

Challenges, Opportunities *and* Traditions

A Snapshot Look at Today's HBCUs

by Stephen Pelletier

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) add a rich texture to the fabric of higher education in the United States. Their legacy is one of access and opportunity.

Like every institution of higher learning, HBCUs must work continually to sustain quality. Always a test, that's even more difficult in today's economic climate. While in many ways the issues that HBCUs face mirror those of all universities, the unique HBCU mission adds an overlay of additional factors that must be considered. At times, presidents of HBCUs must feel like they're walking a tight rope in a typhoon.

In a series of recent interviews, the leaders of several HBCUs in the AASCU membership shared their perspectives on some of the key challenges they face today. Their observations provide a snapshot look at the current state of public HBCUs.

Money, Money, Money

To a significant extent, the financial fates of public universities rise and fall depending on their state's fiscal health. Today's tight times have largely meant that HBCUs have had to tighten their belts.

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, for example, had to absorb a \$6.5 million cut in its state allocation this year, following a \$6 million reduction last year. Concerned about how the cuts will affect daily operations, Florida A&M President James H. Ammons also worries about the potential long-term impact.

The cuts come, Ammons says, "at a time when our institutions, and this nation, have some of the biggest challenges that I think we have ever confronted, especially as it relates to the competitiveness of the United States on a global scale." Less money translates into larger class sizes and not as many course sections, he says, and may impact research opportunities. That's not the direction we need to be going, he suggests, if the nation wants to keep pace with the academic achievements of students abroad.

Ammons believes the issue boils down "to a concern about how higher education—and really education in general—is being valued in this economy."

Money is also tight in Kentucky, where Kentucky State University's appropriation was cut this year by \$1.6 million. That's better than the \$4 million cut that legislators originally proposed, says KSU President Mary Sias, but a series of recent budget cutbacks have meant that her institution is back to the

same level of funding it had in 2005. The upshot is that the university is in a mode of continuous belt-tightening. “We have made operating budget cuts,” Sias says. “We’re looking at greater efficiency and effectiveness.”

Sias also says that Kentucky State is gearing up to get its board more involved in fundraising, and in general is turning more to outside grant sources. “We have to,” she says, “because there’s only so much you can cut from a programmatic standpoint.” Sias candidly acknowledges that, historically, HBCUs have been weaker in fundraising than other institutions. She says that Kentucky State is also “re-tooling our development staff and cleaning up our database of alums” to help create more advanced capacity for raising money.

Sias is not alone in beefing up fundraising efforts—all the presidents interviewed for this story are doing the same. Near Houston, for example, Prairie View A&M University has raised \$25 million toward a \$30 million goal in its first-ever capital campaign. But Prairie View President George C. Wright knows they need to do even more. For example, Wright says, “we’re just now getting to the place of where we’re really asking the alums” for donations. Among practical steps to help that effort, he wants Prairie View to develop tools and processes for fundraising telethons.

Building a fundraising infrastructure is also a goal at Bowie State University in Maryland, where President Mickey Burnim knows that his institution needs more sophisticated databases that will help track alumni. At the same time, he says, there’s also the need to inculcate the value of alumni donations. “Institutions like mine have not done a good job over the years of educating their students and their graduates of the importance of giving, and so we have an education piece to do,” Burnim says. “Many people think that if you are a state institution everything that you need comes in appropriations from the state legislature and that you have no additional needs.”

A related challenge, Burnim says, is the question of how deep alumni pockets might be. He notes that among those who might be willing to give, many are of limited means. “Graduates who are reaching a point in their lives where they might be able to give back haven’t been able to accumulate a whole lot because their salaries have been modest at best,” he observes. “We don’t have a lot of captains of industry, or corporate heads, or really successful entrepreneurs who are in the position to give us millions of dollars with the writing of a single check.”

A focus on advancement is also front-and-center in North Carolina. In 2000, voters there passed a \$3.1 billion bond issue for higher education—at the time the largest such referendum ever approved. Part of those monies helped fund UNC’s Focused Growth Initiative, an effort targeted at creating significant academic and operating improvements at the system’s historically minority campuses, including five HBCUs. Harold L. Martin, senior vice president for academic affairs in the University of North Carolina System (and the former chancellor of Winston-Salem State University) reports that funds from the initiative enabled administrators to look strategically at HBCU’s advancement operations and to suggest ways to enhance institutional capacity to raise private funds. The results were impressive. In just the two-year period 2001 to 2003, for example, state reports show that private fundraising on Initiative campuses rose from some \$15.5 million to nearly \$25.5 million.

The Focused Growth Initiative was also designed to bolster enrollment management—another major issue of concern at HBCUs.



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The Right Mix of Students

A college isn't a college without students. The trick, of course, is to attract the right mix of students to fill classrooms, and to provide the right mix of academics and extracurricular services to keep those students enrolled until they complete their degrees. Among the institutions whose presidents we talked with, the picture is a bit uneven.

Although it is still the largest single-campus HBCU in the country, Florida A&M has seen its enrollment drop from 13,000 to 12,000 over the last three years. Some of the attrition is no doubt a result of the university's well-publicized struggles to retain its accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. As of this writing, the school is on probationary status with SACS at least through June 2008, pending compliance with a series of concerns about financial practices.

James Ammons, who inherited the accreditation problems when he was appointed president of Florida A&M nearly a year ago, is optimistic about enrollment. "We think that with the aggressive recruitment strategies that we've put in place, we should see a turnaround in enrollment this fall. Our applications are up, and we're hoping that we'll be able to get the yield so that we will show that upward trend again."

At Kentucky State University, Mary Sias and her colleagues have problems of a very different sort—enrollment there is bursting at the seams. KSU went from some 2,200 students in 2005 to nearly 2,700 students in 2007. "We actually doubled our freshmen enrollment the year before last," reports Sias, a record they were able to hold and even improve on last year. The key to the gains, Sias says, is "more targeted enrollment management and recruitment techniques."

It may be one of those proverbial good problems to have, but Sias says that further enrollment growth at KSU is limited by the school's ability to house students. "We are at 98 percent occupancy in our housing," Sias says, and even with a new residence hall set to open this fall, the school seeks public-private partnerships that will help them construct even more housing.

Enrollment growth at Prairie View A&M led to yet a different set of issues. In the fall of 2004, the university's enrollment went over 8,000 for the first time. Naturally, the school was pleased. A close look at the university's 1,400 new freshmen, however, showed that more than half were provisional admits who did not fully meet admissions requirements. That raised questions about institutional standards. The school decided to make sure its bar for admissions stayed in place, and for 2005 opted not to admit students who would have been in the lower part of that provisional group.

George Wright knew the decision would be costly in terms of lost tuition and fees. "I've been telling people that we made a decision that cost the university over a million dollars as it worked its way through the system," he says. Nonetheless, the move paid off. Not only did the university's retention and graduation rates rise, but Wright also intuits that the tougher admission standards contributed to a decline in the school's disciplinary problems.

At Bowie State University, where enrollment is near a peak, "we have clearly articulated enrollment growth as our top priority," Mickey Burnim says. That's in part because enrollment has a bearing on state appropriations, he says, but also because "I see enrollment growth as being the most tangible bit of evidence of the health, prosperity and well-being of the institution."

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Additional Challenges

Apart from enrollment management and fiscal concerns, HBCUs face many other challenges that can only be touched on briefly here. The presidents we spoke with, for example, mentioned such perennial issues as the need to improve student retention and graduation rates. Several presidents spoke of the need to build campus infrastructure and maintain the overall quality of the physical plant. At a purely practical level, Mary Sias at Kentucky State University is concerned about rising energy expenses as well as costs associated with campus security.

There are also broader concerns. Sias, for example, says “a struggle that HBCUs have that probably is more endemic to us” is that “large numbers of students come with developmental education needs.” She says that 81 percent of KSU’s students need some form of remediation. The problem, notes Sias, is that schools that feed students into KSU don’t always do a good job of college preparation, and that consequently students “have a more difficult time catching up.” Helping them bridge the preparation gap takes a large investment on the institution’s part. Sias also finds that her institution must often go an extra mile to help students find the financial resources they need to stay in college once they are admitted.

Like all institutions of higher learning, HBCUs are under a greater microscope in terms of demands from the public—and from legislators—to demonstrate things like educational quality and successful student outcomes. “The whole concept of accountability often puts people like me on the defensive,” says George Wright at Prairie State. “That’s one of the real challenges, I think, we have at HBCUs.” It’s not that HBCUs are opposed to accountability, he says, but that there is a need to ensure that accountability measures are designed to be appropriate for a diversity of students.

While most HBCUs have not suffered the fate of Texas Southern University, whose president resigned among allegations of financial malfeasance—after the case first ended in a mistrial, the president reached a plea agreement that includes 10 years of probation and restitution to the university of nearly \$128,000—that case points to a lack of continuity in strong presidential leadership at some HBCUs. “Because we are so few in number, we all shudder when we see problems at an HBCU institution,” Mickey Burnim says. Agreeing that the issue of presidential leadership looms large at HBCUs, James Ammons at Florida A&M suggests that one necessary antidote is closer attention to the pipeline of future administrators and faculty. “When we look at what America is doing in terms of producing African American and minority Ph.D.s,” he says, “I think we have a lot of work to do.”

In the face of the panoply of issues ahead, however, HBCU presidents are steadfast in their commitment to the unique HBCU mission—even as they recognize a need to evolve with society.

Preserving the Mission

Testifying on Capitol Hill earlier this year, Mary Sias told lawmakers that while HBCUs account for only 3 percent of the nation’s more than 4,000 colleges and universities, they enroll 16 percent of African Americans at the undergraduate level and account for nearly 30 percent of all baccalaureate degrees and 40 percent of all first professional degrees earned by African Americans. Behind these statistics is the reality that HBCUs provide unique, significant value—in access, equal opportunity, and, simply, educational excellence. One of the key challenges for HBCUs may be how they can maintain the uniqueness of their mission.



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That's particularly a challenge in light of societal changes. Morehouse College, one of the prominent private HBCUs, graduated its first white valedictorian this year. George Wright at Prairie View A&M is looking to recruit more students from Texas' Hispanic community. The law school at Florida A&M and classes in many of its other professional schools have large proportions of white students. Shifts like these mean that HBCUs need to be thoughtful about preserving their historic missions—and be deft enough to change with the times.

When he encounters HBCU alumni and constituents who fear that an HBCU might lose its history and traditions, UNC's Harold Martin says if HBCUs "improve competitiveness and safety and focus," they will attract bright students regardless of ethnicity. Students and parents, he says, want the same thing—"a quiet educational environment that provides for an intellectually stimulating and safe environment for [students] to grow and mature and gain skills." The ongoing sustainability of HBCUs, he suggests, rests in their commitment to continually improve. Martin says that strengthening an institution enhances its mission and its capacity to "recruit bright and talented students of all ethnicities, as a public university, and strategically address the needs of a region."

James Ammons believes that HBCUs deserve more credit and support for their accomplishments. "When you look at the historical contributions that these institutions have made, in some very critical areas for the competitiveness of our nation, I think that you would conclude that these are institutions that deserve not only additional retention, but additional funding from all levels of government, especially the federal and state government," he says. (In a recent study of funding in select states, James T. Minor, an assistant professor of higher education at Michigan State University, found what he called "inequities" between funding for flagship universities and HBCUs, based on funding per student. "State higher education leaders must be more conscious of how funding patterns might actually counter the goal of expanding access and, perhaps, threaten the semblance of equity," Minor wrote. "Current appropriation processes essentially ignore institutions most capable of educating those least likely to receive postsecondary degrees. There are few instances where state appropriations are directly used to narrow gaps in degree attainment by investing in institutions most capable of serving underrepresented populations.")

"We need to take a harder look at the remarkable achievements that have been made by the Historically Black Colleges and Universities," Ammons argues. "And also, see these institutions as places where answers can be contributed to some of our toughest problems—like high school dropouts, the lack of African American teachers in our classrooms, and the need for additional scientists and engineers."

"What HBCUs have that probably is unique," Mary Sias says, "is a capacity that they've demonstrated time and time again to motivate students, to provide them with the skills they need, and to pay attention." By that, Sias means attention above and beyond what other institutions provide. Both Sias and George Wright, for example, invest their own time in nurturing individual students.

"The mission of Historically Black Colleges has always been to provide access and opportunity," Sias says. "But remember, HBCUs have always had their doors open to all students, irrespective of race or ethnicity."

"People often ask me," says Prairie View's George Wright, "Is an HBCU relevant in today's world?" His response cuts to the essence: "An HBCU is not right for every black student. Not every white student. But it is right for many students." **P**

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