

**Testimony Provided to the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
United States Senate**

Dr. C. Reynold Verret

President

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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 as provost also 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 Chairman John Hickenlooper and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is C. Reynold Verret, and I serve as the 6th President of Xavier University of Louisiana (Xavier). Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel of 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 to share how our institution is addressing issues of underrepresentation of blacks in medical and health sciences fields, how this nation can increase the numbers of black students achieving advanced and terminal degrees, share information on the workforce development and new programs we are launching, and address shortages of practitioners of color in existing and emerging health science and medical fields.

HBCU History and Statistics

Before I share how Xavier is impacting representation in Health and Science fields in the nation with development of innovative academic programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels and preparing students to pursue and persist to graduate and terminal degrees, let me share some general statistics about HBCUs and their performance.

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

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

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 HBCUs²;
- More than 75 percent of HBCU students were African Americans; and
- Over 60 percent of undergraduate students at HBCUs received federal Pell Grants, and over 60 percent of these students received federal loans.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.

² 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

³ 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.

⁴ UNCF Patterson calculations using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

⁵ 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

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);
- 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.⁶

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.⁷

⁶ 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>

⁷ 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>

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 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 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.⁸

History of Xavier

Xavier University of Louisiana is the only historically Black and Catholic institution in the nation, and is 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

⁸ 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

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. 50% of our students have an expected family contribution of below \$2,500. 30% of our students are first generation students. (1st 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 filing educational gaps to assist in their perseverance to degree and beyond.

How Xavier Overcomes Obstacles to Student Success

Xavier achieves this student success despite the many obstacles posed through a strong support system for students through: Intensive advising by faculty and staff that includes Pre-Health advisors, career advisors, and graduate school advisors; Workshops and presentations to assist students on their pathway; Academic Resource Centers -- provide tutoring and supplemental instruction; Early alert system that notifies key faculty and staff when students need intervention to put them back on track to success; Residential education program and co-curricular programs to develop the whole student and grapple with the socio-economic challenges many of our students face.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, during the past decade, Xavier has ranked first nationally in the number of African American students earning undergraduate degrees in Chemistry and the Physical Sciences overall, and in the top five in Biology. Many well-prepared, highly motivated students are attracted by Xavier's reputation in this regard. Conversely, academically disadvantaged students also are drawn to Xavier because of its track record in "leveling the playing field," especially in the first year of college. The New York Times Selective Guide to Colleges observes, "Xavier is a school where achievement has been the rule and beating the odds against success a routine occurrence."

According to the Flexner report data for the 13 historically Black medical schools that were closed and 4 historically Black medical schools that remained open after the 1910 Flexner report,⁹ an extrapolation based on data from the medical schools that remained

⁹ Abraham Flexner and Herman Gates Weiskotten. The Flexner Report on Medical Education in the United States and Canada (1910).

open indicated that 5 of the closed medical schools might have collectively provided training to more than 35,000 graduates by 2019. If these 5 closed schools had remained open, they could have produced a 29% increase in the number of graduating African American physicians in 2019 alone.¹⁰ While this may seem to many a question purely of “what if,” I posit it is an alarming look at how the U.S. could have had a more diverse mixture in the health professions, because the percentages of African-American U.S. doctors has remained unchanged largely throughout my adult life. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), only 5% of all U.S. doctors are Black or African American. A new UCLA study finds that the proportion of physicians who are Black in the U.S. has increased by only 4 percentage points over the past 120 years, and that

Xavier has a long-standing national reputation in producing black health professionals. The University has consistently been the number one undergraduate source of African Americans who persist to complete their MDs. Xavier is nationally ranked as one of the top institution’s whose undergraduates achieve PhDs in the life and social sciences. The College of Pharmacy has also consistently been among the nation’s leaders in awarding Doctor of Pharmacy degrees to African Americans.

Since 2002, graduates have gone on to receive 2,755 master’s degrees, 241 PhD degrees, and 1,529 First Professional degrees since matriculating at Xavier.

Xavier is committed to ensuring that entering first year students persist and complete their educational goals and recognizes the value of reaching out to students well before their college years to enhance skills and habits that will lead to academic success. For over thirty years, Xavier has coordinated summer programs for high school students through its Summer Science Academy (SSA). Approximately 500 students participate each summer in an array of STEM programs including MathStar, BioStar, ChemStar and analytical reasoning programs.

Xavier also has several programs that support minority student achievement for its undergraduates, including the LS-LAMP (Louis Stokes Louisiana Alliance for Minority Participation), BUILD (Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity) Program, MICHESS (Materials and Interfaces Center for High Energy Storage and Sensing) Program, the Ronald E. McNair Program, HBCU-UP (Historically Black Colleges and Universities Undergraduate Programs) programs, Upward Bound Math and Sciences and McNair programs.

¹⁰ Campbell KM, Corral I, Infante Linares JL, Tumin D. Projected Estimates of African American Medical Graduates of Closed Historically Black Medical Schools. Retrieved from <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2769573>

Xavier's goal is to provide students the highest level of learning possible in all areas of the liberal arts and sciences, to help them develop their own commitment to life-long learning, and to prepare them for opportunities to enter and succeed in emerging as well as time-honored careers that require a high level of talent, drive for excellence, and commitment to service.

Developing Graduate Programs to increase Representation of Blacks in Careers of Today and Tomorrow

At Xavier we continue to innovate in what programs we will invest in to better the success opportunities for our students. Our considerations when developing new programs, especially at the graduate and professional level include whether the program reflects a growing demand, if earning this degree will lead to positions that call upon personal judgment and to possibilities for continued personal growth and flexibility needed for rapidly changing markets, whether students who earn the degree will earn salaries that allow them to pay back their student loans and serve as economic generators for the communities in which they live, if the proposed degree make possible personal improvement while being of service to society and most especially to underserved communities of color.

One of our biggest considerations in development of programs is whether the degrees offered at Xavier help diversify a profession and increase representation. Our recently launched programs and planned programs target professions in which only 1-3.5% of practitioners identify as African Americans. This is critical to providing equitable healthcare outcomes. While Xavier started this innovative method of considering programs for development many years ago, the challenge of health care equity was highlighted by the recent disparities demonstrated by COVID outcomes in Black communities.

To provide an overall perspective, since 2016, we have started 23 programs: 6 certificate programs, 9 bachelor's degree programs, 6 minors, 4 master's programs, 1 dual degree program.

New undergraduate programs include Bioinformatics, Data Science, Medical Laboratory Science, Neuroscience, Robotics and Mechatronic Engineering, Statistics.

New graduate programs include Master of Health Sciences, Physician Assistant Studies; Master of Public Health, Health Equity; Master of Science, Speech-Language Pathology; Master of Science, Pharmaceutical Sciences. Three more in development include Master of Science, Health Informatics (start Fall 2022); Master of Science,

Genetic Counseling (start Fall 2024); Doctor of Physical Therapy is in its early planning stages.

Challenges to Our Work

Our greatest challenges to this work are the cost to develop the programs, space limitations that we and many HBCUs face as we deal with aging infrastructure and remain under sourced for capital improvement and expansion projects. The socio-economic challenges that face our students and efforts that we must make for them to succeed despite these challenges. This includes lack of funding for entrance exams, travel for interviews, need to go directly into career field to alleviate the debt of achieving undergraduate degrees, and the cost of the graduate programs.

So, Mr. Chairman, now that I have informed the Committee on what makes Xavier perform well at the production of health professionals, I want to leave you with some recommendations:

1. Double the current Pell Grant. Embracing the only national program that helps low-income students achieve higher education would help ease the avenue to graduate and health professions studies. One of the biggest impediments of Black and low-income students is finances. Students with aptitude and no resources all too often stop out of college, and that is a national tragedy. Doubling Pell, immediately, can immediately increase the odds of students to stay enrolled despite their circumstances.
2. To that end, every effort to provide subsidies to the first two years of education at an HBCU should be revived. Still in 2022, above 50% of HBCU students are first generation learners. Allowing financial impediments to be diminished will allow those learners to choose the institution which has a proven track record of producing minority health professionals. These financial impediments prevent much of our talent pool from ever pursuing a graduate degree.
3. HBCUs' institutional funding is so often in jeopardy. The institutions are more reliant on tuition, room, and board. An additional \$5 billion to expand the Title III institutional aid grants to HBCUs would go a long way to strengthen their academic, administrative and fiscal capabilities, such as creating or expanding educational programs in high-demand fields like the health professions, STEM, computer sciences, nursing and allied health. We are limited and delayed by financial restrictions as we attempt to launch new and innovative programs. Limited by space restrictions, infrastructure restrictions, seed funding to hire talented faculty and staff.
4. There are only a few historically Black institutions which produce a great percentage of the diversity in health and research. Those institutions should receive more robust resources for being excellent at what they do. I know there

are programs like the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) "Centers of Excellence" and National Institutes of Health's (NIH) "Research Endowment" programs, but if you look at persistent health disparities and the national inability to grow the number and percentage of African American health professionals, more robust funding is needed. If you are interested, we can share proposed funding numbers with you, such as an additional \$2 billion directed towards building a pipeline of skilled health care workers with graduate degrees.

5. I also mentioned that part of Xavier's success has been various programs to prepare our students for the rigors of a health professions education. Those programs have never been fully funded, including the "Health Careers Opportunities Program" (HCOP). HCOP and similar programs, and what Xavier has learned from administering them, has allowed our institution to excel and do as much as possible to increase national diversity across the health sector.
6. Too few Black institutions have capacity and resources to function as major research institutions, often described as R01 status. We at Xavier and many other black institutions are creating huge results in the production of black scientists and contributing to research at the leading without the federal investments needed to attain this status that allows more laboratory time for our faculty who are stressed with heavy teaching loads and their institutions fiscal limitations to release them for research. Investing in developing a few key HBCUs, starting with Xavier, will allow us to continue and expand our work and advance development of talent and ability in response to national need. This investment will multiply the number of black students who go on to serve the physical and life sciences (STEM), the health sciences, social sciences, and research and innovation needs of the nation. Xavier has been historically proven by its success in this work. We urge you to make investments in us and similar institutions now to build capacity of our institutions to achieve R01 status.
7. While historically Black colleges have always done "more with less," the year 2022 should be the year that changes. In President Biden's joint families and infrastructure plans, HBCUs, tribal colleges, and minority serving institutions (MSIs) were slated to receive over \$90 billion in investments in research related infrastructure. This is essential. An influx of funding is a recognition that HBCUs have systematically been underfunded; and despite that, HBCUs have excelled beyond the expectation. However, if the playing field is leveled, with a backlog of deferred maintenance transformed into the laboratories necessary to attract and educate the next generation of health professionals, our production level can increase.
8. Forgive balance of HBCU Capital Finance Program debt for remaining HBCUs: The long-term impact of the federal government providing permanent relief the HBCU Capital Finance institutions in December 2020 will be felt for generations. Xavier knows this impact having survived the impact Hurricane

Katrina. We continue our recovery from the recent Hurricane Ida. However, the provisions of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 state that only obligated funds borrowed from the Department of Education's program were eligible for relief. When Xavier, undertaking an opportunity to finally tackle a backlog of deferred maintenance, borrowed \$100,000,000 from the HBCU Capital Finance Program, the subsequent permanent relief proved to have little to no institutional impact. As an issue of fairness for similarly situated institutions, the remaining (and existing) HBCU Capital Finance Program loans should also undergo permanent relief. We at Xavier understand that this relief should not be routine; however, there are numerous measures in the 117th Congress which include this permanent relief, including the Institutional Grants for New Infrastructure, Technology, and Education for (IGNITE) HBCU Excellence Act.

9. Last, but not least, we as a community of institutions are still processing the cowardly acts of terror which have disrupted so many HBCUs. I expect our representation at UNCF will put forth funding and policy recommendations to the appropriate appropriations subcommittees in the coming weeks. I hope the members of this Committee will support those recommendations.

Mr. Chairman, thank you. I look forward to answering the questions of the members of the Committee.