

Knoxville College: Reclaiming the Legacy

Since its founding in 1875, Knoxville College has produced such distinguished alumni as: Former Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) President **Joseph Lowery**; **Alonzo “Jake” Gaither**, the legendary former football coach at Florida A&M who won 85 percent of his games over 25 years and produced such NFL greats as Bob Hayes and Willie Galimore; **Ambassador John E. Reinhardt**, former Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria and director of the United States Information Agency; **Dr. Edith Irby Jones**, the first female president of the National Medical Association; **Dr. Joseph Gay**, former president of the National Dental Association; **Bishop Warren Brown** (A.M.E. Zion); **Dr. Forrest E. Harris**, president of the American Baptist College and director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies at Vanderbilt University; **Dr. Willie E. May**, chief of the Analytical Chemistry Division, Chemical Science and Technology Laboratory, National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST); **Vernon Jarrett**, the first black columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* and former president of the National Association of Black Journalists; Tuskegee, Ala. **Mayor Johnny L. Ford**; **C. Virginia Fields**, president/ CEO of the Black Leadership Commission on AIDS and former two-term Manhattan (N.Y.) Borough president; **George E. Curry**, former editor of *Emerge* magazine and the first African-American elected president of the American Society of Magazine Editors; **Robert Booker**, the first African-American to serve in the Tennessee State Legislature from Knox County; **Ralph Wiley**, author, former ESPN commentator and reporter for *Sports Illustrated*; **Arnetta G. Wallace**, former national president of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, **Ulysses McBride**, past national president of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity; **Barbara Rodgers**, former anchor/reporter WPIX-TV (CBS) in San Francisco; NFL defensive tackle **Grady Jackson** and thousands of others.

The past decade has been particularly challenging for Knoxville College. Even so, it has still dramatically impacted the lives of its students as the beginning of a story in one national magazine on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) illustrates. It began:

Four years ago, Nadir F. Johnson was a drug dealer who wanted to change his base of operation. So he moved from Hampton, Virginia to East Tennessee. But within a week of establishing a new residence, to his surprise, Johnson also established a new lifestyle, enrolling in college and kicking his old habits. By 1996, Johnson had made the Dean’s List and was elected president of the student body at Knoxville College.

[Emerge magazine, September 1998]

Changing Lives

As the Nadir Johnson story vividly illustrates, attending Knoxville College is a life-changing experience. He is now a manager in the construction industry in the Washington, D.C.–area. Unlike the late 1800s, when Knoxville College was founded, African-Americans can now enroll in any university in the nation, even those in the Deep South that denied them admission until the mid-1960s. Yet, Knoxville College and other HBCUs continue to play a unique role in higher education. According to an analysis of data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics, although black colleges represent only 3 percent of the nation’s universities, they produce 23.6 percent of all bachelor’s degrees earned by blacks. The contribution is even greater in the physical, mathematical, biological and agricultural sciences, where HBCUs account for more than 40 percent of bachelor’s degrees earned by African-Americans. HBCUs confer 13.1 percent of master’s degrees earned by blacks and 10.6 percent of all doctoral degrees.

Because of the exceptional success HBCUs have educating African-Americans, they continue to play a vital role in American society. According to a report by the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University, titled, “With All Deliberate Speed: Achievement, Citizenship and Diversity of American Education,” only 31 percent of Latinos complete some college and 48 percent of African-Americans, compared to 62 percent of whites and 80 percent of Asian Americans. “We are losing ground and jobs to other countries – for example, China and India,” the report states. “Our nation’s ability to sustain our long-term economic success depends on the very children we are not educating now.”

It also noted, “According to the National Center on Education and the Economy, by the year 2020, the U.S. will need 14 million more college-trained workers than it will produce. Nowhere is college participation lower than among African-Americans and Hispanic youth; nowhere is the potential to meet our nation’s need for college graduates greater.”

Knoxville College plays a special role in helping to fill that potential. While the “A” and “B” students can be successful in any higher education setting, Knoxville College specializes in enrolling and molding high-risk students – many of whom had underperformed academically in the past or were simply late bloomers – into successful graduates and citizens. As Board of Trustees Chairman George E. Curry likes to say, “Anyone can enroll an ‘A’ or ‘B’ student and take credit for his or her achievements. But at Knoxville College, while we like the ‘A’ and ‘B’ students, we pride ourselves in taking a chance on the mid- or low-range students – the ones that can go either way – and guide them to a successful life. That’s our specialty.”

Mission & Purpose

Knoxville College is a private, church-affiliated, four-year, coeducational, liberal arts institution. It is licensed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. As the only historically black college in East Tennessee, Knoxville College continues to play an important role in the education of African-American youth. KC is located on 39 acres situated north of downtown in the city's community of Mechanicsville. Founded in 1875 by the United Presbyterian Church of North America, the college provides a challenging and stimulating educational experience for students of demonstrated academic ability and for students of potential who have been afforded little advantage in society.

There are roughly a half-dozen institutions in the United States that are considered Work Colleges. Knoxville College is the only HBCU in that group. As such, the college requires every student to work from his or her freshman year through graduation. The goal is to instill the values of work in students while preparing them to graduate with a diploma in one hand and a resume listing work experience in the other. A major attraction of Knoxville College is that its work program allows most students to graduate debt-free and with a resume. This is particularly attractive when one considers that the average cost of attending an in-state public university is \$6,185 a year and \$23,712 annually for private colleges. The cost of attending Knoxville College is slightly less than half of the national average for private colleges.

Knoxville College provides its students, regardless of their backgrounds, a distinctive opportunity for educational achievement. The college maintains a program combining preparation for professional careers with a broad education in the arts and sciences.

Knoxville College strives to fulfill its mission through rigorous instruction and emphasis on:

- ensuring competence and competitiveness of graduates;
- preserving and disseminating the African-American heritage;
- fostering spiritual and moral values consonant with the Judeo-Christian ethic;
- developing an inspirational college community life as preparation for a responsible role in society;
- offering individual, personal attention for each student;
- providing financial support for qualified students;
- utilizing student work requirements to provide tuition support and experiential learning opportunities;
- encouraging student participation in entrepreneurial activities; and
- developing relationships with the local community, industry, and commerce that will enhance the educational and entrepreneurial experience of the students.

Core Values and Principles

The following principles are considered when meeting the KC mission: (a) ensuring competence and competitiveness; (b) preserving and disseminating the African-American heritage; (c) fostering spiritual and moral values consonant with the Judeo-Christian ethic; (d) developing an inspirational college community life as preparation for a responsible role in society; (e) offering individual, personal attention for each student; (f) utilizing student work requirements to provide tuition support and experiential learning opportunities; (g) encouraging student participation in entrepreneurial activities; and (h) developing relationships with the local community, industry, and commerce that will enhance the educational and entrepreneurial experience of the students.

Organizational Structure

KC's organizational design is functional in nature. The Knoxville College system is governed by a Board of Trustees in charge of guiding the college's mission. Functioning on the campus are an Interim President, the Executive Assistant to the President (Chief Operating Officer), Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Business and Financial Affairs, and Institutional Development. The KC workforce consists of experienced individuals with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, including administrative personnel, managers, educators, specialists, and other support staff. Some students also assist in the tasks of the college.

Recent Challenges

For roughly a decade, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the college experienced frequent turnover of presidents, a deep drop in enrollment and a failure by the Board of Trustees to adequately fulfill its responsibilities. Admittedly, many of the wounds were self-inflicted. Conditions deteriorated to the point that in 1997, Knoxville College lost its accreditation. That, in turn, meant a loss of federal aid and the college has been struggling to stay alive. With the loss of accreditation came a lower student enrollment, which has averaged approximately 300 in recent years, down from a high of 1,200 in the 1970s.

The decreased enrollment has meant that Knoxville College has had significantly fewer resources at its disposal. It takes roughly \$40,000 a week to operate KC. The college has been

hard-pressed to meet its financial obligations, it still struggles because of the lack of accreditation and has been forced to dip into interest on its endowment in order to survive. Yet, despite those financial challenges, it is still serving students who have been accepted into major graduate schools or have landed jobs with major corporations. In the 2008 graduating class, for example, one student was admitted to the graduate program at an Ivy League institution (University of Pennsylvania) and another at the University of Massachusetts.

The Road to Recovery

Prodded by alumni and other stakeholders, Knoxville College has begun to recover. A new Board chair was elected shortly after the college lost its accreditation, new trustees were recruited, and today no trustee who was active when the school lost its accreditation remains on the Board. A new KC president was hired in 1997 and her tenure lasted until August 2005. The Board of Trustees is in the process of adding members from the business, academic and philanthropic communities and elected new officers, including Chairman George E. Curry, at its November 2007 Board meeting. At this time, Knoxville College is headed by Dr. Robert Harvey, the Acting President, and Chief Operating Officer Dr. Johnnie B. Cannon, an executive on loan from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Standing out from the Crowd

In an era of intense competition for students, Knoxville College is focusing on three areas – in addition to being a Work College – that will distinguish it from other institutions:

- **The Alvin Speights Music Institute** – Alvin Speights, a two-time Grammy winner, is the music industry's preeminent mixing engineer. He has mixed and engineered songs for such stars as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Yolanda Adams, Boyz II Men, Outcast, Kriss Kross, Keith Sweat, BeBe Winans, Goodie Mob, Jagged Edge, Arrested Development, and too many others to name. He visited Knoxville College during the May 9, 2008 Board of Trustees meeting and agreed to establish a mixing studio at Knoxville College that will bear his name. Not only will Speights tap industry sources for funds to create this facility, he will from time to time travel from his home in Atlanta to conduct special seminars at Knoxville College and encourage other artists and technicians to participate as well.

- **The International Institute for the Study of Hip Hop** – It may not seem like it, but after more than three decades, Hip Hop has been around longer than the typical college student has been alive. First known as rap, the genre is now a \$4 billion-a-year business. It is an urban wonder used to market such mainstream products as Sprite and Burger King and inspired a string of clothing lines, including FUBU, Phat Farm, G-Unit and ENYCE. According to the Panache Report, top earners in the hip-hop industry range from P. Diddy at \$346 million and Jay-Z in a close second with \$340 million to Nelly and Jermaine Dupri tied for 10th place with \$60 million each. There are more than 100 million fans worldwide. Despite its influence, there is no known institution of higher education chronicling the music or studying this phenomenon. The establishment of a Hip Hop Institute at Knoxville College will help recruit students and serve as the No.1 destination for scholars and researchers interested in studying Hip Hop. With the help of SCLC President Charles Steele Jr. and KC Trustee Ron Coffie, Jr., a number of artists have expressed interest in supporting the institute.
- **The SCLC/Knoxville College Conflict Resolution Training Center** – Charles Steele, Jr., president and CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) said one of the failures of the modern Civil Rights Movement is that it did not institutionalize its non-violence techniques that made it so effective in such hot spots as Birmingham, Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. In an effort to curb violence and resolve interpersonal conflicts, SCLC plans to establish Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolence Conflict Resolution Centers over the next five years in the U.S., the Middle East, Europe and Africa. SCLC wants to establish an international training center, based at Knoxville College, to teach the nonviolent techniques used during the Civil Rights Movement. SCLC will be responsible for raising all funds for the training center.

Partial List of Goals

GOAL # 1 – Restore Financial Stability

Situation:

Because of previously cited factors, Knoxville College is approximately \$7 million in debt. More than \$5 million of the debt is in the form of a loan secured in 2003, using all of the college assets as collateral. Without accreditation, the college is ineligible to receive federal funds or assistance from the United Negro College Fund or the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO).

Plans:

- Launch a 5-year, \$30 million capital fund drive by fall 2008.
- Establish the Knoxville College Legacy Foundation before the end of 2008.
- Raise \$172,000 to match a National Park Service grant to restore McKee Hall and other historic buildings on campus.
- Even before kicking off the \$30 million capital fund drive, the Tom Joyner Foundation has agreed to form a partnership with Knoxville College. It has volunteered to provide the college with an immediate grant of \$250,000, sponsor a fund-raising gala during the first or second week in December in Knoxville, assist with student recruitment, and launch a “Save Knoxville College” radio drive during the last two weeks of December 2008.
- Contact the White House Faith Based Initiative about possible assistance.
- Contact the governor about possible state assistance.
- Develop new corporate and philanthropic funding sources.
- Explore the possibility of students using state HOPE Scholarships to attend Knoxville College (Morris Brown was successful in doing this by getting the Georgia General Assembly to pass legislation allowing students with a B-average or above to use HOPE scholarships at institutions such as Morris Brown).
- Increase private and corporate gifts, including planned giving.
- Expand alumni giving.

Goal #2 – Increase Student Enrollment and Expand Campus Activities

Situation: Student enrollment, which peaked in the early 1970s at 1,200 students, has averaged 300 in recent years.

Plans:

- Get each of the 17 alumni chapters to recruit a certain number of students for fall 2008 and beyond.
- As a way of enlivening campus life after an absence of organized sports last year, both male and female basketball teams will be formed for the 2008-2009 school year. Outdoor track and soccer teams will also be added this school year.
- Re-open book store.
- Form a debate team.
- Establish a drama club.
- Re-establish the college choir.
- Offer on-line courses.
- Revamp Web site, with special attention on physical appearance and on-line student applications.
- Develop a new student retention plan that includes strengthening the pre-enrollment Mini-Academy to help prepare incoming students for a strong academic challenge.

Goal #3 – Upgrade Physical Facilities

Situation: Few things discourage students from attending Knoxville College more than the physical appearance of the campus. Even a cursory visit to the campus shows that serious work needs to be done to modernize the buildings. Roofs leak in some buildings, cracks are appearing on some buildings and the general upkeep leaves much to be desired.

Plans:

- Initiate a beautification drive to enhance the physical appearance of the campus.
- Restore or demolish MLK Towers.
- Make campus life more appealing by creating a model co-ed dormitory (Brandon Hall) this fall and re-opening the campus café on the lower level of the College Center. The recent grant from the Tom Joyner Foundation will be used this summer to accomplish these goals.
- Give students greater responsibility for helping maintain physical facilities as part of the overhauled work program.
- Enlist the help of Greek-letter organizations and ask them to submit a proposal for the adoption of a campus building.

Goal #4 – Regain Accreditation by SACS

Situation: The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) withdrew accreditation of Knoxville College in 1997. SACS is the recognized regional accrediting body in the 11 Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia) and in Latin America. Rather than attempting to re-gain accreditation by SACS, the former president made preliminary plans to seek accreditation from an alternative liberal arts accrediting body, but never completed the process.

Plans:

- Focus attention exclusively on regaining accreditation from SACS.
- Contact SACS and apprise them of our interest in regaining accreditation and ask about any in-house assistance they can provide and suggestions for developing a strong working relationship with them.
- Form a joint Board of Trustees/Faculty/Administration Committee to assemble a list of needs for reaccreditation and provide quarterly progress reports to the Chair of the Board's Academic Affairs Committee.
- Wiley College President Bill Strickland went through a 5-year-process to get his institution successfully reaccredited. On the recommendation of Dr. Leonard L. Haynes III, executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Board Chair Curry contacted President Strickland, who offered to provide advice and counsel as KC embarks on the reaccreditation process.
- Contact other college presidents who have been successful in regaining accreditation.

Goal # 5 – Revamp the Work Program

Situation: Since Knoxville College reinvented itself as a Work College a decade ago, it has not made major alterations in the program. It's a time for an exhaustive review of the program and make amendments as necessary.

Plans:

- Review the program and look for places where it can be fine-tuned.
- Change the program so that freshmen will work on campus during their first year, cutting down on distractions and complications caused by off-campus travel.
- Take a team from Knoxville College to visit Warren Wilson College near Asheville, N.C. and see if there are lessons to be learned from their successful Work College.
- Develop a sister-school relationship with Warren Wilson College that will eventually lead to a semester or school year exchange program and other mutually beneficial activities.
- When funds permit, appoint a Dean of Labor to supervise the work program.

Goal #6 – Expand ties to the Local Community

Situation: Because of past leadership instability and hard feelings created by the former president, major efforts must be taken to mend the relationship between the college and community leaders.

Plans:

- Largely through the efforts of COO Johnnie Cannon and Trustee Frank Robinson, some inroads have been made into the Knoxville business community, but much more is still needed. These overtures have already begun to pay dividends as evidenced by the mayor of Knoxville attending recent Founder's Day activities at Knoxville College.
- Create stronger community support by appointing more local and diverse business leaders to the Board of Trustees.
- Use the Board Chair to help personally recruit local leaders for the Board.
- Appoint local business leaders to the Knoxville College Legacy Foundation Board.
- Recruit local civic leaders for the Board of the Knoxville College Community Development Corporation.
- Establish an Advisory Board to the Knoxville College Board of Trustees.
- Recruit more students from the city of Knoxville.
- Explore the possibility of operating joint educational projects with the University of Tennessee, including a plan to develop science and math teachers for area school systems. Dr. Cannon and others have already met with the chancellor and have an upcoming meeting planned with the president of UT.
- Make sure the community is invited to all major campus events.

Goal: #7 – Establish more Business Partnerships

Situation: Knoxville College has been part-owner in one business, the Pilot service station near the campus. In addition to providing revenue to the college, it has also been a place where some Knoxville College students have gone to fulfill their Work College obligations. In need of money, Knoxville College sold its half-interest in the Pilot station approximately three years ago, with the option to repurchase its share at the same price, roughly \$500,000, within five years.

Plans:

- Repurchase KC's share of the Pilot station.
- Create the Knoxville College Community Development Corporation [KCCDC] by June 2008 that will serve as co-developers on all campus construction and establish additional business opportunities such as the joint venture with Pilot Oil.

Goal #8 – Hire a Permanent President

Situation: Knoxville College has been without a president since 2005. Using the search firm services of George Ayers, more than 30 candidates have subsequently applied for the job. A finalist was selected almost two years ago, but withdrew his application when it wasn't clear that the college could afford to pay him over a 3-year period. As the search demonstrated, there is no shortage of qualified candidates willing to accept the job.

Plans:

- While the Board of Trustees is eager to appoint a new president, it has decided to stabilize conditions at the college before attempting to bring a new individual in to lead the institution.
- Because of the extensive search conducted by Ayers before as well as those he conducted for other colleges, it may not be necessary to restart the presidential search process from scratch. When we're ready to select the next president, we will again employ the services of Ayers and decide the best route to take.

Conclusion

Although the college faces challenges on many fronts, it continues to be licensed by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and educates students who prosper as a result of attending Knoxville College. The initial \$250,000 grant by the Tom Joyner Foundation in May 2008, with pledges of additional support and the launching of a "Save Knoxville College" radio campaign in the fall, is independent confirmation of the importance of preserving Knoxville College. Further confirmation has been the active assistance and encouragement received from the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, headed by Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, chairman; Executive Director Leonard L. Hayes III, Ph.D., and Deputy Director Ronald E. Blakely. Knoxville College COO Johnnie Cannon startled some alumni last year when, after painting a sobering picture of the institution's finances, said he is more optimistic than ever about the future of the college. There are many reasons to be optimistic about Knoxville College's ability to reclaim its 133-year legacy.

Dr. Forrest Harris, president of American Baptist College in Nashville, tells about the power of that legacy as well as anyone:

Without Knoxville College, the door to higher education would have been closed to a disadvantaged young man who barely survived the social dysfunctions of public education to graduate from high school but did not have the sufficient educational and academic skill set for admission to college. I was disadvantaged, unable to pass college standardized admission tests, and my parents were without resources to aid me to access necessary remedial training beyond high school. Knoxville College had the creative program opportunity and the dedicated resources that helped me overcome my disadvantages. The administration and faculty at the time I attended KC knew that disadvantaged people like me would need creative advocacy and educational support if many were going to realize a usable future.

I am forever thankful that Knoxville College decided to be the catalyst to prepare disadvantaged young people to meet their own destiny. The fact that as a compliance officer the former Energy Research and Development Administration in Oak Ridge, now the Department of Energy, I received the department's achievement award, and for the past 20 years served on the faculty and directed the Black Church Studies Institute at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and now serve as the president of American Baptist College is due to the educational opportunity Knoxville College made available to me.

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