

# Washington's HBCU is trying to achieve his vision



**Your Turn**  
Mark A. Brown  
Guest columnist

*In a letter to Tuskegee University founding principal Booker T. Washington, Dr. Mark A. Brown, the first alumnus in the university's history to be named president, writes of modern challenges for an HBCU university president.*

Dear Principal Washington,

It's a new school year at your beloved Tuskegee Normal School, Institute and now University. As the first alumnus to sit in your seat since the school opened in 1881, I'm thinking of you and wondering whether we are living up to the high standards that you established.

I am particularly focused on what you wrote in 1896 in "The Awakening of the Negro." You argued that education should both enrich the mind and create economic opportunity for Black students. Nearly 130 years later, and 143 years from the establishment of the Tuskegee Normal School, it's clear that we're pressing closer and closer toward your economic vision. But we certainly have more to do.

## Your call for economic equity is alive and well

Disparities in educational attainment and outcomes are numerous and wide-ranging. Black students are more likely to live in poverty and attend high-poverty schools. Not only are they less likely to enroll in college at all, but those who do are far less likely to graduate than white students.

Those who do receive a degree are liable to hold twice the average student loan debt of their white peers. A year after leaving college, Black graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed as all college graduates.

Looking at the whole picture, it's clear there's no single barrier preventing Black students from realizing their full potential – it's an entire ecosystem of inequity. And these disparities are af-

fecting more than just the students themselves. Recent research suggests that educational and employment inequities have cost the American economy trillions of dollars in lost output over the past 30 years, impacting all of us.

Dismantling these disparities requires urgent action at every level of the educational system and beyond. Your call for economic equity is alive and well at Tuskegee University.

We welcomed almost 1,000 freshmen this year and will likely eclipse 3,000 in total enrollment. I've read that you started with 30 students in a local church basement and exchanged a promise to work in Alabama for tuition.

Tuition remains a challenge. While more than 3,000 students are academically able to attend Tuskegee, 577 were not financially cleared when they arrived on campus this fall. These students struggle to have the funds to go to school even after financial aid and some limited institutional aid.

## Challenges of student debt go far beyond HBCUs

I want to reject the student loan debt option, which will shackle these students for many years to come. Today, the crushing and unfair level of student debt leaves Black students playing catch-up from the first day of their careers.

While rising tuition costs are a problem for all students, it's especially pronounced for Black students. On average, white families hold 10 times the wealth of Black families, meaning Black students often enter college with significantly fewer resources at their disposal. This forces families to turn toward parent PLUS loans, which can saddle students and their parents with significant debt loads that they have no means to repay.

Parent PLUS loans were never meant to turn into the economic pitfalls they are today. Originally intended for middle-class families that wanted to maintain their liquidity while paying tuition, the program reduced credit standards in the early 1990s so that anyone without a significant negative credit event (such

as bankruptcy) could borrow money.

This change was made with a noble goal in mind – increasing access to higher education. But with income no longer a factor in borrowing, families racked up substantial debts that could hobble their financial lives for years to come.

Examining the numbers at historically Black colleges and universities offers a glimpse into what families are dealing with. More than 80% of students at HBCUs receive some form of Title IV funding. Of these students, 65% receive federal student loans.

The challenges of student debt go far beyond HBCUs, affecting Americans throughout the country. As the former chief operating officer of the U.S. Department of Education's office of Federal Student Aid, I saw firsthand the fact that our nation faces a \$1.7 trillion student loan portfolio.

Among borrowers who attended private, for-profit colleges, 14.7% defaulted within three years of beginning repayment.

The economic impacts include a decrease in homeownership. Those with student loan debts are 36% less likely to own a home.

Principal Washington, I know that this directly opposed your desire that education provide social and economic mobility, especially for those who begin their educational journey in poverty.

The cost of this debt far exceeds the dollar value attached to it. Crushing student loan obligations deprive Black students of the freedom to make career choices and pursue opportunities that best utilize their talents. It weighs them down at the exact moment they're poised to take flight.

As the first alumnus to lead the university you envisioned, we have taken immediate action through Save Our Students (SOS). This need for ongoing support is similar to what you faced in many ways, but on a larger scale. We will continue to build relationships and find creative ways to ensure that as many of those 577 students are able to stay in class, and that the seniors who have worked so hard are one step closer to walking across the commencement stage. Perhaps their success from their



**Booker T. Washington, born into slavery in 1856 in Franklin County, Va., would become the founding principal of the Tuskegee Normal School in Alabama in 1881. PROVIDED BY TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY**

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Tuskegee training will allow them to support other students in need down the road.

Finally, Mr. Washington, there is some very good news from your school. In spite of the challenges, the school you had the students build 143 years ago is now ranked No. 1 on social and economic mobility. Said differently, the education and training we provide is still a positive return on investment for those students who persist to graduation.

Thank you, Mr. Washington, for your vision!

*Mark A. Brown is the 10th president and CEO of Tuskegee University. He is the former president and CEO of the Student Freedom Initiative based in Washington, D.C. The Student Freedom Initiative is the vision of billionaire philanthropist Robert F. Smith.*