Howard University awarded $90 million contract to conduct military research for the Pentagon

Dominic Gustavo
7 February 2023

Howard University in Washington D.C. has been awarded a five-year, $90 million contract by the US Department of Defense and the US Air Force to fund a research center dedicated to developing advanced technology for the military.

The center will be one of the Pentagon's 15 officially designated UARCs (University Affiliated Research Centers) and the first to be based at a historically black college/university (HBCU), a dubious "honor" that was announced with great fanfare on January 23 by university President Wayne A.I. Frederick.

The announcement came as the school hosted Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall to proclaim "a historic and tremendous accomplishment for Howard University."

In his remarks, Austin lamented that "Only a tiny fraction of our department's research funding goes to HBCUs." He then declared, "To sharpen America's technological edge and to strengthen America's outstanding military, the department is committed to investing in even more HBCUs and minority-serving institutions. Today, we are taking that commitment to a new level."

Air Force Secretary Kendall added, "What we are celebrating today directly supports two goals incredibly important to our nation, one is a need to grow and diversify the pool of scientists and engineers across the country, particularly those contributing to our national security."

The research center, which will receive $18 million in funding annually for at least five years, will focus on artificial intelligence, machine learning and cybersecurity, with an emphasis on "autonomous systems."

Danda Rawat, who is director of Howard's Data Science and Cybersecurity Center, explained to the university newspaper, *The Dig*, that "Howard's UARC will focus on advanced battle management systems (ABMS) and tactical autonomy, which the Air Force defines as autonomous systems acting with delegated and bounded authority of humans in support of tactical, short-term actions associated with a longer-term strategic vision in war." He added that this research would "provide operational advantages to our war fighters."

Stripping away the euphemisms, the center will be dedicated to the development and improvement of the US military's killing machines, including the drones that for decades have wreaked terror and havoc in the United States' neocolonial wars in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia—wars that have led to millions of deaths and the destruction of entire societies.

Howard's partnership with the most reactionary and bloodstained institution on the planet is presented as a progressive advance for "people of color." Speaking to *The Dig*, Howard Professor Bruce Jones explained, "There is a dearth of people of color going into these areas of tactical autonomy, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and cyber security… This [contract] enables Howard University to provide a pipeline of students and faculty into these strategic areas. In securing this UARC, Howard acts as a model for other HBCUs to do the same."

There are 14 other universities with Pentagon-funded UARCs, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Texas at Austin and Johns Hopkins University. While Howard is the first

© World Socialist Web Site

HBCU to be awarded this "prestigious" program, this is merely the latest step in the integration of HBCUs into the military-intelligence apparatus, part of the broader militarization of American higher education.

Eleven other HBCUs are classified under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as R2 (Research 2) high research activity institutions, conducting research that can be utilized for military purposes, and in many cases specifically intended for military use.

A September 2022 issue of *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* detailed the extent of this collaboration, quoting an Air Force spokesperson who reported: "The Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act required the Department of Defense (DoD) to establish a plan to elevate a consortium of Historically Black Colleges and Universities/Minority-Serving Institutions (HBCUs/MSIs), assess their ability to participate and compete in engineering, research, and development activities, and report the plan to Congress. … The goal is to grow and diversify the available pool of scientists and engineers to support more comprehensive solutions to the department's most challenging problems."

Among the "problems" being tackled by these research centers, such as the one located at the HBCU Florida A&M University (FAMU), is the issue of communication with hypersonic aircraft, which is difficult due to the high speeds involved. The solution would allow hypersonic craft to operate entirely unmanned, giving the US a military edge over its principal competitors, designated in the article as Russia and China.

The establishment of the UARC at Howard will open the road for the university to receive a Carnegie R1 (very high research activity) designation, which in turn will open the floodgates for even more funding and grants. This fact was noted with glee by the university's president, himself a millionaire who answers to a wealthy Board of Trustees made up of venture capitalists and Democratic Party operatives.

The research center at Howard will provide the infrastructure for a consortium of HBCUs that will collaborate and share academic resources among themselves in support of the research. Among these schools are Jackson State University, Tuskegee University and Tougaloo College. The founding of the center at Howard will therefore serve as a catalyst for the further integration of these institutions into the military-intelligence complex.

The unholy alliance between the Pentagon and the wealthy executives who run Howard University is a demonstration of the fundamentally reactionary character of identity politics.

When the race- and gender-obsessed middle classes speak of "diversity," they are referring to the elevation of a narrow layer of grasping careerists to well-paid positions in academia, the state and the corporate world. There is no contradiction between these aspirations and the war aims of American imperialism. Indeed, they are in lockstep: the wealth of these affluent layers is tied to Wall Street by a million threads.

On the other hand, this "diversity" has nothing to do with the interests of the great mass of the working class of all races, from whom the gargantuan costs of the ever-expanding military apparatus and its imperialist wars are extracted in the form of increased austerity and exploitation.

This basic contradiction has found its expression at Howard, which has a wealthy, mostly black administration, while it hosts mostly black students from working class backgrounds, who face deplorable living conditions on campus. Similarly, the mostly black faculty face low pay and high exploitation. The administration claims it has no money to pay for better dorms or higher wages, even as it receives millions of dollars to fund the latest weapons research.

The integration of Howard and other HBCUs into the military apparatus of US imperialism is part of the broader militarization of America's colleges and universities, which are being transformed into a pipeline for trained technicians and specialists who can be put to use in the burgeoning military-intelligence field. Any aspect of academics that cannot be put to this use is deemed worthless. Hence the attempt by the Howard administration to shut down the university's classical studies department in 2021, which was called off only after it provoked outrage among students and faculty.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site