

**Testimony Provided to the
Committee on Education and Labor's Subcommittee on Higher
Education and Workforce Investment**

United States House of Representatives

Dr. C. Reynold Verret

President

Xavier University of Louisiana

May 22, 2019

Biography

Dr. C. Reynold Verret is the 6th President of Xavier University of Louisiana. Prior to his Presidency, Dr. Verret served as provost and chief academic officer for Savannah State University since 2012. As provost, he worked closely with the President and members of her Cabinet to achieve the university vision and strategic goals and provided leadership to ensure that the university's priorities are addressed and implemented. He led the university's initiatives to build enrollment, enhance the quality and diversity of academic programs, and to create cooperative relationships with neighboring institution and with international partners. He contributed to the university's advancement efforts and capital campaign by shaping its goals and cultivating donors.

Dr. Verret has served also as provost at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania and as Dean of the Misher College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. At these institutions, he led the revisions of general education curricula, oversaw accreditations, developed international programs, established collaborative agreements with neighboring institutions at the K-12 and higher education levels, instituted new state-approved academic programs, promoted interdisciplinary efforts between the humanities and sciences, and planned new facilities. Dr. Verret also served on faculty at Tulane University and also at Clark Atlanta University, where he was chair of the department of chemistry for many years.

As a scientist, Dr. Verret's research interests have included the cytotoxicity of immune cells, biosensors and biomarkers. He has published in the fields of biological chemistry and immunology. At the University of the Sciences, he led a faculty effort establishing a knowledge network on social exclusion in support of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health within the World Health Organization.

Throughout, Dr. Verret works to enhance student achievement and progression to degree. He has contributed to increasing the number of US students pursuing degrees in STEM disciplines and continuing to advanced study. This has included initiatives to mitigate the shortage of qualified science and math teachers in K-12.

He has served on many professional organizations and advisory bodies, including those of the National Institutes of Health, the Board of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and the Georgia Coastal Indicators Coalition. He has received awards and fellowships for teaching and scholarship.

Dr. Verret received his undergraduate degree cum laude in biochemistry from Columbia University and the Ph.D. in biochemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. To these, were added postdoctoral experiences as fellow at the Howard Hughes Institute for Immunology at Yale and the Center for Cancer Research at MIT.

Executive Summary

Subcommittee Chairwoman Susan Davis, Ranking Member Lloyd Smucker, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Dr. C. Reynold Verret, and I serve as the 6th President of Xavier University of Louisiana (Xavier). Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. My institution is Catholic and considered a historically black college and university (HBCU).

The ultimate purpose of Xavier is to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing its students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. This preparation takes place in a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means, including research and community service.

I was asked to testify before the subcommittee today on the institution as an engine of economic mobility, programs that demonstrate this at the institution, how these programs prepare students for a career, and a brief history of HBCUs and why they were created.

HBCUs were created as early as 1837 to provide African Americans access to higher education. Noted for their contributions in educating “black, low-income and educationally disadvantaged Americans,” the 101 HBCUs today constitute the class of institutions that satisfy the statutory definition of the term “HBCU” as defined in the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (HEA).

In my home state of Louisiana, according to an economic impact report released by UNCF (the United Negro College Fund), the impact of the six HBCUs in the state on their regional economies included:

- An employment impact of 8,454 jobs;
- A total economic impact of \$923 million; and
- A lifetime earnings of \$9.4 billion

For Xavier specifically, the report indicated that my institution had the following impact on the regional economy:

- An output impact of \$200 million;
- A value-added impact of \$135 million;

- A labor income impact of \$95 million; and
- An employment impact of 1,715 jobs.

Xavier is considered to be one of the best value schools in the nation for a quality education, according to the *U.S News & World Report*. However, as a student comes closer to realizing their dreams of higher education, the more expensive those goals become to attain. Tuition is \$22,503 per year at Xavier. This total does not include fees or room and board, which is considerably lower than its peer institutions. More than 93 percent of Xavier undergraduates qualify for need-based, as well as other forms, of financial aid and more than 65 percent receive Federal Pell grants.

We are grateful for the passage of Public Law 115-123 that included language to forgive the outstanding balances under the HBCU Hurricane Supplemental Loan program. This effort was supported by both Republicans and Democrats, and we thank you for your encouragement and bipartisan recognition of the valuable role HBCUs play in America.

Xavier yields more minority students who are well prepared for their careers. In fact, according to *THE* (Times Higher Education), “Xavier ranks first among the nation’s colleges and universities in the number of African American graduates who go on to complete medical school. It is also No. 1 in the nation in producing African American graduates who go on to receive life sciences PhDs. and No. 1 number one in the nation for awarding African Americans baccalaureate degrees in physics and the physical sciences.”

At Xavier, we are constantly advancing our programs and preparing our students for the workforce. We are in the process of launching 14 new high-quality programs that align with the labor market demand, including bachelor’s degrees in Neuroscience, the only Physician Assistant master's degree program in Louisiana, and a PhD in education. Believing that all children deserve great teachers, we are also engaged in preparing highly qualified teachers for our primary and secondary schools. The expansion of our program offerings over the past three years allows Xavier to meet the evolving needs of students to be globally competitive and to meet the talent needs of our regional and national workforce. The nation has need of the ability, creativity, and ingenuity of these young minds in order to prosper and compete globally.

We apply resources prudently for success of our students, and the Student Academic Success Office provides the resources and support systems to assist all students in being successful. Our UNCF (United Negro College Fund) Lilly Foundation grant has allowed us to focus on creating career pathways, and our faculty embrace a culture of

success for students that is part of the tradition of Xavier. Our students learn to assist each other in the pursuit of degrees. We identify students at risk early in their college careers and provide needed support to remedy weaknesses so that they might persist.

I am happy that the Fiscal Year 2020 Labor-HHS Appropriations bill includes much needed increases in funding for HBCUs, and hope its passage through the House and Senate will ultimately follow. Title III – Parts B, C D, E, and F – remain important programs to the HBCU community that should be fully funded. Senator Doug Jones (D-AL), Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), Representative Alma Adams (D-NC), and Representative Mark Walker (R-NC) recently introduced the Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education (FUTURE) Act, a bipartisan, bicameral piece of legislation. This bill extends the mandatory funding in Title III, Part F, for HBCUs of \$85 million for STEM initiatives until 2021, and it is my hope that Congress passes this bill before this stream of funding expires on September 30, 2019.

For more information and details regarding my remarks, I ask that you read my written testimony submitted for your review.

Thank you.

Full Testimony

Introduction

Subcommittee Chairwoman Susan Davis, Ranking Member Lloyd Smucker, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Dr. C. Reynold Verret, and I serve as the 6th President of Xavier University of Louisiana (Xavier). Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. My institution is Catholic and considered a historically black college and university (HBCU).

The ultimate purpose of Xavier is to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing its students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. This preparation takes place in a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means, including research and community service.

HBCU History and Statistics

Before I dive in to the more intricate details of Xavier, I would like to share a few facts about HBCUs and our history.

HBCUs were created as early as 1837 to provide African Americans access to higher education. In fact, the very first HBCU was Cheney University of Pennsylvania established in 1837. Noted for their contributions in educating “black, low-income and educationally disadvantaged Americans,” the 101 HBCUs today constitute the class of institutions that satisfy the statutory definition of the term “HBCU” as defined in the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (HEA). This term was given to these institutions in the *Higher Education Amendments of 1986* when Part B of the HEA was restructured to replace a previous program known as “Aid to Institutions with Special Needs” with the current program we have in Part B – “Strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities.”

HBCUs disproportionately enroll low-income, first-generation, and academically underprepared college students—precisely the students that the country most needs to obtain college degrees. In 2017:

- Nearly 300,000 students attended HBCUs¹;
- More than 75 percent of HBCU students were African Americans; and

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Digest of education statistics 2018* [Table 313.20]. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_313.20.asp

- 70 percent of all students at HBCUs received federal Pell Grants, and 78 percent of these students received federal loans.²

HBCUs comprised 3 percent of all two- and four-year non-profit colleges and universities, yet they:

- Enroll 10 percent of African American undergraduates;
- Produce 17 percent of all African American college graduates with bachelor's degrees; and
- Graduate 24 percent of African Americans with bachelor's degrees in STEM fields.³

A 2015 Gallup survey confirms that HBCUs are providing African American students with a better college experience than African American students at other colleges and universities.

- 55 percent of African American HBCU graduates say their college prepared them well for post-college life versus 29 percent for African American graduates of other institutions.⁴

HBCUs attained these results at an affordable price for students—that is, the cost of attendance at HBCUs is about 30 percent lower, on average, than other colleges—despite limited operating budgets and endowments that are roughly half the typical size of other four-year public and private non-profit colleges and universities.

Since our founding, HBCUs have been, and continue to be, under-resourced institutions. An issue brief produced by ACE (American Council on Education) and UNCF (United Negro College Fund, Inc.) revealed the following:

- Public HBCUs rely more heavily on federal, state, and local funding in comparison with their non-HBCU counterparts (54 percent of overall revenue vs 38 percent);
- Private HBCUs depend a little bit more on tuition dollars than their non-HBCUs counterparts (45 percent compared with 37 percent);

² UNCF Patterson calculations using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gallup, Inc. (2015). *Gallup-USA funds minority college graduates report*. Retrieved from UNCF Website: https://www.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/USA_Funds_Minority_Report_GALLUP-2.pdf

- Private gifts, grants, and contracts constitute a smaller portion of overall revenue at private HBCUs compared to their non-HBCU counterparts (17 percent vs 25 percent);
- Public and Private HBCUs experienced the largest declines in federal funding per full-time equivalent student between 2003-2015; and
- In both the public and private sectors, HBCU endowments lag behind those of non-HBCUs by at least 70 percent.⁵

Despite being under-resourced institutions, HBCUs have a large economic impact that often goes unnoticed by most. In 2017, UNCF released a report detailing the economic impact of HBCUs. The report revealed that in 2014, the impact of HBCUs on their regional economies included:

- \$10.3 billion in initial spending, which includes spending by the institution for personnel services, spending by the institution for operating expenses, and spending by students;
- An employment impact of 134,090 jobs, which approximately 43 percent were on-campus jobs and 57 percent were off-campus jobs;
- \$10.1 billion in terms of gross regional product, which is a measure of the value of production of all industries;
- A work-life earnings of \$130 billion for the Class of 2014, which is 56 percent more than they could expect to earn without their 2014 certificates or degrees; and
- A total economic impact of \$14.8 billion.⁶

In my home state of Louisiana, the impact of the six HBCUs in the state on their regional economies included:

- An employment impact of 8,454 jobs;
- A total economic impact of \$923 million; and
- A lifetime earnings of \$9.4 billion⁷

For Xavier specifically, the report indicated that my institution had the following impact on the regional economy:

⁵ Williams, K.L. & Davis, B.L. (2019). *Public and private investments and divestments in historically black colleges and universities*. Retrieved from American Council on Education Website: <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Public-and-Private-Investments-and-Divestments-in-HBCUs.aspx>

⁶ Humphreys, J.M. (2017). *HBCUs make America strong: The positive economic impact of historically black colleges and universities*. Retrieved from UNCF Website: <https://www.uncf.org/programs/hbcu-impact>

⁷ Ibid.

- An output impact of \$200 million;
- A value-added impact of \$135 million;
- A labor income impact of \$95 million; and
- An employment impact of 1,715 jobs.⁸

In fact, throughout the report, Xavier ranked in the top ten in all categories of impacts on the economy, and we strive to continue to increase our footprint.

In addition to the positive impact HBCUs make on the overall economy, HBCUs also have a strong impact academically when observed at the state and local level. An upcoming report to be released by UNCF shows that:

- HBCUs comprised 8.5 percent of the four-year institutions across the 21 states and territories in the analysis;
- Across the 21 states and territories in the analysis, HBCUs enrolled, on average, 24 percent of all black undergraduates pursuing a bachelor's degree in a college or university in 2016;
- Across the 21 states and territories in the analysis, on average, 26 percent of all black bachelor's degree recipients graduated from an HBCU in 2016; and
- In Louisiana, HBCUs are 19 percent of the total institutions, but enroll 38 percent of all black undergraduates and award 38 percent of all black bachelor's degrees in the state.⁹

Facts About Xavier University of Louisiana

Xavier is considered to be one of the best value schools in the nation for a quality education.¹⁰ However, as a student comes closer to realizing their dreams of higher education, the more expensive those goals become to attain. Tuition is \$22,503 per year at Xavier. This total does not include fees or room and board, which is considerably lower than its peer institutions. More than 93 percent of Xavier undergraduates qualify for need-based, as well as other forms, of financial aid and more than 65 percent receive Federal Pell grants. In order to develop the whole person, Xavier relies on a combination of Federal Pell grant funding, tuition, and partnership programs to complete the full circle of enabling our students to become

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Saunders, K. & Nagle, B.T. (2018). *HBCUs punching above their weight: A state-level analysis of historically black college and university enrollment and graduation*. Washington, DC: UNCF Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute

¹⁰ U.S. News & World Report. (2018). *Best colleges rankings*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/xavier-university-of-louisiana-2032/rankings>

servant-leaders and the creative women and men undergirding our economy and society.

Through federal funding received and other revenue sources and donations, we continue our important work. We are grateful for federal assistance and bipartisan support for our recovery from Hurricane Katrina; however, we remain a tuition-dependent institution attempting to meet the needs of students with great economic need. Since taking office, my administration has focused our resources on student success. Despite the devastation of Hurricane Katrina 14 years ago, we are now on good financial standing and can imagine a future for the growing student population we anticipate in 2019. This is largely due to the prudent management of funds and investing in ourselves for impact, but we are grateful for the passage of Public Law 115-123 that included language to forgive the outstanding balances under the HBCU Hurricane Supplemental Loan program. This effort was supported by both Republicans and Democrats, and we thank you for your encouragement and bipartisan recognition of the valuable role HBCUs play in America.

Xavier yields more minority students who are well prepared for their careers. In fact, according to *THE* (Times Higher Education), “Xavier ranks first among the nation’s colleges and universities in the number of African American graduates who go on to complete medical school. It is also No. 1 in the nation in producing African American graduates who go on to receive life sciences PhDs. and No. 1 number one in the nation for awarding African Americans baccalaureate degrees in physics and the physical sciences.”¹¹ Xavier also has graduated a large body of educators, engineers, teachers, business leaders, elected officials, attorneys and jurists who serve the nation and lead in communities across the country.

We rely heavily on student financial aid to meet the needs of our students as we are an under-resourced institution, like all HBCUs. We keep our admission criteria reasonable, and we invite a wider range of standardized test scores in contrast to many mainstream institutions. In light of the cross section of applicants admitted with a variety of socio-economic and academic backgrounds, our faculty and staff engage diligently with students to afford every opportunity to achieve and succeed at the highest level.

Committed to academic excellence, Xavier attracts many students who are high achievers, yet it remains committed to admitting a certain percentage of students who exhibit the will to succeed. The retention rate of first-time, full time students is 72

¹¹ Times Higher Education. (2019). *World university rankings*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/xavier-university-louisiana#survey-answer>

percent, according to data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education System;¹² however, our retention rate has increased to 73.9 percent according to our calculations.

A challenge for many students of colors is the variable quality of education experienced prior to college, we as a community of educators must address these gaps in preparation. Another major challenge for student retention in HBCUs is cost and financial resources available to many families. Tuition inches up yearly while family income stagnates. Loss of this talent pool, much of it black and brown, weakens the country as it seeks to compete in the global marketplace and to remain a leader among the nations.

For those students facing economic threats, programs must be developed to help all students persist, and we have been working to do this at Xavier. Upon my arrival, we established an emergency fund to provide funding for unanticipated expenses that place students, in good academic standing, at risk of not completing their degrees. The Division of Student Affairs are also addressing food and housing security.

Increasing retention, partnerships, and programs are essential to help offset the costs of higher education for minority and first-generation college students, in combination with the funding that is provided through Pell grants. Summer programs are also useful in engaging high school students in the sciences, mathematics, and writing. These, and our dual enrollment programs, prime the pipeline to college whether at Xavier or elsewhere.

We are the only Black and Catholic university, founded by a Saint native to the United States. We understand education as a gift not only as a benefit to the individual student but also to those these graduates go on to serve. The call is, and will always be, to service.

Preparing Students for the Workforce

At Xavier, we are constantly advancing our programs and preparing our students for the workforce. We are in the process of launching 14 new high-quality programs that align with the labor market demand, including bachelor's degrees in Neuroscience, the only Physician Assistant master's degree program in Louisiana, and a PhD in education. Believing that all children deserve great teachers, we are also engaged in preparing highly qualified teachers for our primary and secondary schools. The expansion of our program offerings over the past three years allows Xavier to meet

¹² National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Retention rates for first-time students pursuing bachelor's degrees*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=xavier+university+of+louisiana&s=all&id=160904#retgrad>

the evolving needs of students to be globally competitive and to meet the talent needs of our regional and national workforce.

We apply resources prudently for success of our students, and the Student Academic Success Office provides the resources and support systems to assist all students in being successful. Our UNCF (United Negro College Fund) Lilly Foundation grant has allowed us to focus on creating career pathways, and our faculty embrace a culture of success for students that is part of the tradition of Xavier. Our students learn to assist each other in the pursuit of degrees. We identify students at risk early in their college careers and provide needed support to remedy weaknesses so that they might persist.

Policy Recommendations

As I mentioned above, HBCUs are under-resourced institutions, and more investment in HBCU's is a priority. I am happy that the House Committee on Appropriations voted to pass a Fiscal Year 2020 Labor-HHS Appropriations bill that included much needed increases in funding for HBCUs, and I hope that the House and Senate will ultimately pass this bill. Our students desperately need increases in the Pell grant program, Federal Work Study, and the campus-based aid programs. We have students on our campus that benefit from college access programs, and we want to make sure that we can serve even more students in these programs.

In the HEA, there are other streams of funding known as institutional aid that HBCUs and minority-serving institutions can take advantage of. The Strengthening HBCU program in Title III, Part B, of the HEA serves as the main source of institutional aid for HBCUs and was created in the *Higher Education Amendments of 1986* (P.L. 99-498). Since the creation of this program, HBCUs have been able to access additional funds to help with initiatives such as:

- purchasing or renting laboratory equipment, constructing, or renovating instructional facilities;
- establishing or enhancing a program of teacher education designed to qualify students to teach in a public elementary or secondary school in the states and that includes preparation for teacher certification;
- establishing community outreach programs that will encourage elementary and secondary students to develop the academic skills and interest to pursue a postsecondary education; and
- acquiring real property in connection with the construction, renovation, or addition to or improvement of campus facilities.

Title III, Part B, also includes funding for Historically Black Graduate Institutions (HBGI) and allows them to use additional funds for initiatives such as:

- scholarships, fellowships, or other financial assistance for needy graduate and professional students to permit them to enroll in and complete doctoral degrees in disciplines in which African Americans are underrepresented;
- acquisition of real property that is adjacent to the campus and in connection with the construction or renovation of campus facilities; and
- development of a new qualified graduate program, so long as the institution does not use more than 10% of its HBGI grant for such a purpose.

It is my hope that Congress provides full funding for these programs and reinvest in the Endowment Challenge Grant program.

Senator Doug Jones (D-AL), Senator Tim Scott (R-SC), Representative Alma Adams (D-NC), and Representative Mark Walker (R-NC) recently introduced the Fostering Undergraduate Talent by Unlocking Resources for Education (FUTURE) Act, a bipartisan, bicameral piece of legislation. This bill extends the mandatory funding for HBCUs of \$85 million for STEM initiatives until 2021. STEM remains a major component of a student's education and a report released by the White House's National Science and Technology Council said that the "national benefits of a strong STEM foundation cannot be fully realized until all members of society have equitable access to STEM education and [until] there is much broader participation by those historically underserved and underrepresented in STEM fields..."¹³ The report goes on to highlight the importance of diversity in the workplace leading to more engaged, innovative, and higher-performing organizations. This stream of funding is scheduled to expire September 30, 2019, so it is imperative that this bill passes both Chambers and become law before the expiration date.

Everyone deserves a chance to get a good education, one that provides the skills critical to successfully navigating daily life and finding a good job. With the right investments, HBCUs can be the bridge for many more people and can continue serving in our role for education.

Conclusion

¹³ National Science & Technology Council. (2018). *Charting a course for success: America's strategy for stem education*. Retrieved from White House Website: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/STEM-Education-Strategic-Plan-2018.pdf>

In conclusion, HBCUs are invaluable institutions that not only contribute to society, but provide an invaluable experience for our students, especially our students who are low-income and first generation.

It is an honor to be asked to present this testimony, and I commend you for your service and for addressing these important issues.

Thank you.