Island (the estate, in a stroke of historical irony, was named Whitehall). The scholarship's first recipient went on to found Dartmouth, and a later grantee co-founded the College of New Jersey, known today as Princeton.

"Georgetown's founders, prohibited by the rules of their faith from charging students tuition, planned to underwrite school operations in large part with slave sales and plantation profits, to which there was apparently no ecclesiastical objection. Columbia, when it was still King's College, subsidised slave traders with below-market loans."

Still, this is just the tip of the iceberg so to speak, with the 90 per cent submerged below the water yet to surface. And this is not going to be plain sailing as illustrated by the case of Princeton in defence of the 28th US president, Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), who is closely associated with the university until lately.

According to historian Martha Sandweiss, Princeton epitomises "the paradox at the heart of American history: from the very start, liberty and slavery were intimately intertwined". To this a ABS newsletter noted Princeton raised money and recruited students for the school through rich families, who owned enslaved people in the South and throughout the Caribbean.

Wilson, who has come to be regarded as having a racist view and a history of bigotry, is honoured by having campus buildings named after him, despite protests from the campus

community. As late as 2016, the so-called Wilson Legacy Review Committee — charged with deciding what to do with Wilson — while agreeing with protesters, refused to remove the name from the buildings.

The Black Justice League of Princeton University, however, vowed not to stop trying to get the name removed. It took another four years on June 28, before Princeton announced the removal of the name of the former US president from a building on its campus "because of his racist beliefs and policies".

It took the death of "I can't breathe" George Floyd to bring about the much-needed change. Princeton president Christopher Eisgruber said in a statement that "Wilson's racism was significant and consequential even by the standards of his own time".

He went on to say: "Princeton is part of an America that has too often disregarded, ignored, or excused racism, allowing the persistence of systems that discriminate against black people."

One begins to wonder, is not ranking part of the same system, thus equally guilty of the same? And is it not time for it to go for good?

The writer, a 'New Straits Times' columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector