

## **Presentation to the Senate Study Committee on Excellence, Innovation, and Technology at HBCUs**

### Committee Members

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Senator Tonya Anderson  
Senator Valencia Seay  
Senator Freddie Powell Sims  
Senator Jason Anavitarte

Good afternoon members of the study committee, those who presented today, and everyone either attending in person or viewing this hearing online.

Thank you for offering me and my staff an opportunity to share some thoughts about an issue important to our organization overall, but of equal importance to me personally.

I also want to thank Clark Atlanta University and President French for hosting this hearing on its beautiful campus.

My name is Nathaniel Smith and I have the honor of serving as the Founder and Chief Equity Officer of the Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), a regional multi-issue nonprofit organization, headquartered in Atlanta, whose mission is to advance racial equity and shared prosperity for all in the American South.

At PSE, we work to disrupt the systemic harm Black people and other historically disinvested communities of color endure due to unjust policies, practices and economies designed to dictate who wins and who loses.

We believe America needs a values revolution where justice, freedom, democracy, and equity are cornerstones for all people to realize their dreams in this state and nation.

As a fourth generation Atlantan, and son of civil rights activists, who served in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I come to this conversation as a proud Georgian, bearing a legacy of social justice.

I am also a proud graduate of an HBCU. As my father before me, I am a graduate of Morehouse College. This institution was instrumental in shaping my identity, politics, consciousness, and filling me with great purpose. I am indebted to Morehouse for its academic rigor, cultural awakening, bonds of brotherhood, and instilling in me the power of audacity.

My experience is not unique. During the hearings I am sure many shared how transformative HBCUs have been in offering students with minimal resources a quality education and positioning graduates to positively contribute to society. That is the HBCU narrative. We marvel at its success, its resiliency, its perseverance. But our focus should not be on HBCUs surviving. It should be on HBCUs thriving.

Today, let us conclude these hearings by allowing ourselves the space to imagine their potential economic impact if provided the necessary policy and fiscal investments for long-term resilience.

During the first committee hearing, Mr. Lodriguez Murray of the United Negro College Fund offered data on the economic impact of HBCUs nationally and in Georgia. According to their analysis, the total economic impact of Georgia's 9 HBCUs to the state is \$1.3B.

An amazing statistic to say the least, but way short of its potential impact.

I am offering a different frame to the discussion. Many times, we talk of impact with regards to people, namely how HBCUs contribute to the social mobility of its graduates. That is good, I am a beneficiary of its success, but we need to expand our gaze and broaden our imagination. We need to ask ourselves how HBCUs can be catalysts for shared prosperity and competitiveness in the communities and states they support and serve?

Let me offer some context.

According to a report by McKinsey and Company titled, How HBCUs can accelerate Black economic mobility,

- 81 percent of HBCUs are in US counties where the median wage is below the national average.
- Black Americans in the workforce earn a median annual wage approximately 30 percent, or \$10,000 lower than white workers.
- There is an estimated \$1.6 trillion gap in aggregate revenue between Black-owned and non-Black-owned businesses across the US economy.

With proper investments and partnerships, HBCUs can serve as anchors to economic development while also developing pathways for entrepreneurship and equitable worker compensation.

If this data is not compelling, then we can all step outside this campus and walk towards Joseph Lowery Boulevard towards Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and then back down Northside Drive to Fair Street.

This exercise can be done around any of the other HBCUs across the state. We have an opportunity to transform these HBCU communities by realizing innovative strategies like **HBCU economic prosperity planning districts**, similar to other planning districts, yet centered around HBCUs. In these prosperity districts, city, county, state, and federal governments can strategically leverage their resources to grow the requisite physical and civic infrastructure to modernize our campuses and surrounding communities.

Within the district, investments can be made in the following ways:

- **Housing** – Develop attainable mixed-use housing on HBCU owned property. This would diversify institutional revenue, provide off campus housing for students, provide affordable housing for families, and create retail space for local businesses.
- **Digital Infrastructure** – Districts can receive upgrades in broadband fiber optics to strengthen WIFI capability thereby increasing access to internet services.
- **Small Business Development** – Invest in small business development in commercial corridors where HBCUs serve as local incubators to provide entrepreneurs with the technical assistance, knowledge, and resources to start a local business.

- **Environmental Upgrades** – Improve the local environment by protecting or adding to the tree canopy, preserving greenspace, protecting waterways, building dedicated bike lanes, constructing walking paths, and encouraging urban farming.
- **Campus Property Upgrades** – Support public/private partnerships to improve campus facilities where buildings are weatherized, resilient, and use various forms of energy for power. As well, investments can be made to construct resilience hubs, as we are trying to do at the Atlanta University Center, so the community can have access to vital resources, especially during natural disasters.
- **Workforce Development Centers** – In each district, HBCUs can partner with existing or create new workforce development centers to provide local residents certification training to enter emerging economies where Black workers are underrepresented.

These are but a few of the possibilities an HBCU economic prosperity planning district can offer.

This is an audacious idea, but it is time for us to entertain innovative approaches to support our most historic and valuable institutions and the talent they cultivate. We can no longer accept what is but need to seriously consider what can be.

Again, I want to thank the Senate Study Committee for allowing me a chance to share some thoughts about HBCUs and ways Georgia can maximize their potential to serve as catalysts for economic and community development. Georgia's success is tied to HBCUs. Now let us put that reality into action.

Thank you.

I am glad to take questions if there are any.