

UNCF, HBCUs Laud Passage of Omnibus Appropriations Bill

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

In late March, congressional leaders released the 2018 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, which combines 12 different spending bills into one measure affecting the rest of fiscal year 2018. This bill is particularly important HBCUs, which depend on many of the measures included to maintain fiscal health. “This measure shows what can happen when the Congress and president listen to our concerns. And they did!” says Dr. Michael Lomax, president and CEO of UNCF, in a prepared statement.

financial pressures make these students at higher risk for not completing a degree.

In addition to the \$35 million increase in Title III funding, the Department of Education is increasing its funding to HBCUs by \$45 million. “Congress is recognizing the importance of HBCUs,” Murray says.

Another important program receiving attention is the HBCU Capital Finance Program. HBCUs have “historically had a hard time getting the capital to build,” says Murray. Those that need to build a new building, refinance a building, or undertake other such projects can find themselves in a bind.

Adams, who taught art history at Bennett for 40 years, credits Budd with his help in co-writing the language for the Omnibus Appropriations Bill that made this possible. Murray explains that Bennett College reached out to UNCF for help on this issue, and UNCF President Lomax arranged meetings with Adams and Budd to explore how Congress could help colleges like Bennett. “UNCF could grease the wheels,” says Murray, noting that the measure was approved quickly because Congress wanted to impact colleges in the current fiscal year.

Murray praises the bipartisan support that the Omnibus Appropriations Bill received, seeing that as complementary to the way UNCF approaches its work. “We view our issues to be bipartisan; we want to be statesmanlike about our advocacy,” he says. He further explains “bipartisanship elevates your administration; it takes you a step above and puts you in a whole different league.” He believes UNCF has been helpful in “sensitize[ing] the White House and the Department [of Education] to the need to have an impact,” and that the passage of this bill as a demonstration that “the administration is willing to give a nod to investments” in the success of HBCUs.

Of course, UNCF is not resting on its successes for the 2018 fiscal year. Murray notes that priorities for fiscal year 2019 include sustaining the progress made thus far and making more gains as Congress moves forward.

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Lodriguez Murry is the VP of Public Policy and Government Affairs for UNCF. He explains that the monies directed at HBCUs help to target populations most at risk for not attending or not completing college.

For example, the bill included \$35 million in increases to Title III funding, which can be used by institutions as they see fit—for endowments, building projects, instructors, or other projects. This is critically important given the populations that HBCUs serve. Murray explains that HBCUs typically serve first-generation college students from families of lower socioeconomic status. In fact, many HBCUs have student bodies that are 75 percent Pell eligible, compared with an average Pell eligibility of 39 percent at predominantly white institutions.

“They get an education in an environment that is supportive,” Murray says of these students. This is important because the dual challenges of first-generation student status and

Murray explains that “the 2008 [economic] downturn hit HBCUs harder than other institutions because they operate closer to the margin,” without the security of a large endowment or plentiful alumni contributions that other institutions may rely on to smooth an economic hiccup. Additionally, in 2010, changes in the Parent PLUS loans caused the enrollment at HBCUs to decline nationwide.

This is why the \$60 million investment over six years in building projects on HBCU campuses is so critical. The Capital Finance Program provides financing for HBCUs for building projects at a lower rate; the additional funding allows some institutions to defer repayment of loans, allowing them to reallocate funds to enrollment or other projects

All of this came together at Bennett College through the efforts of freshman Congressman Ted Budd (R) and Congresswoman Alma Adams (D).