

Committee on Education and Labor
Hearing Topic: *America's Black Colleges and Universities: Models of Excellence and Challenges For the Future*

Congressional Testimony of
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Good morning Chairman Miller and other members of the House Committee on Education and Labor. I appreciate the Committee affording me the opportunity this morning to express my views on two issues: 1) the continued viability of historically black colleges and universities and 2) the expansion of Section 326 (e) (1) Eligibility of Historically Black Graduate Institutions program contained in H.R. 4137, Section 306.

As I read the newspaper daily and listen to the news, I see that as a country we have challenges that will continue to confront us for a very long time in this complex and troubled world in which we live. The solutions will come not only from the privileged few who have often had quality education reserved for them, but also from those whose ACT and SAT scores may have been very modest but still received a quality education.

Our strength as a nation must come from how we structure and afford our students educational opportunities.

For more than 100 years most of the 105 historically black colleges and universities have provided access and opportunity not only to Black students but to any underserved students who entered our doors.

At a time when the demand for a college education is climbing toward a universal expectation... that is a college degree will very soon be like a high school diploma... HBCUs have responded and stepped up to the mark. They stand and have have stood ready to admit and enhance the skills of countless students who would have been "left waiting at the door". HBCUs have stood in the gap and served as a bridge for tens of thousands of such students.

Recently, there has been some discussion about whether HBCUs continue to be viable. In fact, I am often asked that question as a president of an HBCU. The answer I give is a resounding "Yes"; HBCUs are and continue to be needed and are as vital now to the educational system in America as they have ever been.

One of the great strengths of America is that it made a decision and a commitment to try to afford all Americans a chance to receive a quality education. Current demographic changes in America show that blacks and browns will be more than half of the students we educate in the next five to six years. Educating all of American's people is an urgent priority. No one can do it better than HBCUs.

Scholars like George Mason, Professor Walter Williams and other syndicated columnists have mistakenly represented to a large degree what life is like at HBCUs. One of my colleagues, Dr. Ernest McNealy at Stillman College says what they have said is akin to “yelling fire in a theater when there is none. That is not acceptable as legitimate free speech because of the harm that it causes. Standing in a theater and yelling that someone else said that there is a fire is dangerous because the perpetrated untruth further exacerbates the original harm”.

While they were nodding, HBCUs which account for only 3% of the nation's more than 4,000 colleges and universities, found themselves enrolling 16% of African Americans at the undergraduate level. HBCUs also continue to account for nearly 30% of all baccalaureate degrees and 40% of all first professional degrees to African Americans.

The numbers do not mean HBCUs are perfect and we certainly have many areas to improve. Dr. J.T. Minor recently in a recently published piece called, “Contemporary HBCUs: Considering Institutional Capacity” reports that HBCUs like their white counterparts are losing far too many students. According to a survey by The Education Trust, only 60% of all college students complete undergraduate study in six years. Seventy percent of all students who attend HBCUs are classified as low-income which contributes to even lower graduation rates at many HBCUs.

The encouraging news from this report noted by Lezli Baskerkerville, president of NAFEO, the National Association for Equal Opportunity is that increasing the capacity at HBCUs and investing in their missions, which include remediation of students ill-served by the PK-12 system, can reverse the trend.

Institutions like Kentucky State University and other HBCUs you will hear about this morning are highly effective in providing access to higher education to students that we will rely on tomorrow. In Kentucky 52% of all high schools students graduating need at least one course in remediation. For African American that number is 77%. KSU and other HBCUs take the terror of poverty, hunger, fear and hopelessness and turn it into hope.

On more than 100 small and mid size campuses across this nation, our historically black colleges and universities have responded to the call to produce students who can think critically, integrate knowledge and then communicate that knowledge clearly to others. They have taught students to care about the problems facing our communities and to use technology and innovation to help solve those problems. HBCUs have always stood willingly to be a part of the solution. That has been our legacy and continues to be our mission. We stand as ready today as we ever have been to make a difference.

While money may not cure all the ills of our educational system and of HBCUs in particular, having adequate resources will go a long way in helping to provide a quality education for all those who need it.

I want to thank the Committee for creating in H.R. 4137 an alternative HBCU Masters Degree program in Title VII of the Act, for which Kentucky State is unquestionably eligible. This provision is sorely needed to create a pipeline to terminal degree programs at our institutions.

The new program, an alternative HBCU Masters Degree program in Title VII of the Act created in H.R. 4137, fashioned and advanced by NAFEO and TMCF, is designed to provide institutional awards to HBCUs and minority-serving institutions that are not eligible to participate in the Title IIIB HBGI program in section 326 of the Act. I believe that Masters Degree programs that do not lead to doctorates are deserving of federal financial support, and that this competitive grant program can be of immense assistance to building the capacity of our institutions. Indeed, the Senate bill that includes Kentucky State in Section 326 includes a program that authorizes competitive grants to nursing programs to expand faculty and facilities. The non-competitive funding to designated qualified institutions under Section 326 is what makes that provision and our inclusion in the Senate bill under that Section so attractive.

Both Section 326 and the new Masters Degree program you incorporate in the House bill are about building capacity. You have heard about the number of African Americans and minority students who graduate with their masters from HBCUs in the fields articulated. These provisions will certainly better position the HBCU community to expand opportunities and do a better job of meeting the workforce needs for highly qualified, compassionate, diverse professionals in high need, hard to fill scientific disciplines.

In closing, I want to thank you for your commitment to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. By your actions and commitment you show each of us daily that there is hope for the next generation of African Americans and minority students.

We continue to need your help and support. Our future and the futures of the next generation of students depend greatly on each of you and the actions you take.

Our journey begins today. My grandmother, a true Renaissance woman, once told me when I was standing around and looking at her work... feeding the chickens, churning butter and washing heavy quilts, "Don't wait to be told what to do; assign yourself."

HBCUs have always "assigned" themselves. We ask that you join us in this effort.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.