



Capitol Recap

A comprehensive review of the day's events in the Pennsylvania Capitol

AROUND THE ROTUNDA

PLS coverage of Capitol events including press conferences, bill signings, & media availabilities



ADVOCATES CALL FOR RENEWED INVESTMENT, MISSION FOR CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY

By Caleb Sisak, PLS Intern

The Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus (PLBC) hosted an informational meeting with various stakeholders, including Heeding Cheyney's Call, to highlight the funding and quality-of-learning issues plaguing Cheyney University. The participants called for immediate action by the state to fulfill its financial obligations to support the vital mission of the institution.

Rep. Vanessa Brown, chairwoman of the PLBC, discussed the heritage of Cheyney University being one of only two historically black colleges and universities in the commonwealth. While all institutions of higher learning are facing financial challenges, she emphasized, these issues are greatly magnified by the unique mandate and state funding formula applied to Cheyney University. "The overarching issue of state funding and, more specifically, the issue of financial parity as it relates to Cheyney University is what has prompted me to convene this meeting today," Rep. Brown said.

[Michael Coard](#), Co-Counsel for Heeding Cheyney's Call, asserted that the organization is exploring all options to attain "parity through equity" in order to place Cheyney University on a level playing field with the 13 other, predominantly white, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) institutions. Beyond its rich history as the first higher education institution for people of African descent in America, Coard pointed to the present offerings of the university including undergraduate, graduate, and specific leadership training programs. He stated, "Cheyney University—an all-time great institution—currently has an all-time low student enrollment and an all-time high budget deficit." Coard attributed the current deficiencies at Cheyney University to lacking implementation of new, attractive programs, in addition to the state's "inequitable" funding formula applied to PASSHE schools.

Coard noted the disproportionately negative effect that the commonwealth's funding formula has had on Cheyney University compared to other PASSHE schools. He posited, "The legal term for this is 'unconstitutional racial discrimination' resulting from, at worst, malicious intent and, at relative best, adverse impact." Coard explained that the current funding formula penalizes schools based on performance measures, thus negating the possibility of improvements from further investments. He said that a 1999 agreement with the federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR) requires the state to direct adequate funding and resources to Cheyney University; in spite of this, since 2001 the funding from performance standards have only become more disparate.

"There is an urgent need to revise the inequitable 'funding formula' to take into account Cheyney University's historic mission, its unique contributions to Pennsylvania, and its immediate exceptionally positive potential," Coard submitted. "Equity demands that such a revision include not only what is currently due, but also retroactive compensation as well."

[Joe Sestak](#), former faculty member at Cheyney University, reflected on the 17 visits he made to the school during his tenure as a United States Congressman. "Cheyney University is probably needed more today in a different type of mission than it was in the past," he said. "They help a large demographic, those of color, to get onto the ladder of success when there continued from previous page 6 continued on next page are so few ladders offered to them." Commenting on the changing demographics in America, Sestak called for a renewed investment in the education of the most disenfranchised minority populations coming out of urban centers. He implored, "Youth are the most precious national asset, and never before have we needed more of them."

[Pace McConkie](#), Director of the Robert M. Bell Center for Civil Rights in Education at Morgan State University, emphasized the need to address continuing iniquities in Pennsylvania. "What we need is a Cheyney University that is comparable to and competitive with all of the other institutions in the Commonwealth," McConkie said. "We need a Cheyney University that operates within a system of higher education that is free from policies and practices that would foster discrimination or perpetuate segregation."

McConkie highlighted the continuing struggle to meet the legal standards established by court cases requiring an educational environment of equality. He stated that historically black institutions must be "viable" options for students to receive an education that is competitive and comparable with those offered by predominantly white schools. McConkie added, "This is contemporary stuff, it isn't just history."

[Rep. James Roebuck](#), Minority Chairman of the House Education Committee, expressed his support for opening a meaningful dialogue into the challenges facing Cheyney University. "I do see Cheyney as an institution that deserves greater support from the state," he shared. "I think that the institution also needs to recapture that vision that allowed it to be a preeminent institution for training educators in the

commonwealth, a major institution offering opportunity to numerous young people to get a higher education.” Rep. Roebuck said that this mandate has not changed, but “becomes something of greater necessity as we move forward.”

[Dr. Earl Richardson](#), Advisor to Heeding Cheyney’s Call, said equality in education has been persistently pursued via legislative and legal mechanisms. “Our concern should be how we now accommodate the growth of the future by developing Cheyney to its fullest potential,” he said. In particular, Richardson described the lack of investment in academic infrastructure, program innovation, and campus support services as contributing to the challenges currently facing Cheyney University. “If you don’t have the capacity to compete with the majority institutions, then you’re not going to attract some of the best students,” Richardson argued. “Serving white students and black students is not mutually exclusive.”

[E. Sonny Harris](#), Professor at Cheyney University, reflected on the present state of the university. “Cheyney is in very bad shape, it’s barely surviving,” he stated. Harris echoed previous sentiments on state of dysfunction and disrepair. He posited, “No matter how much money is given to Cheyney, you have to have competent leadership at Cheyney University.” He argued that the successes of other schools are derived as much from competent, visionary leadership as financial resources. Any opportunity for future improvements will require strong leadership, Harris implored.

[Junious Stanton](#), President of the Cheyney University National Alumni Association Executive Board, discussed the culture of engagement amongst alumnus concerned about the school’s future. He shared, “Today we ask for your assistance to keep Cheyney University alive, vibrant and a vital cog in the Pennsylvania and national educational infrastructure.” He noted the state’s history of consistently underfunding Cheyney University compared to other PASSHE institutions, which he argued has made it difficult to provide a competitive, valuable education. “At a time when post secondary education is a must and the cost of getting a quality education is rising annually, we cannot afford to acquiesce to ‘fewer students served,’” Stanton said. “The undeniable fact is this continuing funding shortfall puts Cheyney in an untenable position.”

[Joan Flynn](#), Chair of the Education Committee for the Pennsylvania National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), emphasized the unique opportunities provided to students by historically black colleges and universities. She stated, “For many students, Cheyney is the perfect emotional and psychological fit.” Reflecting on the challenges mentioned by others, she charged the state with failing to dedicate sufficient investment in securing the well-being of Cheyney University. “The privilege of state supported higher education is a right that Pennsylvania has chosen to provide for its citizens,” Flynn observed. “However, the conditions under which Cheyney students are required to receive their education deprive them of their personal and present right to the equal protection of the laws.” Flynn said, “The result of the disparities faced by Cheyney University students is that they are

handicapped in their pursuit of effective instruction. The conditions at Cheyney University impair and inhibit the ability of students to study, and, in general, to learn their professions.”

Richardson commented on the need to have a unified voice in expressing the challenges facing Cheyney University. “If we do not proceed in unity, then we set ourselves up for failure,” he said. “This is an insidious situation that our black colleges have been put into, they’ve been put into a situation in which we have created great internal turmoil and chaos because of what has happened to us externally.” Richardson concluded that the direct cause of the present predicament stems from the state’s failure to provide adequate support saying, “You can’t manage what you don’t have.”

Rep. Brown thanked the various speakers for their insights on the challenges facing Cheyney University, and she acknowledged the need to bring the conversation to the attention of state leaders.