



**Statement of Secretary Hazel O'Leary, President
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Member, UNCF
Member, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
Before the
House Education and Labor Hearing
On
*"America's Black Colleges and Universities:
Models of Excellence and Challenges for the Future"*
Thursday, March 13, 2008
10:00 a.m.
Washington, D.C.**

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities to the nation. It is my intention that this conversation yields a better understanding not only of their historical significance but also of their current contribution to this nation's process of social mobility.

I believe that Fisk is an excellent example of the triumphs and opportunities that these institutions experience. Further, I believe that it will become apparent that the challenges that many HBCUs cannot always be separated from America's higher educational crisis.

I would like to begin by giving a brief historical perspective of the storied history of Fisk University.

Fisk's Storied History of Academic Excellence

Founded mere months after the Civil War, Fisk was Nashville's first university.

Fisk was established by John Ogden, Reverend Erastus Milo Cravath and Reverend Edward P. Smith and named in honor of General Clinton B. Fisk of the Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau. Fisk opened to classes on January 9, 1866 with the stated mission of providing a quality liberal arts education without regard to race. In fact, the children of many of the northern white instructors who came to teach at Fisk actually studied alongside African American students at a time when segregation was not just a social rule, but in many circles, a biblically sanctioned practice.

Many know about the world-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers. They started as a group of students who traveled to earn enough money to provide food and other critical support for

the financially challenged school. The Singers raised enough money over the course of six years to build the first permanent structure in the country built for the education of newly freed slaves. They succeeded and funded construction of the renowned Jubilee Hall; the first permanent structure in America built specifically for educating African Americans.

During their performance for Queen Victoria in 1873, it was she who remarked that these fine young people surely must have come from a musical city. Hence, Nashville, Tennessee has prided itself in being promoted as Music City, U.S.A.

Our 42 acre campus is a National Historic Landmark and is on the National Registry of Historic Places and has been a living and learning environment of countless thousands of students, faculty, and administrators, some of whom are in the U.S. Senate and legislative bodies throughout the nation today.

* **W.E.B. DuBois**, sociologist, scholar, first African-American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard; Founder of NAACP

* **Dr. Bradley Sheares** – CEO of Reliant Pharmaceuticals, formerly president of the U.S. Human Health division of Merck & Co., Inc., where he had commercial responsibility for the company's portfolio of prescription medicines for the treatment of chronic and acute diseases in the United States.

* **St. Elmo Brady**, first African-American to earn a doctorate in chemistry.

* **Elmer Imes**, 1st African American to receive PhD in physics

* **Joyce Bolden**, first African-American woman to serve on the Commission for Accreditation of the National Association of Schools of Music

* **John Lewis**, politician, civil rights activist, former President of SNCC

* **Percy Lavon Julian**, first African-American chemist and second African-American from any field to become a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

* **Cora Brown**, first African-American woman to be elected to a state senate

* **Johnnetta Cole**, anthropologist, former President of Spelman College and Bennett College

* **John Hope Franklin**, historian, professor, scholar, author of landmark text, *From Slavery to Freedom*, graduate of the class of 1935

* **Nikki Giovanni**, poet, author, professor, scholar

* **Alcee Hastings**, U.S. Congressman and former U.S. district court judge

- * **James Weldon Johnson**, author, poet and civil rights activist, author of the "Negro National Anthem" "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"
- * **Alma Powell**, wife of Gen. Colin Powell
- * **Kay George Roberts**, orchestral conductor
- * **Martha Lynn Sherrod**, Presiding District Court Judge, first African American to win an at-large election in North Alabama since Reconstruction
- * **Matthew Knowles**, President and CEO of Music World Entertainment and manager of Beyoncé Knowles, his daughter

It was at Fisk that these, and many others who remain lesser-known contributors to American life and culture and beneficiaries of the social mobility earned, and continue to earn, by receiving a Fisk education.

While Fisk is known for producing some of the most thoughtful and globally engaged persons in the 19th and 20th Centuries, its 21st Century legacy has been and will be the matriculation and education of students who, at least statistically, are not expected to earn a college degree. The image of Fisk as a bastion of black middle class elitism has certainly given way to a talented and academically accomplished student body of which 91% must receive some form of financial aid in order to afford college.

In 1951, Fisk became the first HBCU to induct members into the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society. We continue that legacy each year by adding to the membership ranks of that very prestigious liberal arts society.

It was a young civil rights organizer named Diane Nash who on May 10, 1960, having led a group of students from Fisk's campus to the Nashville mayor's office to confront him about a segregated downtown who employed the Socratic method learned in her courses at Fisk to get him to admit that segregation was not only harmful but morally wrong.

It was John Lewis who, while a student at Fisk and American Baptist College in Nashville, protested the segregated conditions of Nashville. John participated in the Freedom Rides to desegregate the South, and was a national leader in the struggle for civil rights. He became nationally known after his prominent role on the Selma to Montgomery marches, when police beat the nonviolently marching Lewis mercilessly in public, leaving wounds that are still visible today.

As well as being the incubator for many world changers with name recognition, equally important are the many unnamed teachers, business professionals, lawyers, scientists,

and community leaders who claim proudly their participation in the Fisk experience. Among many other notable firsts, in 1952 Fisk University was the first historically black college or university to induct students into a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society.

II. The Turning Point – Impact and Opportunity

In spite of having roots in northern philanthropy, Fisk’s fortunes have paralleled the health of the overall economy as well as the funding environment experienced by many small liberal arts colleges and universities.

In addition to those economic variables, the social and demographic changes of the last half-century have also had an impact on our mission and have caused some public policy practitioners and potential donors to question the necessity of the HBCU.

In spite of increased competition from better-capitalized majority institutions, the fact remains that historically black colleges and universities account for 3 percent of the numbers of schools in this country but produce twenty-four percent of the African American college graduates in the United States.

Thomas Friedman’s book The World is Flat presents the thesis that an increasingly developed world with rising standards of living across the globe means increased competition for limited resources on an unprecedented scale. It is for that very reason that our schools must get it right. This country needs all hands on deck if we are to prosper in the coming decades. The challenges are so great and the need for ethical leadership so intense that to leave any individual without opportunity is to threaten the security and progress of us all.

III. Reinventing a Historical Educational Institution with a Racial Designation

The designation of “historically black” frequently prompts some to question the social necessity of our schools. The key for Fisk’s success is the assembly of two-way partnerships with public and private sector organizations. Fisk has employed this strategy in educating tomorrow’s scientists.

According to a study conducted by the National Science Foundation, Fisk University, with a student population of under a thousand, graduates more African Americans who go on to earn the PhD in the natural sciences than any school in the nation, in spite of having a student body of fewer than 1,000 students. Our committed faculty, which includes a two-time R&D 100 Award winning physicist and winner of the Room

Temperature Semiconductor Award has the flexibility to focus on the needs of individual students.

An important tool in our excellence in the sciences is the Center of Excellence in Physics and Chemistry of Materials (CPCoM) supported by the National Science Foundation and a second center of excellence is supported by the Department of Defense called the Center for Optical Logic Devices (COLD). It is through those centers that our masters to doctorate bridge programs in physics, biology and nursing find support and have continued and productive connections to graduate programs and research resources across the nation.

What is critical to our success in this effort are the ongoing relationships between government agencies and partner universities. Those relationships provide Fisk with financial and programmatic support that ensures robust and relevant academic programs in the areas of law, medicine, and other disciplines. Those universities span the country and include Howard University, Meharry Medical College, Vanderbilt University, Case Western Reserve University, Belmont University, and others.

In December of 2007, Fisk received a challenge grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that could bring a total of \$7 million to the University by June 30, 2008. As we continue to raise the funds to meet that challenge, the University is also involved in what we have termed a re-alignment. That effort has as its goal the rebalancing of Fisk's core operations with its resources, in short, to build a Fisk with a smaller footprint with a taller steeple.

We started a ground-up analysis of all academic and administrative programs in the late fall. At the end of that process what will result is a business model that enhances Fisk's strengths, eliminates poorly performing areas and consolidates increased resources into programs that are viable but in need of increased investment.

IV. Financial Challenges

As I mentioned earlier, 91% of Fisk students receive some sort of financial aid. With competition from well-funded majority institutions Fisk has had to work harder to provide institutional scholarships and aid for top students.

This is where one of the key differences in a school like Fisk and a majority institution is most visible. We have demonstrated time and again that if we can admit and support a student in his or her first year there is a 86% chance that we will retain them for further study and graduation.

Conversely, many majority institutions, while they have less difficulty financing minority students, with few exceptions, they consistently have difficulty in retaining them from their first year to second and an even more difficulty graduating them.

A key initiative in which Fisk is currently engaged is the development of an endowed scholarship fund of which the corpus will generate funds to be used to attract academically talented students to Fisk.

This year, Fisk's entering class had an average GPA of 3.32 and an ACT score of 22.5.

V. The Pathway Forward:

As one of the nation's flagship historically black universities Fisk has tremendous outcomes relative to its resources. The scientific, social, and cultural impact that a university should have through the creation of new knowledge is a critical part of what we work hard to improve everyday.

Funds from all sources, especially Title III and IV funds are sometimes the difference between possibility and impossibility for a number of Fisk University student oriented initiatives as well as research projects.

Title IV funds for Pell Grants are critical portions of Fisk's student's financial aid packages.

The use of Title III to encourage endowment growth is a key strategy to increase the endowment size and thus self-sufficiency of our schools.

Fisk receives grants from the following agencies:

- HUD provides community-based initiatives on campus.
- Interior Park Service funds help us to restore our historic buildings.
- Justice Department grants to enhance campus security.
- Department of Energy provides Fisk with research funding for the development of radiation detection equipment.
- National Science Foundation grants supports both undergraduate and graduate students engaged in material science research
- Space science related research is supported by NASA, including collaborations with NASA centers.
- Department of Defense supporting cutting edge research in optical sciences in collaboration with Idaho State University.