



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Frederica Wilson (FL-24)
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment Hearing
"Homecoming: The Historical Roots and Continued Contributions of HBCUs"
Wednesday, October 6, 2021 | 12:00 p.m.

Today, we are meeting to explore the unique role that Historically Black Colleges and Universities play in expanding access to affordable, high-quality education.

As a graduate of Fisk University, I am proud to chair this first hearing to exclusively examine the state of these vital institutions since 2008. And as Chair of the Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee, I am committed to addressing the pressing needs of our nation's HBCUs and their students, including infrastructure modernization, improved research capabilities, financial assistance to reduce economic barriers and eliminate food and housing insecurity, and investments to account for decades – decades – of gross underfunding.

HBCUs have been at the very heart of addressing our nation's long-standing education and racial equity failures. For nearly 200 years, they have provided ladders of economic and social mobility and safe havens for generations of Black students.

In fact, HBCUs were established for the *specific* purpose of educating Black students because other institutions would not and refused to. The majority were founded in the wake of the emancipation proclamation to serve formerly enslaved Black Americans, as was my institution, Fisk University.

Since their inception, these institutions have survived Jim Crow-era segregation, differed maintenance, de jure discrimination, and decades – decades – of persistent underinvestment.

Today, HBCUs remain integral to promoting the academic, social, and economic success of the descendants of enslaved Americans and fostering a thriving community for underrepresented student populations, including Black students. Remarkably, while HBCUs account for only 3 percent of all colleges and universities, they have graduated 80 percent of Black judges, 70 percent of Black doctors, 50 percent of Black teachers, and 40 percent of Black Members of Congress.

Unfortunately, many states have chronically underfunded HBCUs compared to other institutions, leaving them to achieve *far* more with *far* less.

This inequitable treatment dates back to the 1800s but it continues today. HBCUs are still recovering from sweeping cuts to higher education funding during the 2008 recession, which disproportionately affected their campuses. The recent proliferation of state performance-based funding policies that disadvantage HBCUs is making resource disparities even worse.

Additionally, the endowments held by private HBCUs are less than one-third the size of those held by private non-HBCUs.

To fulfill our nation's promise of higher education for all people – all children, Congress must provide HBCUs with the resources and support they need to combat systemic underfunding and discrimination.

Since March 2020, Congress has secured more than \$6.5 billion in HBCU funding, including \$5 billion in COVID relief and \$1.6 billion to forgive capital financing loans. These historic investments provided emergency aid to help students access essentials, like food and housing, and allowed more than 20 HBCUs to erase students' debt. And just last month, our committee advanced its portion of the *Build Back Better Act*, which included over \$30 billion in higher education investments that will benefit HBCUs.

These investments are a critical step towards addressing decades of systemic underinvestment. However, let us not forget, we recognize that we still have a long way to go to correct historic inequities in HBCU funding.

Thanks to these pivotal institutions, we can all benefit from the contribution of such luminaries as Mary McLeod Bethune, my role model, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Katherine Johnson, Toni Morrison, Congressman John Lewis, who went to Fisk University with me, and Vice President Kamala Harris. We must preserve and protect HBCUs for the sake of the next generation of change-makers and for those yet unborn.

So, I look forward to working with my colleagues to ensure that HBCUs receive the support that they need so that we can ensure that happens.

Additionally, in the future, we will host hearings that showcase the contributions and accomplishments of Tribal Colleges and Universities and Minority-Serving Institutions, which also play an important role in the higher education landscape.

I want to thank our distinguished witnesses, again, for being with us today. I now yield to the distinguished Ranking Member, Dr. Murphy, for his opening statement.