

Testimony Provided to the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform

Concerning

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

Emmanuel Ukot
President, Student Government Association
Xavier University of Louisiana

March 17, 2022

Biography

Emmanuel Ukot is a senior from Houston, Texas, majoring in Business Management at Xavier University of Louisiana. Emmanuel has served in SGA since his freshman year and has been twice elected to serve as the Student Body President. During his term, SGA has advocated for students on a variety of issues, and they have collaborated closely with the university administration to convert students' concerns to actionable solutions.

Within one year, Emmanuel's team successfully advocated for the university to permanently readjust the scholarship GPA requirements for students; they implemented a new and convenient digital ticketing system with the campus police department; and the students voted the year prior to increase the operating budget by over \$300,000, allowing the student government to increase funding for organizations by an average of 65%. Because of the hard work of student leaders and the support of the administration, the quality of student life and advocacy has risen at Xavier.

Outside of college, Emmanuel is active in his local church, loves biking, and can be found playing the piano, which he has played for over 17 years. With a passion for project management and operations, he looks forward to transitioning into the workforce in the summer and deliver quality services through streamlined processes while driving operational outcomes that greatly benefit all stakeholders.

Executive Summary

Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, Ranking Member James Comer, and Members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Emmanuel Ukot, and I serve as the President of the Student Government Association at Xavier University of Louisiana. Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and is the only institution in the country that is both Catholic and a historically black college and university (HBCU).

The purpose of Xavier is to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing students like me to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. By cultivating a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means – including research and community service – students are able to practice how to live out the mission of our university.

I was asked to testify before the Committee today on the importance of our country's HBCUs, share a student's perspective on the need for continued federal support, and how the recent racially motivated bomb threats made against over 30 HBCUs in the beginning of February 2022 have directly impacted our students thus far.

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 accredited 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).¹

When I was in high school preparing for college, I applied to a number of institutions. But it wasn't until a friend of mine got accepted to an HBCU – and strongly encouraged me to attend one – that I began to seriously inquire about attending an HBCU. That is when I applied to a number of HBCUs and I enrolled at Xavier University of Louisiana. Not only did Xavier help me pivot in my career path, but the faculty, staff, and administrators truly challenged me to become and stay engaged and socially responsible in what I am doing. I realized over time that Xavier is more than its strong and rigorous academics. It is more than its strong student life experience and athletics program. It is a lifestyle. By educating students like me on the mission of this university and curating experiences for us to practice it, we are truly living out the mission of the university. And the same is true for many HBCU students across the country.

This is why it was especially painful when dozens of HBCUs across the country, uniquely important environments for students like me, received bomb threats at the start of February 2022

¹ The definition of an HBCU can be found in Section 322(2) of the HEA.

– the beginning of Black History Month. And as the news spread and law enforcement began to investigate, the Federal Bureau of Investigation labeled these acts as “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes.” On Xavier’s campus, students were concerned and shared just how anxious they were, especially given the significance of the month we were in. Students approached the Student Government Association regarding the university’s counseling and wellness services, and I personally know a few students who were too nervous to attend classes for the remainder of the week. While this brazen racially motivated act had an immediate effect on a number of students, I also saw the potential for a larger issue at hand.

In a society where racial tensions have reached boiling points in the past two years, acts of aggression like this further feed into racial discord and friction that can affect the future generation even more than the current generation. As many of us work to allow room for difficult discussions concerning race that strive to bring our communities together, hateful acts like this further pushes people away from such hard but necessary discussions and the work that needs to be done. As our HBCUs strive to develop the next socially responsible leaders, these acts are antithetical to the mission.

This is why the support of individuals, organizations, and the federal government is necessary to protect our HBCUs.

So, Madam Chairwoman, now that I have informed the Committee on what makes Xavier and other HBCUs assets and what these threats meant to students on our campus, I want to leave you with some recommendations:

1. The FBI needs to bring those who have perpetrated these terroristic calls, instant messages, and online posts to justice.
2. HBCUs need more funding for security.
3. If Congress reauthorizes programs which will seek to harden HBCU campuses and prepare them for these kinds of threats, then Congress should name HBCUs in the authorizing law and provide report language in the annual appropriations process—each year—to ensure the departments and agencies make sure funding goes where it is necessary.
4. Members of Congress should receive a classified briefing to understand the nature of these HBCU threats. This level of briefing is something which we in the HBCU community may not be able to have, but Members of Congress are routinely trusted with this level of intelligence. More must be done. And we rely on you to do it on our behalf.
5. The mental health impact of our student body should be a paramount concern. Our institutions have been approached by the executives from the American Psychological Association (APA) noting that the triple impact of COVID-19, the ongoing racial reckoning in America, and the bomb threats on HBCU campuses are having real and lasting impacts on our students.

6. Congress should finish the process started last week by the U.S. Senate. Thursday evening, March 3rd, the Senate passed S. Res. 534 “on hotline.” This was a simple resolution co-sponsored by a group of 45 bipartisan members of this body, and led by Senator Tim Scott and Senator Chris Coons, that condemns the HBCU bomb threats and names each affected institution. The House of Representatives may soon pass a very similar simple resolution.

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

Full Testimony

Introduction

Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, Ranking Member James Comer, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Emmanuel Ukot, and I serve as the President of the Student Government Association at Xavier University of Louisiana. Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and is the only institution in the country that is both Catholic and a historically black college and university (HBCU).

The purpose of Xavier is to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing students like me to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. By cultivating a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means – including research and community service – students are able to practice how to live out the mission of our university.

HBCU History and Statistics

Before I share how Xavier was impacted by the recent threats and is working to safeguard against any future threats, allow me to share some history about HBCUs.

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 accredited 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).²

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 2018:

- Nearly 300,000 students attended HBCUs³;
- More than 75 percent of HBCU students were African Americans; and

² The definition of an HBCU can be found in Section 322(2) of the HEA.

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *Digest of education statistics 2019* [Table 313.20]. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_313.20.asp

- Over 60 percent of undergraduate students at HBCUs received federal Pell Grants, and over 60 percent of these students received federal loans.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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);
- 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);

⁴ UNCF Public Policy and Government Affairs calculations using 2018 data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Data shows that out of 257,451 total undergraduate students at HBCUs, 159,101 students were receiving Pell Grants and 162,179 students were receiving federal loans.

⁵ UNCF Patterson calculations using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

⁶ 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

- 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.⁷

Despite being under-resourced institutions, HBCUs have a large economic impact that often goes unnoticed by most. In 2017, the 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.⁸

Regarding Xavier University of Louisiana specifically, my institution had the following economic impact on its regional economy according to the UNCF report:

- \$200,000,000 in annual economic impact;
- 1,715 jobs supported annually; and
- \$1.7 billion in lifetime earnings for one graduating class.

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 the UNCF shows the following:

⁷ 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>

⁸ 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>

- 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 North Carolina, HBCUs are 16 percent of the four-year institutions, but enroll 45 percent of all black undergraduates and award 43 percent of all black bachelor's degrees in the state.⁹

History of Xavier

Xavier University of Louisiana is the only historically Black and Catholic institution nationally recognized for its science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum, while remaining close to its liberal arts roots. Xavier's mission is to create 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.

As of Fall 2021, the University has 245 full-time faculty members who offer courses in over 50 majors on the undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and first-professional degree levels. Xavier's current enrollment is 3,604. Of these, 2,749 are undergraduates and 236 are graduate students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. In addition, there are 613 students enrolled in the College of Pharmacy, which offers the Master of Health Science in Physician Assistant Studies, the Master of Science in Pharmaceutical Sciences, and the Doctor of Pharmacy, and 236 students are enrolled in Master's and Doctoral programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. Xavier's student body is 77% African American, with approximately 39% from Louisiana, primarily from the New Orleans area. The balance comes from 41 other states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and several countries. Fifty percent of our students have an expected family contribution of below \$2,500. Thirty percent of our students are first-generation students. (first-generation students have lower retention and graduation rates). Xavier welcomes students who are spread out across the academic profile spectrum and has a proven track record of meeting students where they are and filling educational gaps to assist in their perseverance to degree and beyond.

Xavier and other HBCUs at Risk: The Need for Federal Support

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

On the morning of January 4th, 2022, at least eight HBCUs received bomb threats. Those institutions include Howard University, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Prairie View A&M University, North Carolina Central University, Florida Memorial University, Norfolk State University, Spelman College, and fellow New Orleans institution Xavier University at Louisiana. When these threats took place, it was disconcerting to all HBCUs that federal law enforcement—at the time—refused to acknowledge what we all felt: the racial motivation for these threats. As a matter of fact, after these eight threats, there was no coordinated briefing for the HBCU community. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) area offices were in touch with the affected institutions, but it seemed that all HBCUs, their students, and their way of life were impacted. The harm was, indeed, the terror. HBCUs increasingly appeal to a segment of students because the institutions allow those students, largely young African Americans, to be come of age and learn who they are and want to become in a place where they can be comfortable and secure. The rash of threats, taking place merely two days prior to the one-year anniversary of the January 6th Capitol Hill insurrection, threatened that valued sense of security.

On January 31st, 2022, at least seven HBCUs received bomb threats. Those institutions include Southern University and A&M College, Howard University, Bethune-Cookman University, Albany State University, Bowie State University, Alabama A&M University, and Delaware State University. Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, a Historically Black Graduate Institution in Los Angeles was the eighth institution that received a threat on that day.

On February 1st, 2022, the first day of Black History Month, at least eighteen HBCUs received bomb threats. Those institutions include Shorter College, Philanders Smith College, Arkansas Baptist College, the University of the District of Columbia, Howard University, Edward Waters University, Spelman College, Fort Valley State University, Kentucky State University, Xavier University of Louisiana, Coppin State University, Morgan State University, Jackson State University, Alcorn State University, Mississippi Valley State University, Rust College, Tougaloo College, and Harris-Stowe State University.

After this round of threats, to say our community was on edge would be an understatement. Local law enforcement was responsive, did full sweeps of the campuses, and no bombs were found. However, it is obvious that someone or some individuals were seeking to attack our way of life. They wanted to steal our students' sense of security. They wanted to disrupt our class schedule. They were terrorizing us, and we had no recourse. It is worth noting that since the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), 20% of college students say their mental health has worsened. Now, add to those challenges the now increasing threat that many institutions had bomb threats called in. Buildings were cleared. Students were sent home. Some virtual learning was reconvened for a day or so because students were afraid to return to their campus.

While individual institutions were in touch with local law enforcement and the FBI, our HBCU umbrella organization, UNCF, was in touch with the White House. This is when we first learned that the Administration was taking this matter seriously and that the President had been briefed. UNCF, in the strongest possible terms, suggested a true FBI briefing for the HBCU community. Prior, on January 24th, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona held what was billed as a briefing on HBCU threats. While historic that both cabinet leaders were meeting with HBCU presidents, the hour-long engagement was largely a discussion of successes the Administration has had for HBCUs. The community craved information on the ongoing threats and an end to the sense of terror that was growing. In response to our

UNCF-White House outreach, on February 2nd, the FBI briefed the HBCU community along with some in the Jewish and Christian church community who had all received threats.

We understood that the FBI would not release any information to us that would compromise their ongoing investigation. While we were being briefed by them, news outlets were reporting that tech-savvy juveniles were responsible for the HBCU bomb threats. This was never confirmed to us by the FBI. However, at the same time as the February 2nd FBI briefing, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) was under threats. Their alleged assailant was Matthew Christopher Harris, and he was arrested in Boulder, Colorado. He was shown as arrested, with the FBI showing a full sense of force for all to see. The arrest was covered by local and national media. The fact that those who are threatening HBCU campuses with phone calls and messages alleging bomb placements have not been identified and shown to come to justice gives the—hopefully unintended—appearance that one can threaten HBCUs and get away with it. If this continues, we are definitely concerned that the copy-cats will ensure these threats, and the terror and disruption they bring, continue.

On February 8th, 2022, one institution received a bomb threat: Spelman College.

On February 14th, 2022, two institutions received bomb threats: Howard University and Fisk University.

On February 16th, 2022, three institutions received bomb threats: Fayetteville State University, Claflin University, and Winston-Salem State University.

On February 23rd, 2022, one institution received a bomb threat: Hampton University.

On February 25th, 2022, at least three institutions received a bomb threat. Those institutions include Norfolk State University, Elizabeth City State University, and Dillard University.

At Xavier University of Louisiana, the threat received on February 1, 2022 was the second of two threats to campus. The first was received at the beginning of the calendar year on January 4, 2022. At that time, students had not yet returned to campus from the winter break but were informed by the university and were notified when law enforcement cleared the campus for reopening later that day. While this event did not garner as much attention, it contributed to the extreme feeling of being unsettled as threats around the nation continued to occur through February.

For many students at Xavier, our campus is a second homes and safe space where we discover ourselves and live with hope and a sense of belonging unavailable to us in other spaces outside of our campus. Our HBCUs are spaces where we are the majority, where we are valued, and where we are expected to excel. These attacks robbed us of that freedom and ease that HBCUs have historically provided to black students.

Furthermore, in a society where racial tensions have reached boiling points in the past two years, acts of aggression like this further feed into racial discord and friction that can affect the future generation even more than the current generation. As many of us work to allow room for difficult discussions concerning race that strive to bring our communities together, hateful acts like this

further push people away from such hard but necessary discussions and the work that needs to be done to heal our communities. As our HBCUs strive to develop the next socially responsible leaders, these acts are antithetical to the mission.

The impact is real and lasting. It reminds all of us that there is still much work to be done in this nation on racism.

Safeguarding Xavier and other HBCUs

In the aftermath of the threats, my institution is enhancing security measures with the limited resources available to do so. Assessments are ongoing of campus security infrastructure and notification tools.

Our greatest challenges to this work are the cost of implementation and limitations that we and many HBCUs face as we deal with aging infrastructure while remaining under-resourced for capital improvement projects. For Xavier, and our sibling HBCUs, the financial resources simply do not currently exist in our budgets to fully safeguard our campuses. Infrastructure investments in HBCUs to provide funding for state-of-the-art building entry systems, early alert systems, notification software, and additional security forces are needed now.

So, Madam Chairwoman, with this information on what makes Xavier an asset to this nation and why these threats must be fully addressed, I would like to share some specific and general recommendations to support Xavier and all HBCUs:

1. HBCUs need more funding for security. The Department of Justice has two programs which seek to harden campuses for these kinds of threats. The issue is that the programs funnel the money through the state governments. The states have not given Congress a list of which institutions received the funding. Furthermore, HBCUs have a long track record of being treated unfairly by their states. If you look at the lawsuit won by Maryland HBCUs and other issues where funding is obviously owed to institutions like Tennessee State University, you find that states tend to target resources to their “flagship” institutions. By doing so, states often underfund HBCUs. The states are not the best avenue to make sure that HBCUs receive necessary funding.
2. If Congress reauthorizes programs which will seek to harden HBCU campuses and prepare them for these kinds of threats, then Congress should name HBCUs in the authorizing law and provide report language in the annual appropriations process—each year—to ensure the departments and agencies make sure funding goes where it is necessary. This recommendation is imperative, because many who administer federal funds do not understand the unique nature of HBCUs and may conflate HBCUs with MSIs like Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). MSIs like HSIs are not the ones under threat. HBCUs are. As such, HBCUs need targeted assistance to respond to this moment of threat that no other group of higher education institutions are experiencing in these strong numbers. Also, those

who administer departments and agencies will only do what they are directed to do and linking any directives with funding is the best way to ensure that bureaucracy follows through. Otherwise, it is my experience that the funding will not get to HBCUs.

3. Members of Congress should receive a classified briefing to understand the nature of these HBCU threats. This level of briefing is something which we in the HBCU community may not be able to have, but Members of Congress are routinely trusted with this level of intelligence. The HBCU community has been disturbed with the fact that the senators and representatives interested in bringing these threats to a close have either not been briefed or it has taken until as late as last week for them to have been informed. We want to believe that federal law enforcement is taking these repeated and problematic threats seriously, but the flow of information is necessary. More must be done. The FBI needs to bring those who have perpetrated these terroristic calls, instant messages, and online posts to justice. They should be shown in custody as a deterrent to any other malicious individuals that these threats will not be tolerated. Again, note the recent threats that were made to UCLA mentioned earlier in my testimony. Their alleged assailant was caught, treated seriously, and the attention to the case deterred others.
4. HBCUs need more funding for security. The Department of Justice has two programs which seek to harden campuses for these kinds of threats. The issue is that the programs funnel the money through the state governments. The states have not given Congress a list of which institutions received the funding. Furthermore, HBCUs have a long track record of being treated unfairly by their states. If you look at the lawsuit won by Maryland HBCUs and other issues where funding is obviously owed to institutions like Tennessee State University, you find that states tend to target resources to their “flagship” institutions. By doing so, states often underfund HBCUs. The states are not the best avenue to make sure that HBCUs receive necessary funding.
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8. The mental health impact of our student body should be a paramount concern. Our institutions have been approached by the executives from the American Psychological Association (APA) noting that the triple impact of COVID-19, the ongoing racial reckoning in America, and the bomb threats on HBCU campuses are having real and lasting impacts on our students. We desire to partner with APA to support our students; however, resources are lacking. We will write your colleagues on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) and the Senate Committee on Appropriations with further recommendations.
9. Congress should finish the process started earlier this month by the U.S. Senate. Thursday evening, March 3rd, the Senate passed S. Res. 534 “on hotline.” This was a simple resolution co-sponsored by a group of 45 bipartisan members of this body, and led by Senator Tim Scott and Senator Chris Coons, that condemns the HBCU bomb threats and names each affected institution. The House of Representatives may soon pass a very similar simple resolution. That would mean that both houses of Congress would have condemned the HBCU bomb threats in a bipartisan and bicameral way, sending a signal to the nation that this type of terror will not be tolerated.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to share the importance of my university and HBCUs across the country. HBCUs have a history of contributing to society and developing civically engaged and responsible leaders. Racially charged acts like the bomb threats are not only an attack to our campus, but they are an attack on the ideals and values of HBCUs and their collective mission. It is an honor to present this testimony, and I thank the Committee for addressing this important issue.