



**Written Testimony of**

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**House Committee on Oversight and Reform**

**Hybrid Hearing with the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties**

**“HBCUs at Risk: Examining Federal Support for  
Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

**March 17, 2022**

Chair Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Mace, Representative Donalds, and distinguished Members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify in today's hearing, where I am joined by Mr. Sean Haglund, Department of Homeland Security and Mr. Ryan Young, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In the last two months, more than one-third of our country's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have received bomb threats. While, thankfully, no explosive devices have been found on any of these campuses, significant and lasting damage has been done by threatening the safety and security of the students, faculty, and staff of these storied institutions. As a result of these threats, learning has been disrupted, crucial resources have been diverted to emergency response, and there has been an increased burden on already overwhelmed campus mental health systems. It is not just the institutions that have been impacted. HBCU students already experiencing negative impacts from the pandemic such as lingering effects of illness, trauma, and basic needs insecurities are now experiencing additional stress and anxiety as a result of these bomb threats.

Threats against HBCUs are being taken seriously by Education Secretary, Dr. Miguel Cardona and our leadership at the Department of Education (ED). We believe strongly that these acts of intimidation and threats of violence – specifically directed at Black students and the institutions that serve them – cannot be tolerated and have no place in our country. We support the work of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who are leading these investigations and providing technical assistance to HBCUs on ways to improve campus security. And we will continue to work closely with HBCU leaders, as we move forward together, to support all efforts to keep our school communities safe.

It is important to view these recent, repeated threats through both the lens of the present day as well as our country's history. HBCUs were founded to educate Black people in an America that refused to accept them as full human beings and prevented them – because of racial discrimination – from attending other colleges. Threats to the education and well-being of Black Americans and HBCUs are an unfortunate part of American history. My own father experienced this type of threat and intimidation while matriculating during the 1960s at South Carolina State University (SCSU), an HBCU in Orangeburg, South Carolina. He shared those experiences, including the Orangeburg Massacre of 1968 where highway patrolmen killed three SCSU students and wounded more than two dozen others. My father carried the scars of that traumatic experience for many years post-graduation. Similarly, the bomb threats that we witnessed in January and each week in February – Black History Month – were reminiscent of the attempts during the Civil Rights Era to intimidate and provoke fear in Black Americans.

That the timing of most of these threats coincided with Black History Month was likely an attempt to exploit tensions in our country and remind HBCU campus communities and, by extension, Black people throughout our nation, to not take their assumed safety for granted. However, it is the government's job to help ensure these hateful actions do not deter the staff and students of these HBCUs nor prevent future students from attending them. Throughout history, students enrolled in and staff employed by HBCUs have shown they possess a persevering spirit.

Like the leaders of the Civil Rights era, they will not be deterred or distracted from the task at hand, which is to receive and provide a high-quality education.

Educational opportunity is a fundamental element of the American promise and HBCUs have played an outsized role in securing that opportunity. As President Biden indicated in Executive Order 14041 – which re-established the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities (White House Initiative on HBCUs) – HBCUs have a proud history and legacy of achievement.<sup>1</sup> In the face of discrimination against Black Americans, HBCUs have long stood and excelled in the face of discrimination.

That legacy continues – today, more than 100 HBCUs, located in 19 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, serve nearly 300,000 students annually.<sup>2</sup> These schools vary in size and academic focus and serve diverse students and communities in urban, rural, and suburban settings. HBCUs play a critical role in providing educational opportunities, scholarly growth, and a sense of community for students. They create pathways to opportunity for their students and foster academic excellence and civic engagement. This is evidenced by the fact that HBCU graduates are leaders in every field and include barrier-breaking doctors, business owners, scientists, artists, lawyers, engineers, and educators, many of whom are public servants. In fact, HBCUs produce nearly 20 percent of all Black college graduates and 25 percent of Black graduates who earn degrees in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and math.<sup>3</sup> Several HBCU graduates serve in senior roles in the Biden-Harris Administration, including Vice President Kamala Harris – the first HBCU graduate ever to serve as Vice-President of the United States – as well as the Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, Cedric Richmond, and the Environmental Protection Agency Administrator, Michael Regan. In addition, several members of Congress, including members of this Committee, are also HBCU graduates.

### *ED's Response to HBCU Bomb Threats*

ED strongly believes that the anonymous threats to these individual institutions are not only heinous and cowardly, but are also a threat to the long and hard-won progress that has been made in securing the general welfare of HBCUs and the Nation. This kind of intimidation cannot and will not be accepted.

In January, following the first reports of the threats, Education Secretary Cardona and Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas hosted a briefing with more than 40 presidents of HBCUs from

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1 <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/09/09/2021-19579/white-house-initiative-on-advancing-educational-equity-excellence-and-economic-opportunity-through>

2 [https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/HBCU\\_Consumer\\_Brochure\\_FINAL\\_APPROVED.pdf?\\_ga=2.11023543.2094949621.1646150645-681410785.1646150645](https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/HBCU_Consumer_Brochure_FINAL_APPROVED.pdf?_ga=2.11023543.2094949621.1646150645-681410785.1646150645)

3 [https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/HBCU\\_Consumer\\_Brochure\\_FINAL\\_APPROVED.pdf?\\_ga=2.11023543.2094949621.1646150645-681410785.1646150645](https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/HBCU_Consumer_Brochure_FINAL_APPROVED.pdf?_ga=2.11023543.2094949621.1646150645-681410785.1646150645)

across the nation to share information on grant programs, training resources, and other tools available to HBCUs to strengthen campus safety and security.

Secretary Cardona (Secretary) has spoken directly to the presidents from several HBCUs, including Delaware State University (DSU), Harris-Stowe State University, Howard University, Spelman College, and Xavier University of Louisiana to better understand the types of supports needed at these targeted institutions. These leaders – with deepened determination to serve their students and provide high-quality educational experiences – raised important concerns during their conversations with the Secretary, including reflections about the need to modernize and update their operations, including campus safety and security, and the need for more resources to help bolster mental health services due to increased apprehension across the campus community.

I have also spoken directly with HBCU presidents, students, alumni, and association leaders from the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Thurgood Marshall College Fund, Sothern Poverty Law Center, and United Negro College Fund. They all recognize these threats as another attempt to thwart Black Americans' access to an education. HBCU leaders are especially concerned about the psychological and mental health of their students, many of whom view the campus as cultural safe haven where their dreams can blossom.

Senior leaders at ED, including Secretary Cardona, have visited several HBCUs to witness firsthand the work they are doing to support Black students and share our commitment to their success.

- Secretary Cardona and Undersecretary James Kvaal visited Tennessee State University to speak with students and administrators about teacher preparation programs and mental health.
- Secretary Cardona and I visited North Carolina Central University to discuss their mental health supports and held a roundtable with students to learn about mental health needs and the impacts of the bomb threats.
- Undersecretary Kvaal and I visited DSU's new building for graduate, adult, and continuing education students. We met with DSU's president, Dr. Tony Allen, and other senior leaders to discuss a variety of issues impacting DSU and other HBCUs.
- Dr. Arthur McMahan, Senior Associate Director of the White House Initiative on HBCU, participated in a HBCU Roundtable at SCSU with Congressman James Clyburn and Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm to discuss the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and spoke with HBCU student leaders about a variety of issues.

The White House Initiative on HBCUs is also coordinating a government-wide approach through its Campus Safety and Resilience cluster, led by the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security. The White House Initiative on HBCU has posted on its website ([ed.gov/whhbcu](https://ed.gov/whhbcu)) resources and tools provided by the cluster related to school safety and security. This includes regional points of contacts, training opportunities, reference documents, and other materials. As additional resources are made available, the White House Initiative on HBCU intends to share them with the HBCU community on weekly basis through its newsletter.

In February, cluster representatives from DHS hosted a HBCU Symposium, *The Path Forward: Campus Safety and Resilience*. This multi-agency event for HBCUs focused on campus safety

and resilience and provided information about funding opportunities and resources to assist HBCUs with violence prevention and threat mitigation.

The White House Initiative on HBCU is also developing a document that describes the specific roles of different federal agencies in responding to these bomb threats, including federal resources available to HBCUs and guidance on how to respond to a bomb threat. They continue to work in collaboration with DHS to provide in-person support through trainings and briefings. They have also reached out to some of the targeted HBCUs to identify specific needs as a result of the current environment.

ED staff who work in support of institutional compliance with the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act have sent letters to HBCUs to request information on campus practices, such as existing emergency management plans, in order to offer tailored technical assistance in areas such as identifying vulnerabilities and making recommendations for improvements. The Department's Clery Group will also work with institutions to identify reliable and cost-effective options for issuing emergency notifications and timely warnings to keep campus communities informed about issues affecting their safety.

Last, ED administers Project SERV, which provides short-term immediate funding for local educational agencies (LEAs) and institutions of higher education (IHEs) in which the learning environment has been disrupted due to a violent or traumatic incident, to provide resources to respond to the event and re-establish a safe environment conducive to learning. In order for an LEA or IHE to qualify for funding, the entity needs to be able to demonstrate that the learning environment has been disrupted as the result of a significant, traumatic event. ED has determined that the repeated bomb threats against HBCUs in calendar year 2022 can potentially meet the definition of a significant, traumatic event, depending on the impacts of the threats on students and faculty at the impacted individual campuses. The Department is working with the HBCUs that have received bomb threats during 2022 to determine if Project SERV can help with any short-term immediate funding needs to restore the learning environment on their campuses.

#### *Biden-Harris Administration's Commitment to Supporting HBCUs*

The Biden-Harris Administration has made historic investments in HBCUs to ameliorate chronic underfunding and help address critical needs brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, the Biden-Harris Administration has delivered a historic \$5.8 billion cumulative investment in and support for HBCUs, including:

- \$3.7 billion from the American Rescue Plan and other pandemic relief programs, which have helped HBCUs lessen the negative impact of the pandemic on students' educational attainment. Institutions have used these funds to support students' ability to meet basic needs; target resources to students with the greatest need; support campus operations, staffing, teaching, and educational programs; and keep campus communities safe by preventing and mitigating the spread of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> For example, HBCUs lead the field in using the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) to discharge outstanding institutional debt or unpaid balances, which has been shown to result in students leaving

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/arp.html>

college prematurely and may hinder their ability to transfer or get a job.<sup>5</sup> Colleges like Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University have cancelled \$16 million in student debt.<sup>6</sup> HBCUs have used HEERF to support students' basic needs, such as childcare, food, housing, transportation and healthcare. North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University used HEERF aid to establish a housing scholarship for students to afford on-campus housing.<sup>7</sup>

- More than \$500 million in grant funding for academic capacity-building and fiscal stability.<sup>8</sup>
- The discharge of approximately \$1.6 billion of debt from loans provided to HBCUs for capital improvements through ED's HBCU Capital Financing Program. The action resulted in institutional debt relief to 45 HBCUs earlier this year. Discharging these debts has enabled these institutions to focus resources on supporting students, faculty, and staff while recovering from the pandemic; and

President Biden also signed Executive Order 14041 which, in addition to re-establishing the White House Initiative on HBCU, calls for a whole-of-government approach to supporting HBCUs, to remove barriers and improve access to federal funding and other programs, particularly in areas of research and development, and ensure that HBCUs can respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The White House Initiative on HBCU plays a critical role in ED's work with HBCUs and has served as a linchpin in the government-wide approach to building capacity at HBCUs to participate in federal programs, including responding to the crisis of the bomb threats, and the implementation of the 2020 Propelling Agency Relationships Towards a New Era of Results for Students (PARTNERS) Act.

In addition to the Executive Order re-establishing the White House Initiative on HBCU, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Dietra Trent was appointed as the Executive Director for the White House Initiative on HBCU at ED. Dr. Trent, an alum of Hampton University, has more than 25 years of experience in working to advance equity in under-resourced communities and has worked to advance HBCUs in Virginia during her time as the State's Secretary of Education.

President Biden also named Dr. Tony Allen, president of Delaware State University, as Chair of the President's Board of Advisors on HBCUs and Dr. Glenda Baskin Glover, president of Tennessee State University as Vice Chair. The Board, originally established by the Carter Administration and codified by the 2020 PARTNERS Act, engages key stakeholders in fields such as education, business, and philanthropy to advise the President on all matters pertaining to HBCUs.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/08/02/college-student-balance-forgiveness/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/02/us/florida-a-and-m-becomes-latest-hbcu-to-clear-student-debt-trnd/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ncat.edu/admissions/financial-aid/heerf-funding.php>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-fiscal-year-2021-grant-awards-showcase-commitment-equity-excellence-and-opportunity>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/09/09/2021-19579/white-house-initiative-on-advancing-educational-equity-excellence-and-economic-opportunity-through>

I am honored to lead the Office of Postsecondary Education, which oversees the Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities Division that administers programs authorized under Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965, including the Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Strengthening Historically Black Graduate Institutions, and Master's Degree Programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities programs. Since its inception, one of the primary missions of Title III programs has been to support our nation's HBCUs to provide support for improvements in educational quality, management, and fiscal stability. My office also disseminates and provides oversight for HEERF, which has played a vital role in supporting colleges and universities through this pandemic.

The office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) provides targeted support for HBCUs, Tribally-controlled colleges and universities (TCCU), and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) that participate in Title IV Federal Student Aid programs. Staff in FSA's Minority-Serving and Under-Resourced Schools Division provide special support and assistance to HBCUs, TCCUs, and MSIs, such as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI) and Asian American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (ANNAPISI). This division develops strategies and models for the delivery of training, technical assistance, management consultation, and other means of support. The outcomes of these efforts have been improvements to overall institutional student aid delivery systems, a reduction in key audit and program review findings, an increased institutional focus on student success goals – like retention and graduation – and an increased level of institutional sharing and implementation of best practices.

FSA's Partner Engagement and Relationship Management Group is responsible for executive partner engagement and relationship management issues relating to the administration of the Title IV programs at higher educational institutions, including HBCUs, TCCUs, and MSIs. This group champions institutional outreach activities on behalf of ED, including opportunities for executive-level leadership training, presentations, and routine communications pertaining to Title IV policy and legislative issues.

#### *Biden-Harris Administration Proposals to Support HBCUs*

Chronic underfunding and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted new and continuing challenges for HBCUs, and President Biden has proposed investments in his fiscal year 2022 Budget that would help ensure sustained support for HBCUs and their students. Additional need-based grants are especially critical to HBCU students, 60 percent of whom rely on Pell Grants (as compared to 34 percent of all U.S. undergraduate students). The President's 2022 Budget proposed to raise the maximum Pell Grant to \$8,370, an increase of \$1,875 that would be the largest one-time increase in the program's history. Biden-Harris Administration proposals also include funding for the Augustus Hawkins Centers of Excellence Program, which would invest in strengthening and expanding teacher preparation programs at HBCUs and other MSIs.

ED is committed to ensuring that all students are able to excel in college and earn a high-value degrees or certificates. We support inclusive institutions, which despite limited resources, are deeply committed to access and opportunity for today's students and strive to improve college outcomes, especially for students of color.

President Biden's Fiscal Year 2022 budget request for ED also includes a total of \$807 million in discretionary funding to HBCUs, an increase of \$72 million over the Fiscal Year 2021 funding level, which would substantially increase key HBCU funding streams to support research, infrastructure, and student support services, among other programming. As Congress works on passing a comprehensive funding bill, including these requests from the President's budget would ensure HBCUs are more secure because they would be able to adequately invest in their security infrastructure. ED is committed to providing substantive support to the HBCU community.

In closing, let me strongly reiterate -- we condemn these threats and will do our part to support these institutions and their leadership. We recognize that there is tension in our larger society, which spills over and plays out on our college campuses. Whether its school shootings, bomb threats, or other forms of threats and intimidation, they have no place in any of our educational institutions. In this moment, we ask *ALL* leaders – political, government, educational, and others -- to be the bridge that unites, rather than the one that divides.