

Fisk Raises Millions Before Deadline

Contributed by Shauntel Lowe -- Black College Wire
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Fundraising qualifies school for challenge grant

Fisk University sang the final notes of its familiar song of financial turmoil a few weeks ago when the university reached its fundraising goal of \$4 million enabling it to receive a supplementary foundation grant to prevent the school from closing.

For the historically black institution with a chronicled past of financial struggle, the achievement meant the past year's highly-publicized funding fiasco might finally be its last. On June 25, the university announced it had raised \$4 million in unrestricted funds before a June 30 deadline as required to receive a \$2 million challenge grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Mellon Foundation also gave Fisk \$1 million outright during the school year.

"Thirty-four percent of contributions in support of the Mellon Foundation Challenge came from Middle Tennessee and it is clear that with the help of our alumni, the community of faith, government leaders, as well as our corporate and foundation partners we can claim great victory this year," said university president Hazel R. O'Leary in a press release. Total fundraising for the year is expected to exceed \$8.3 million. Former director and concert pianist of the legendary Fisk Jubilee Singers, Matthew Kennedy said he thought Fisk would reach its goal. "I'm a very positive thinking person and I just didn't think that Fisk would be faced with serious consequences such as having to close and I don't think the public will let that happen because of the long legacy in the field of education that Fisk has," the 87-year-old said. The special fundraising effort was prompted by acute, if not unprecedented, financial struggle at the school.

In November 2007, Fisk was in danger of not being able to make its payroll after the middle of December, according to John Donohue, executive vice president of development for The United Negro College Fund. UNCF partnered with Fisk in the fall to help with fundraising at the request of the Mellon Foundation, Donohue told Black College Wire in February. Donohue said there was talk of closing the school, but Fisk spokesperson Ken West contended that was not true. In any case, the school was running out of money, and quickly. Its efforts to sell the rights to or portions of a 101-piece art collection gifted to the university in 1949 by renowned artist Georgia O'Keeffe were thwarted by legal challenges from the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Sante Fe, N.M., heir of the O'Keeffe estate.

In a cost-cutting move, Fisk announced in February that it would be ending its NCAA athletics program, which cost over \$250,000 annually, in favor of a less expensive intramural sports program. The announcement generated negative feedback from alumni to coaches who felt the move would devastate campus camaraderie. The university recently announced it was reinstating basketball.

By the end of February, the university had raised \$1 million of the \$4 million goal for the foundation grant. Throughout the fundraising drive, administrators remained confident that Fisk would be able to reach its goal. "One of the things that we know, and we're completely confident in this, is that Fisk isn't going anywhere," said Keith Chandler, dean of admissions, in a May interview with Black College Wire.

"We're planning for a second 142 years, not for any imminent shutdown of any kind." Former Fisk provost Kofi Lomotey told Black College Wire in February that there was "no question in my mind" that the goal would be met. In May, Lomotey was appointed chancellor of the Baton Rouge campus of Southern University.

In February, Kennedy told of his daily search through the newspaper for updates on the financial crisis at his alma mater. By the end of June, the 87-year-old had traded in his newspaper for a party hat as he attended a university celebration for reaching its goal. "I was delighted," he said. "Our president gave remarks and appreciation for all the efforts of everyone." Throughout the fundraising push, Fisk alumni were strongly urged to dig deep to save their school. In May, D. Billye Sanders, chair of the General Alumni Association of Fisk University, said alumni had been sent letters asking them to give. At that point, she said, alumni had raised just over \$1.1 million.

Now that the goal has been met, Sanders said it's important for the giving to continue.

"The whole matching gift initiative excited our alumni," she said. "Our theme for alumni: make giving to Fisk a habit." The university president seems to think that will happen. In a university press release, O'Leary said, "We are well positioned to sustain our fund raising momentum year over year." It's too early to tell if the high hopes of administrators will translate into a new era of sustainability for Fisk or if the start of a new fiscal year on July 1 was just the cue to rewind to the beginning of the oft-troubled university's familiar song of financial struggle.

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