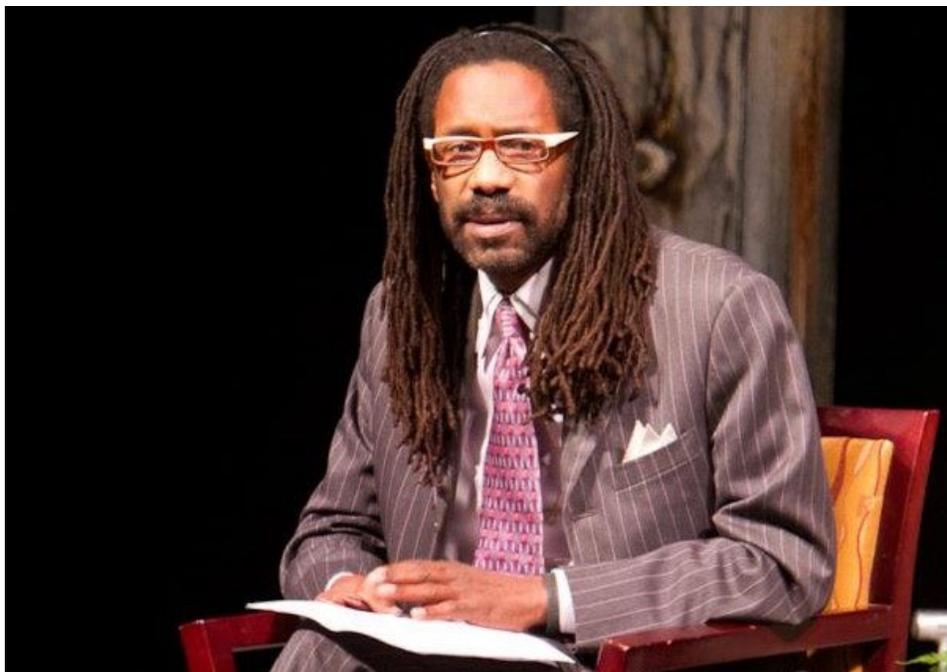


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# Why Cheyney deserves to be saved: alumni, faculty and students make their case



Michael Coard, a 1982 Cheyney alumnus, holds himself up as an example of what Cheyney University's mission is and why it needs to continue to exist. (Michael Coard's Facebook )



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When it comes to explaining Cheyney's mission, its purpose, it's reason for existing, Michael Coard holds himself up as an example.

He was a poor black kid growing up in a financially depressed section of North Philadelphia, in a neighborhood was filled with people who never made much of their lives. It wasn't until he went to Cheyney University that he saw black women as mathematics professors and a black man, like his father, serve as a school president.

At Cheyney, Coard said he didn't worry about a white professor giving him a lower grade than he deserved because of the color of his skin. His race proved no obstacle in getting elected to student government, or to being appointed as the council of trustees' student representative.

"That wouldn't have happened at Shippensburg and Millersville and West Chester or IUP," said Coard, now a criminal defense lawyer in Philadelphia who serves as the spokesman for

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**CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY**

**Heeding Cheyney's Call**, an activist group of university supporters. "I'm not saying white students are racist but white students are not inclined to vote for a black student to lead student government. **But that could happen at Cheyney.**"



## Task force formed to develop new model for Cheyney University

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Cheyney tailored his academic program, enabling him to graduate with a bachelor's in education and one in political science by taking just one extra semester of classes. Upon graduation in 1982, he was awarded a full scholarship to Ohio State University's School of Law.

"Once I realized academically what I could do, now I got this confidence. I had this what I call a Muhammed Ali-type of arrogance that I'm the greatest," he said. "I got two damn degrees not just one. Now when I go to Ohio State, I'm like yeah, bring it on. I was not only able to compete with these bright white students from these major universities but in many cases, excel. So for me, schools like Cheyney and other HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities] provide that foundation that a white school can't."

It's intangibles like these that Cheyney students and faculty cite when they **make the case for keeping this university around and making it more viable.**

"Cheyney changes lives," said faculty member B.J. Mullaney. She has seen it time and again as students that have passed through the school come back later to thank her for helping to transform their lives.

"Cheyney is a place where you can see that you make a difference," said Mullaney, an information systems librarian who is the campus faculty union president. "I've been other places in my career but here more so, you can see individuals who take chances and grow."

Nearly in tears, Mullaney talks about her fears that Cheyney's mission of serving a broad pool of low-income minority students, many of them first-generation students, is under attack.



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The university, part of the State System of Higher Education, is beset by financial woes, a shrinking student population, an accreditation on probation, and other problems **at a time when the system is looking to reorganize to make the whole more**

## **financially viable.**

She's worried they won't look beyond Cheyney's bottom line to what makes it unique and valuable.



### **Can historic Cheyney University be saved?**

"I think it's good for all segments of society to have a place that acknowledges that they are a valued person and citizen," she said. Cheyney serves that purpose particularly for minority students who need a nurturing environment to succeed academically.

Caitlin Schmall, one of the few white students enrolled at Cheyney, came there from predominately white Northampton Area High School. The senior fashion merchandising and management major chose it because it was one of the few fashion programs she could get into, given her lack of experience. She didn't even think about it being a historically black university at first.

"After being here for four years, I'm glad I came because I got to learn more things that I didn't learn in school," she said. "I got a more eye-opening experience."

Because of the school's small size, students and faculty form strong bonds that make it easy to pass up opportunities to transfer to other schools with more programs or better facilities.

Staying, they say, makes them stronger and more resilient.

Senior Shaneeka Briggs, 22 of Yonkers, N.Y., speaks of the joke around campus that if you can make it at Cheyney, you can make it anywhere. Psychology associate professor Christopher Barnes agrees.

"It represents the fact that education for minorities and African Americans has always been a struggle to attain and the fact they are here and struggling through it kind of makes them appreciate it more," he said. "It makes them much more confident they can succeed anywhere else."

Barnes, who taught at Lock Haven University for a year before joining Cheyney's faculty 11 years ago, said his experience in working at Cheyney will likely be the highlight of his career.

With all the negative publicity the school gets and the concern about its survival, he said leaving for a more financially stable institution may be appealing, but he sees how hard faculty are working to keep it going.

"My heart would sink if two years later, five years later or even 10 years later, I look around and see Cheyney University is viable. It's been turned around. Cheyney University means so much to me that I would rather be here when it's thriving," he said.

So he said leaving for him isn't an option "because I would feel I'm turning my back on the institution especially when it needs me the most."

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