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**Testimony of
President Aaron A. Walton
Before the
House Education Committee & PA Legislative Black Caucus
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Good afternoon, Chair Schweyer (Majority Chair), Chair Topper (Minority Chair), Chair Nelson (PLBC Chair) and Members of the House Education Committee and PA Legislative Black Caucus.

My name is Aaron A. Walton, President of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. I am a proud undergraduate degree recipient of a PA State system university, a past trustee of a PA State System University, and a past member of the Board of Governors of the PA State System.

First, I would like to thank the House Education Committee, and the PA Legislative Black Caucus for extending me the opportunity to participate in this Joint public hearing. We are at a pivotal moment in history where HBCU's Financial support and resources are stretched beyond the limits. It is an issue that must be attacked from both a micro and macro level to continue to enjoy the ROI associated with HBCU's.

It is no accident that this dialogue is occurring where it all began, in Pennsylvania. As Cheyney University and Lincoln university represent the firsts' Cheyney, the nation's first HBCU founded in 1837, and Lincoln University the first-degree granting HBCU founded in 1854. Collectively, we should be setting the standard for the other 99 HBCU's which were founded after both of these State treasures.

As the nation's first Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Cheyney University of Pennsylvania represents a cornerstone of African American higher education, embodying resilience, excellence, and an unyielding commitment to empowering future generations. The university has been a beacon of hope since 1837 and serves as a testament to the invaluable role of African American education through centuries. Through it all, the university remains steadfast. All the while, the institution has enjoyed many successes in academics, athletics, and social justice and continues to serve as a sanctuary for the next generation of African American leaders and educators.

Against a backdrop of pervasive injustice, it is Cheyney's perseverance that lays the foundation for understanding its remarkable journey of transformation. Cheyney has charted a course of undeniable progress, marked by significant milestones that collectively paint a picture of a vibrant, evolving institution. The increase in enrollment marked improvement in retention, and graduation rates combined with strategic financial management, has seen the university balance its budget with surpluses for five consecutive years. Cheyney's trajectory is one of ascendancy and promise.

In 2017, the board of Governors created a task force to develop a new model for education and Cheyney University which stood on the steps of extinction. Since the implementation of the recommendations of this body, Cheyney has demonstrated remarkable resilience.

In recent years, the increase in enrollment, an exceptional 54% since 2018, is a testament to the university's growing appeal, underscored by enhanced learning experiences and career opportunities. This is particularly evident in the threefold increase in the percentage of students in STEM programs, showing Cheyney's commitment to aligning educational offerings with the demands of a global economy.

Behind these numbers lie the vibrant lives of students whose potential is being nurtured through initiatives like the Keystone Honors Scholarship, which has seen remarkable growth since 2017, expanding from \$2.3 million to approximately \$4.5 million, ensuring that financial barriers do not deter the aspirations of deserving students. This increased funding has resulted in the significant recruitment of academically talented students, from 60 Keystone scholarship recipients in 2017, to more than 200 qualified recipients in 2024.

The strategic partnerships, such as the Sports Analytics Training Camp with the Philadelphia 76ers, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Mosaic Development Partners, underscore Cheyney's dedication to career development, offering practical experiences that directly enhance career opportunities for students.

Cheyney's story is one of resilience, innovation, and leadership. It's a narrative that invites all — students, faculty, alumni, and supporters — to be part of a journey that transcends the confines of a campus. Reflecting on Cheyney's historical significance and its enduring spirit, we must remember to embrace the responsibility to nurture this beacon of hope, even when third parties might be blind to its progress, ensuring that Cheyney remains a cornerstone of empowerment and excellence for generations to come.

The centerpiece of successful organizations is adequate financial resources. The two decision filters that have been adopted by Cheyney University are the following.

- What is in the best interest of the students?
- What helps preserve this legacy institution?

To execute both these filters requires an investment of time, talent, and treasure.

Value Proposition

The value is in the experience. HBCUs are diverse and differentiated by their unique culture. They are experts in educating and creating opportunity for black people. They also serve as a place of learning for students of all races open to understanding the "black experience;" in 2013 non-black students made up 20% of HBCU enrollment. More than just academic environments, HBCUs are communities. Cultural identity, a lift-as-I-climb spirit, a culture of altruism and a commitment to achieve excellence are all at the heart of an HBCU education.

Cheyney's student racial mix supports the value proposition, currently, 83% of the student body is African American, 8% Hispanic, 5% Multi-Cultural, 2% unknown, and 1% Asian. The instructional component is further evidence.

65.5 % of the faculty is African American, 29 % white, 4.5% Asian, and 1% other.

According to an U.S. Commission On Civil Rights report, HBCUs are credited with creating the American black middle class. The report states that HBCU's have produced 40% of African-American members of Congress, 40% of engineers, 50% professors at PWIs, 50% lawyers, and 80% of judges. The impact of millennial HBCU alums are found across all industries: Wall Street, Capitol Hill, Hollywood, on campuses like Harvard Business School, Johns Hopkins, Stanford GSB, at companies such as McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, Google, Apple -- and even on Forbes' 30 Under 30 lists.

The Solution

A purposeful and intentional investment in innovation can change the trajectory of HBCUs and its students. From inception, HBCUs were created out of great social need, and while great social need persists, today's challenges are different. Today, HBCUs have a great opportunity to redesign the institutions for 21st century sustainability yielding long-term positive outcomes. HBCUs have a huge opportunity to be "catalysts for innovation." HBCUs should invest five key areas: project-based learning (PBL), entrepreneurship, social innovation, STE(A)M, and economic empowerment.

Cheyney University, has, out of necessity, had to stretch resources to address the needs of the students it recruits. First generation 44%, Pell eligible 70%, receiving financial aid, 97%.

THE RESULTS:

ENROLLMENT

The average enrollment declines at Cheyney from Fall 2010-Fall 2018 was 8.8%.
The average annual enrollment increases from Fall 18-Fall 22 was 12.6%.

ACADEMIC PROFILE

New freshman average GPA 2013-2017 was 2.62 HS GPA 850 SAT
New freshman average GPA 2018-2022 was 2.91 HS GPA
950 SAT

OUTCOMES

51 % average retention rate Fall 2014-18
63% average retention rate Fall 2019-22

FINANCIALS

4.4m avg annual deficits in FY12-FY17
2.7m annual surpluses in FY 19-22

The continuation of these, and greater results are predicated on increased financial resources that can be dedicated to ensuring student success at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania.