

Written Testimony

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Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

The State of Higher Education

**“The Nations Value Proposition in Education at
Tuskegee University a Historical Black College and University (HBCU)”**

Wednesday, May 21, 2025

Introduction:

Good morning, Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I am Mark Brown, the 10th President and Chief Executive Officer of Tuskegee University. I testify before you on the State of Higher Education as a representative of the 101 legislatively established Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as a proud alumnus of Tuskegee University’s Class of 1986. I come before you as the first alumnus to lead Tuskegee University in its 143-year history.

I want to emphasize that between 1986-1990, I personally utilized most forms of federal assistance that we will discuss today. While I now serve as a College President, Retired Air Force Major General, and experienced executive, I began

my journey as an HBCU student and direct beneficiary of these vital financial aid services. I have two Tuskegee Student Ambassadors with me today. I would like to ask them both to stand.

- Mrs. Aryial O'Neal is from Los Angeles, California. Her major is Political Science, and she is now studying for the LSAT exam.
- Mr. Tyler Smith is from Atlanta, Ga. His major is Biology, and his aspiration is to attend medical school.

Thank you both.

The purpose of my testimony is to highlight the Nation's Value Proposition in Education at HBCUs, with Tuskegee University as my primary example. I will address what I believe are universal HBCU concerns regarding proposed risk-sharing approaches, the value of gainful employment measurements, and the return on investment when job placement-focused education combines with federal investments such as PELL Grants, Graduate PLUS and Parent PLUS loans, research grants, and land grants.

Historical Context and Current Landscape:

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established in the 19th century to provide higher education opportunities to Black Americans who were barred from attending existing intuitions of higher learning. Today, the 101 HBCUs represent

just 2.3 percent of degree-granting universities in the United States, yet their impact far exceeds their numbers:

- HBCUs confer 17 percent of all bachelor's degrees and 24 percent of all STEM-related bachelor's degrees earned by Black students.
- 40 percent of all Black engineers are HBCU graduates.
- 40 percent of all Black U.S. Congress Members are HBCU alumni.
- 50 percent of all Black lawyers graduated from HBCUs.
- 80 percent of all Black judges hold HBCU degrees.
- HBCUs supply more Black applicants to medical schools than non-HBCU institutions.

Tuskegee University was founded on July 1, 1881, by our first Principal, Dr.

Booker T. Washington. His educational philosophy centered on training the “Hand, Head, and Heart” – emphasizing practical education that integrated job training with classroom instructions. Students worked in their respective fields for part of the year and studied in classrooms during other periods. Many of our campus buildings were constructed by those early students, using bricks they made themselves-structures that are still in use today.

This modal continues at Tuskegee, aligned with what we call “Gainful Employment” measures, reinforced through required internships and industry-appropriate certifications for graduation.

HBCUs collectively serve approximately 219,327 students across 19 states.

Notably, 90 percent of all undergraduate HBCU students receive some form of financial aid in 2019-2020:

- 83 percent received grants.
- 65 percent took out student loans.
- 4 percent received work-study awards.
- 2 percent received federal veterans’ education benefits.
- 18 percent had parents who took out federal Direct PLUS Loans

Any reduction in federal funding, especially Title IV need-based programs, would therefore negatively impact 9 out of every 10 HBCU students.

Federal Student Loans:

The Federal Student Loan portfolio remains at \$1.6 trillion with 42 million recipients – the same figures from when I served as Chief Operating Officer of the Office of Federal Student Aid in the Department of Education. However, the number of borrowers increases by approximately 1 million per year, with accumulated interest accounting for a significant percentage of annual growth.

We cannot reform the student loan portfolio without addressing its origins. These programs trace back to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society Initiative, which aimed to provide greater access to higher education for students with financial need. The primary tool in this effort is the PELL Grant, supported by Federal Work Study. When these programs fail to close the gap on college costs, students turn to Federal Student Loans.

The loan portfolio has grown partly because PELL Grants and Federal Work Study haven't kept pace with rising college costs. The PELL Grant remained relatively flat from the 1980s through 2010s, only receiving significant increases in the last eight years.

Today, PELL Grants provide up to \$7,395 annually to more than seven million low- and moderate- income students. For context, a single parent with two children earning up to \$51,818 adjusted gross income (225 percent of the federal poverty guideline) can qualify for the maximum award.

However, this maximum amount covers only 31 percent of tuition, fees, room and meals at the average public four-year college, compared to 79 percent in 1975.

Cuts to the program would put college out of reach for many more low-income students, while increased would represent a true federal investment in education, reduce dependence on loans, and help address workforce skill deficits.

As you may be aware, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office stated in a report just last week that more than half of all Pell Grant recipients would be awarded less money to pay for college if the House of Representatives proposal in changing eligibility requirements were to succeed. According to their findings, this would impact more than half of Pell recipients negatively by receiving smaller grants. It is my hope that the Senate will reconsider this recommended policy change. Given the established benefits and need of the PELL Grant program.

This dynamic is evident at most HBCUs. At Tuskegee University, we recently celebrated our Spring 2025 Commencement, conferring degrees on nearly 800 graduates across undergraduate and graduate programs. In the current academic year alone, Tuskegee processed over \$22 million in federal loans:

- Over \$5 million in Graduate PLUS Loans
- More than \$10 million in Parent PLUS Loans
- Nearly \$5.3 million in subsidized loans

These federal loans, PELL grants, and institutional support made it possible for students in essential fields – Veterinary Medicine, Material Sciences, Computer Science, Social Work, and more – to afford not just tuition but housing, food and transportation. Eliminating Graduate PLUS Loans would severely limit access to graduate education, particularly for high-need, high-potential students.

This is not about dependency – it's about opportunity and investing in futures that will benefit society many times over.

For example, we graduated from 60 new Doctor of Veterinary Medicine this May. By commencement day, 100 percent had secured employment, with most beginning work within 48 hours of graduation. The majority utilized some form of federal aid, including loans.

National estimates project a shortage of as many as 24,000 companion animal veterinarians by 2030, even accounting for new graduates over the next decade. Tuskegee University, with the help of need-based federal aid will help address this deficit. Similar scenarios exist for our graduates in Aerospace, Chemical, Mechanical, and Electrical Engineering, Architecture and other fields where the nation faces critical shortages.

Gainful Employment.

Universities should be incentivized to emphasize fields of study resulting in positive employment outcomes upon graduation. Evidence-based programs with transparent historical outcomes should be aligned with federal assistance.

At Tuskegee, we now require an internship, relevant industry certification, and rigorous degree requirements for all students. This approach bridges the gap

between classroom learning and workplace demands, positioning our graduates for the social and economic mobility that college education should provide.

Tuskegee University is a national leader in social mobility – ranked #1 in Alabama. A recent UNCF report confirms that HBCUs like Tuskegee have an access rate twice the national average, with 88 percent of HBCUs achieving mobility rates in the 90th percentile nationwide. This means we are exceptionally successful at moving students from the bottom 40 percent of income distribution to the top 60 percent, creating genuine economic transformation. We open doors for first generation college students who often face economic challenges yet rise to meet these challenges with excellence.

Our 81 percent retention rate demonstrates our commitment to student success.

While we continue to improve our six-year graduation rate, what truly distinguishes our students in their post-graduation trajectory. Looking at recent graduates, including the Class of 2025:

- 44 percent secure full-time employment
- 29 percent pursue graduate school.
- 7 percent enter professional school.
- Others continue into military service, postgraduate work, or volunteer programs like the Peace Corps and Teach for America

Our graduates aren't just working, they're thriving economically. In fact, 74 percent of our alumni earn between \$50,000 and over \$100,000 annually. That's the real return on investment. For the 64 percent of our students receiving financial aid, with a median graduate debt of \$27,000 (below the national average of \$32,000), federal support isn't just helpful – it's vital.

This success isn't accidental. It results from hard work, job placement policies, institutional support, and access to key resources – especially Graduate PLUS Loans.

Risk Sharing Models:

The social and economic mobility outcomes I've described are achieved while accepting 30 percent of college applicants. Educating and training a broader segment of society, including first-generation college students, is central to the HBCU mission. This mission, which I believe serves as a national necessity, inherently involves risk. Some students may require more time to graduate, additional intervention and certainly financial assistance.

A risk-sharing model that fails to recognize the uneven distribution of risk among universities could reduce educational access for those who need it most—precisely those often served by HBCUs.

As noted earlier, Tuskegee accepts approximately 30 percent of applicants, compared to about 2 percent at predominately white institutions of similar prestige. Yet our retention and graduation outcomes remain consistently high. We do more with less for students who are too often overlooked by the broader higher education system.

Under the proposed College Cost Reduction Act (CCRA), institutions like Tuskegee could be held financially liable for student loan defaults. However, our students already face systematic barriers, and while our three-year loan default rate remains manageable those figures are likely skewed nationwide due to COVID-related policies and deferment options.

If CCRA policies pass without adequate safeguards, Tuskegee and other HBCUs could face:

- Severe financial strain
- Damage to hard-earned reputations
- Potential loss of eligibility for federal aid programs

This would devastate not just our institutions but the thousands of students who depend on us to transform their lives through education.

It is not in our national interest to penalize institutions by doing the challenging work of economic uplift, community development, and workforce readiness. Instead, we should strengthen programs that incentivize gainful employment.

Tuskegee Approach: Hand, Heart, and Mind:

HBCUs serve as powerful economic engines for their states and the nation. According to the 2024 UNCF HBCU Economic Impact Report, Tuskegee University generates \$237.1 million in total economic impact for the local and regional economies of Alabama. Every dollar spent by Tuskegee University and our students generates an additional 43 cents in economic activity on our region, creating a powerful multiplier effect that benefits businesses and communities throughout central Alabama. This impact is particularly significant along the 55-mile economic corridor stretching from Montgomery to Auburn, where Tuskegee serves as a vital connecting hub. Our institution supports over 2,064 jobs both on and off campus, and the report shows that an additional 1.5 jobs are created in the surrounding communities, demonstrating our role as a critical employment engine for the region. Our 2021 graduates alone are projected to earn \$2 billion in total lifetime earnings- far more than they would without degrees. At Tuskegee, we provide substantial economic benefits to Macon County and Alabama through our continued emphasis on educating the hand, heart and mind.

We operationalize this philosophy by prioritizing internships, certifications and experiences that make employment outcomes central to the educational journey. For example, every member of our 2024-2025 Freshman Class received IBM certification regardless of academic major, enhancing their employability across sectors.

We have also increased the number of tutors and counselors in our Financial Aid centers to reach our Strategic Plan goal of reducing average student loan debt by 50 percent over the next 3-5 years.

Finally, we leverage our 1890 Land Grant status to benefit both Alabama and the nation. Our College of Agriculture, Environment, and Nutrition Sciences (CAENS) is one of our most popular colleges. CAENS provides cutting edge solutions to 21st Century challenges in Alabama, training local farmers in solar energy use for year-round farming and USDA-approved techniques for bringing cattle to market. True to Tuskegee tradition, these students also produce the leafy green vegetables used in our campus cafeteria.

On the research front, Tuskegee partners with the University of Alabama Birmingham through a \$12 million NIH grant (\$3 million allocated to Tuskegee) under the Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) initiative. This program has recruited 12 promising biomedical

researchers (9 at UAB, 3 at TU) specializing in cancer, diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and neuroscience – fields directly impacting Alabama’s most vulnerable populations, particularly in the rural Black Belt. At Tuskegee, our FIRST Scientists focus on prostate, breast, ovarian, and uterine cancers, addressing the high morbidity rates in our region.

Interrupting this grant would not only disrupt crucial scientific progress but undermine transformative efforts to improve health outcomes and economic opportunity in Alabama. What our university does, and access to education generally, matters profoundly to the wellbeing of our state and nation.

Policy Recommendation:

Mr. Chairman, as the committee approaches difficult budget decisions, I urge you to use an evidenced based approach and, if so, view higher education – particularly the vital mission of HBCUs as an opportunity to meet our national economic needs and to continue to stimulate the economy. I specifically ask the committee to:

1. Continue reforming and modernizing the PELL Grant and Federal Work Study programs to reduce reliance on Federal Student Loans.

2. Incentivize the use of evidence-based Gainful Employment metrics rather than imposing Risk-Sharing models that do not recognize the challenges of educating underserved populations.
3. Incentivize industry partnerships with HBCUs to bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace demands.

Conclusion:

Mr. Chairman, in September 1895, our first President Booker T. Washington delivered what became known as the “Great Compromise Speech” at the Atlanta International Exposition. Addressing an audience concerned with rebuilding the South’s economy through international trade, he posed a profound question about the recently freed men and women who had not been educated.

President Washington noted that one-third of the South’s population was of African descent – today, that represents 1.6 million people of color in the Black Rural South. He argued that no nation can succeed while ignoring the talent of 33 percent of its population. In his words, nearly sixteen million hands would either ‘aid you in pulling the load upward or left uneducated that same sixteen million would pull the load downward.’ The world could have it one way or the other – either “one-third of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress.”

Today, 129 years after that speech, Washington's vision has proven prophetic.

Tuskegee has educated African Americans as he envisioned, with profound results:

- Tuskegee has the highest graduation rate of any school in Alabama.
- Tuskegee is the #1 producer of Black aerospace science engineers.
- Tuskegee ranks among the leading producers of Black engineering graduates in chemical, electrical and mechanical engineering.
- Tuskegee produces more Black general officers in the military than any other institution (including service academies)
- Tuskegee is still the largest producers of Black students with bachelor's degrees in Math, Science and Engineering in Alabama

In short, the world needed Tuskegee and other HBCUs in 1895, and it needs them today to continue serving as economic engines for their communities and the nation. In Alabama specifically, Tuskegee stands as a premier HBCU and ranks among the top economic contributors in the critical I-85 corridor connecting Montgomery, Tuskegee, and Auburn – a region vital to our state's continued development and prosperity.

Thank you, Chairman, Ranking Member, and Honorable Committee members, for your time and this hearing.

