

What Would Carter G. Woodson Do?

James Stewart
ASALH Past President
September 2015

I am truly humbled to be on the same podium with this group of distinguished scholar/leaders who have preceded me as ASALH President.

As a trained economist I know that I am clearly an outlier in terms of the traditional professional training of ASALH presidents. However, remember that our title champions the study of the life as well as the history of African Americans. Moreover, I am not the first economist who has served as ASALH President. That distinction goes to the late Dr. Andrew Brimmer, who served two terms as ASALH President.

My training as an economist was useful in addressing the most challenge issue that I confronted during my presidential tenure, i.e. the disposition of the property located on U Street that the Association had purchased with the goal of establishing a permanent independent office. This effort was partially a response to uncertainty regarding whether Howard University would continue to host ASALH and whether and when the Carter G. Woodson heroic site would be renovated and whether ASALH would be afforded office space within the complex if and when renovations were complete.

Although there are still many uncertainties facing the organizations, we have successfully navigated the most treacherous waters. Consequently, as we celebrate our centennial, I believe that we must focus our attention on building a 21st century ASALH that is sustainable and meets the changing needs of our various

constituencies. My approach to addressing this issue is to ask the question “What Would Carter G. Woodson Do?” What I mean is facing today’s challenges what strategies would Carter G. Woodson use to build an organization like ASALH and pursue his objectives?

Woodson sought to build a membership-based organization comprised of stakeholders committed to supporting the conducting and disseminating of research exploring the history of African Americans. This venture was undertaken at a time when there was a lacuna of non-racist treatises examining the experience of people of African descent and the Black presence in predominately white colleges and universities was minimal. Given this set of circumstances a strategy that involved organizing local groups of enthusiasts in branches was pure genius. And, establishing a publishing company and creating a journal made very effective use of the best available distribution and information dissemination technologies. In addition, holding an annual meeting was ideal for sharing information and broadening networks. Moreover, the initiation of “Negro History Week to broaden the interest in exploring Black history was a spark of genius. Moreover organizing a cadre of researchers, i.e. “Woodson’s Boys,” to build a body of scholarly historical research insured that the movement would gain momentum over time.

The weak link in Woodson’s strategy was identifying a stable source of funding to underwrite the enterprise. Support received from foundations was sporadic and limited, and it was often necessary for Woodson to dip into his own personal resources to maintain momentum.

Now let us imagine for the moment that Carter G. Woodson was with us today and was tasked with adapting his strategies to address contemporary challenges confronting ASALH. Now Woodson would have to consider several negative trends affecting the Association including:

1. The celebration of Black History Month has become mainstream and has been increasingly co-opted by corporate interests with limited fiscal or reputational benefit to ASALH.
2. The world of book and journal publishing has been turned upside down by the digital revolution resulting in catastrophic declines in subscriptions and subscription revenues.
3. ASALH branches have had major difficulties in recruiting younger members and efforts to build college chapters have been largely ineffective.
4. The locus of scholarly research is in departments in colleges and universities and many scholars prioritize attendance at disciplinary professional conferences over attending ASALH conferences.
5. The high cost of attending the annual conference has become a barrier for many who wish to be engaged with ASALH.
6. Obtaining external funding from grants and sponsorships continues to be a difficult undertaking.

Confronted with these realities I believe that Woodson would foreground strategies designed to engage youth and young adults in supporting ASALH's mission. I believe that he would be strongly supportive of ASALH's partnership with

Kiamsha and the “Pen or Pencil” project. But I believe he would break new ground by advocating for the authorization to create digital branches that reflect the heavy engagement of today’s youth with social media. Such branches could hold virtual meetings, reducing the difficulties of bringing people together in the same physical space. These branches could be attached to existing organizations including churches and colleges and universities. I also believe that Woodson would promote the idea of “digital Black history summer camps” where school-age youth would receive instruction online in how to conduct videotaped oral history interviews, edit the interviews, and post edited versions on Youtube and Facebook. This initiative could be expanded into the school year through cooperative arrangements with teachers of Black history courses and teachers who have participated in the annual Teachers’ Workshops held at the ASALH convention. In fact, I believe that Woodson would propose a targeted membership recruitment initiative aimed at these teachers and seek their support in helping their students organize digital branches.

I also believe that Woodson would recognize the need to develop new strategies to promote the celebration of Black History Month. I believe he would advocate for initiation of an annual Black History video contest where groups of students in schools would produce five-minute videos focusing on the annual Black History Month theme. The three top videos would be screened at the annual Black History Month luncheon and the winning production teams would be invited guests at the event. Finally, I believe that Woodson would observe that Black employee groups in many major corporations organize Black History Month celebrations and propose that ASALH market its Black History Month lecture service to these groups.

Such lectures might become so popular that some groups might want to expand the activity into mini-courses for members. Content for such lectures and courses could be generated through the work of ASALH “Scholars-in-Residence” who would be the 21st century equivalent of “Woodson’s Boys,” but would, of course, embrace both genders. The partnership between ASALH and Black employee groups might also go a long way in generating additional revenue for ASALH because these groups may be more successful in getting their employer to provide significant support to ASALH than ASALH has been via direct solicitation of corporate executives.

With these new ideas as a point of departure, Woodson would be confident that future ASALH presidents would preside over a vibrant organization that is well-positioned to carry out the Association’s original mission as the 21st century continues to unfold.

Thank you!