

News

One of the Oldest HBCUs in the Country Could Fold in September

Cheyney University, One of the Nation's Oldest HBCUs, Could Lose Its Accreditation in September

By Stacy M. Brown
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After years of financial trouble and heartbreaking enrollment decline, Cheyney University, one of the oldest Black institutions of higher education in America, is on the verge of fiscal ruin and in danger of losing its accreditation.

Cheyney's problems have sparked rallies, protests and an outpouring of support and outrage from state senators, alumni and others.

"On the one hand, it's tragic. On the flip side, this didn't happen overnight," said Johnny Taylor Jr., the president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. "While there were all sorts of other factors, including a bad economy in 2008 and state and federal [agencies] that failed to help, this still reflects badly on Cheyney's board of trustees and the university's president."

Founded in 1837, by Richard Humphreys, a reformed slave trader, Cheyney represents more than just a place of learning, said Pennsylvania State Representative Stephen Kinsey, who recently joined students and others at a rally for the school.

"Cheyney represents the struggle of being Black in America, fighting to be recognized, speaking up to be supported, and a never-ending struggle to be treated equally," Kinsey said.

A report issued by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted that, although HBCUs only make up three percent of today's colleges and universities, more than 20 percent of African-American college graduates attend an HBCU.

"For years, these historic institutions have

struggles as funding to the school decreased and tuition rose. Since 2010, enrollment dropped 50 percent from over 1,500 students to an estimated 746.

Since 2013, Cheyney has borrowed over \$30.5 million to stay solvent and, if school officials can't deliver a plan that satisfies the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the school could lose its accreditation in September.

This would be particularly devastating, because the school's ac-

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produced amazing leaders, that not only contribute to their respective fields, but who also pride themselves on their 'lifting while they climb' attitudes," said U.S. Senator Bob Casey, D-Pennsylvania.

Cheyney has faced a myriad of financial

creditation is tied to its access to federal grant programs, including Pell grants.

The Philadelphia Tribune reported that State Rep. Stephen Kinsey (D-Pa.) said that nearly three-quarters of the students are from low-income households and



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qualify for federal Pell grants.

State Rep. Stephen Kinsey (D-Pa.) said that he felt obligated to save Cheyney University, during a recent rally about the fate of the school, according to the Tribune.

Pennsylvania State Senator Vincent Hughes, a Cheyney trustee, said work continues to prevent the loss of accreditation. "We've been working with the governor and others," Hughes said. "I wish I can guarantee things, but I also can't allow myself to think negatively."

Such notables to attend Cheyney include, the late "60 Minutes" journalist Ed Bradley; charismatic educator Marcus Foster; former Chicago Bears linemen James Williams; Emmy-winning anchorman Jim Vance; and Philadelphia Tribune Publisher Robert Bogle.

"Cheyney University

of Pennsylvania has been an important contributor to the education of African-Americans since before the Civil War, and the data shows that we need every HBCU in the country to continue their legacy of contributing to its education outcomes," said Dr. Michael L. Lomax, the president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund. "HBCUs continue to show their outsized impact, representing three percent of all two and four-year nonprofit colleges and universities, enrolling 10 percent of African-American undergraduates, producing 18 percent of all African-American bachelor's degrees and generating 25 percent of all bachelor's degrees in STEM fields earned by African-Americans annually."

Lomax added that federal and state governments, alumni, corpora-

tions, philanthropists, and others need to invest more heavily in institutions like Cheyney University.

"The governor has been working closely with the state system and its board to create a path forward for Cheyney, that allows it to build off its history, continue as a degree-granting institution, and address its financial struggles," said J.J. Abbott, a spokesman for Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf.

Pennsylvania Democratic State Rep. Jordan Harris, a member of a task force formed to advise Cheyney's administration, said the university has been underfunded for years and without permanent leadership.

"The task force's job is not to tell the university what to do, but to make recommendations," Harris said. "For the past two years, the state system has provided a line of credit to Cheyney University to be sustained financially. The State System of Higher Education needs to forgive that debt immediately."



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