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OPINION

State of Emergency for Black Colleges

Funding inequities shortchange students

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Current financial problems facing the storied Grambling State University football program are a sign of funding inequities that are shortchanging students and threatening the very existence of a growing number of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).



Last month, in protest of severe budget cuts that have decimated the football facilities and led to the firing of Coach Doug Williams, the Grambling State Tigers players refused to take the 160 mile trip to Jackson, Miss. for their scheduled matchup with Jackson State. The players' boycott sent shockwaves through the Southwestern Athletic Conference and highlighted the dire financial status of many of our nation's 105 HBCUs.

Draconian higher education budget cuts in Louisiana being pushed by Gov. Bobby Jindal are a big part of the Grambling problem. According to the New York Times, state funding for Grambling is "down 56 percent since 2008.

In response, the university has laid off more than 120 staff members and reduced the number of degree programs to 47 from 67. This has left the football program in shambles, with players forced to practice and play in unsafe and unsanitary facilities while sometimes enduring thousand-mile bus trips for away games.

The Grambling football experience is unique, but it is also symptomatic of a larger problem that extends beyond the football field to the financial offices and classrooms of the institutions that have traditionally produced the lion's share of African American professionals.

With lower endowments, cut-rate tuition fees, fund raising challenge and a disproportionate number of first-generation, low-income students, HBCUs have been hit especially hard by the economic downturn.

Recent cuts in government aid and other funding streams have been the last straw for several of them. St. Paul's College in southern Virginia closed its doors in June. Atlanta's Morris Brown College recently declared bankruptcy. And a board member at Howard University, considered by many to be the nation's premier HBCU, recently wrote, "Howard will not be here in three years if we don't make some crucial decisions now."

In addition to the financial strains on HBCUs, prospective students are finding it harder to scrape up the money to enroll. A recent change in credit history criteria in the federal Parent PLUS Loan Program has resulted in the denial of loans to 28,000 HBCU students and a loss of \$154 million in revenue to HBCUs. Congressional Black Caucus

Chair, Marcia L. Fudge has responded to this crisis by demanding a return to the previous credit policy. She says, "The issue must be addressed and the policy must be fixed now."

The contributions of HBCUs cannot be overstated. While the 105 HBCU institutions represent just three percent of the nation's higher education establishment, they graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees. They also graduate more than 50 percent of African American professionals, half of black public school teachers, and most of the African American students who earn bachelor's degrees in STEM fields.

For decades HBCUs have been the backbone of a growing black middle class and a stronger America. We must do everything we can to prevent their decline and keep them alive.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Gun Violence Epidemic is Not Inevitable

It's Not Rocket Science

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

"In the 1960s, when my grandfather was teaching me to drive in his little red Ford Falcon, there was an epidemic of deaths on the highways in the United States, and young people were dying in very large numbers." That's how Dr. Mark L. Rosenberg, president of the Task Force for Global Health, former assistant surgeon general, and former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, recently began talking about today's public health crisis for young people.

He continued. "And this country said, 'We can't let this happen. We're going to stop it,' and they took \$200 million and said, 'We're going to invest in research on how to stop young people from losing their lives on the highway,' and they did an amazing, amazing thing. The research that they supported, and they started the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, that research led to redesigning cars completely. . . . The front end of the cars we drive today crush like an accordion to protect us. We have side-impact protection, rollover protection, air bags. . . . We redesigned the roads. . . . We've gotten drunk drivers, to a huge extent, off the roads. . . . What we did in the '60s, redesigning the car, redesigning the roadway, redesigning the drivers, was a result of scientific research, and as a result we have saved, between the '60s and the beginning of this century, 325,000 lives. That's the result of science."

Dr. Rosenberg is confident that America can save lives being lost in the current epidemic of gun violence that is the second



leading cause of death among children and teens ages 1 - 19 and the number one cause of death among black children and teens. He believes this public health threat must be attacked just like all others—by using the power of science and evidence-based research: "We can apply the same science to firearm injuries and deaths of children, and it's not rocket science."

The Children's Defense Fund partnered with Washington National Cathedral in a forum last month with leading experts on gun violence where Dr. Rosenberg shared his

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—Dr. Mark L. Rosenberg

experience from key research from the 1990s.

"We set out to show that you could start a research program to find out how to prevent gun violence, just like you could reduce the number of fatalities on the roads, and I think one of the most striking findings from our research was designed to answer the question: Does having a gun in your home protect you, or does it put you and your family at risk? Because the people who make and sell guns and the National Rifle Association had a very strong vested interest in telling people, 'You should get a gun and have it in your home for protection.'"

"So we tried to answer that question scientifically, and what we found was that not

only did having a gun in your home not protect you, but it increased the risk that someone in your own home would be killed by a gun, not by 10 percent or 20 percent, that's how much of a risk you have to show to take a drug off the market; not by 100 percent or 200 percent, but 300 percent increase in the risk. And the risk that someone in your home would die from suicide with a gun, and I need to remind us that two-thirds of all gun deaths are suicides, the risk that someone in your home would die from gun suicide went up not 300 percent, but 500 percent.

These were extraordinary findings that bringing a gun into your home increases the risk that someone in your home will die from a gun. . . . these research findings have been replicated again and again in many studies. So they're not something that we question. This is the truth."

This research was not well received by the gun lobby, and Dr. Rosenberg says they started a campaign to get rid of the whole gun violence prevention research agenda. The NRA successfully lobbied their allies in Congress to stop the CDC's gun violence prevention research funding. As a result funding for gun violence prevention research at the CDC fell from an average of \$2.5 million

per year in 1993-1996 to half that in 1997-2000.

Two decades later, the CDC is spending just \$100,000 per year on gun violence prevention research. Meanwhile we are spending 2,500 times that amount on research to prevent traffic fatalities, even though traffic accidents and guns kill a similar number of people every year. We must not let this continue to happen.

The President has requested that Congress authorize \$10 million for gun violence prevention research at the CDC, and another \$20 million to set up a nationwide system to better track gun deaths. This would still be only a tenth of what we are spending on traffic deaths, but it would be a vast improvement over where we are right now.

Dr. Rosenberg also said: "There's this sense of fatalism that people sometimes have, and you say, 'Oh, there's 300 million guns out there in the country. The problem is so big, there is nothing we can do about it, and besides, we've lived with violence from the beginnings of mankind. It's just out there'. . . . But we've learned that violence is not 'just evil,' but violence is specific types of problems: child abuse, child neglect, dating violence, youth violence, intimate partner violence and gender-based violence, rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse, elder abuse, and suicide. Violence is a set of specific problems."

Our nation's gun violence epidemic is not inevitable. Scholars must be allowed to do the desperately needed scientific research that will help parents, policymakers and the public determine how we can all work together to stop it. The NRA cannot be allowed to continue to block the truth at the cost of so many lives.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.