

# Financially Strapped Fisk University Ends NCAA Athletics

Contributed by Shauntel Lowe - Black College Wire  
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School battles for possession of famed art collection it wants to sell

Clad in his Greek letters, Fisk University senior David Hill would make his way to the annual homecoming basketball game, on the lookout for his fraternity brothers, old and young, of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. They might embrace or just say hello, the older Omegas doling out pieces of wisdom to the younger frats. But not anymore.

"Usually everyone has a homecoming football game. We just have a basketball game. And now, we're not even going to have that," Hill said.

Amid a deepening financial crisis, Fisk administrators recently announced that they were ending all of the university's NCAA athletic programs after this year and will develop a system of intramural sports in their place.

According to a statement by Provost Kofi Lomotey, released Feb. 25, the Nashville university views the move as an opportunity to involve more students in sports.

But many current students, alumni and faculty see the loss of the sports program as potentially devastating to student life on campus.

"It decreases the camaraderie between students now that you don't have a function or an event where students get together. It decreases school pride. What are you rooting for, other than your academics?" said Hill, who is majoring in physics with plans for a career in astronomy.

The move is just the latest strategic shift for the university, which has been struggling to gain traction in its race to raise funds before it runs out of money.

Financial struggle is nothing new or uncommon at Fisk, known for the historic fundraising efforts of its student chorus, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who traveled throughout the United States and Europe in the early 1870s to raise money for the school. The group is honored with Jubilee Hall on the Fisk campus.

But this period of struggle for the university has attracted nationwide attention as Fisk has battled in court over the right to sell, or at this point simply keep, the 101-piece Stieglitz collection of modern art given to the university in the 1949 by renowned artist Georgia O'Keeffe, wife of photographer Alfred Stieglitz.

The university has tried to sell pieces of the collection and proposed a \$30 million deal to share the collection with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, founded by Wal-Mart heiress Alice L. Walton, according to The Associated Press. In court earlier this month, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, N.M., heir of the O'Keeffe estate, argued that the agreement between O'Keeffe and Fisk forbids selling or sharing any portion of the collection and Nashville Chancellor Ellen Hobbes Lyle ruled that this proposition violated the wishes of O'Keeffe.

Now the O'Keeffe museum is trying to reclaim the entire collection on the grounds that Fisk violated the terms of its agreement with O'Keeffe and has forfeited its rights to the collection. Fisk and the museum made closing arguments in that case before Lyle on Feb. 19 and are currently awaiting a ruling that could take up to 30 days. Fundraising efforts stepped up

Meanwhile, Fisk is scrambling to get a hold on its financial situation through fundraising and budget cuts. University Spokesperson Ken West said the university annually spends \$263,075 to support the athletic program while only generating \$10,000 in revenue from an NCAA grant for participating in certain games. West said none of the school's approximately 100 athletes are on scholarships related to their participation in the NCAA Division III sports. He said the university expects the intramural program to cost \$60,000 annually.

While West said no revenue is generated from ticket sales or concessions, JoVan Kearse, Fisk's sports information director and head cheerleading coach, said non-students are charged \$5 to attend basketball games. Kearse said there is often miscommunication between the administration and athletics.

It appears that miscommunication is at the heart of many of the university's fiscal and organizational problems. Kearse said on February 18, the coaches and directors in the athletic department found out the school would no longer be participating in the NCAA Division III.

"It was really just a surprise to the majority of us," she said. The evening of Feb. 19, the university held a townhall "family" meeting and announced the decision.

"As they were telling about the fundraising efforts, they kind of slipped in that the athletic department would end June 30 as far as participating in NCAA," she said. "Most of us just assume that we won't have a job. We just realize it's over."

Kearse said many people don't understand how important athletics are on a college campus, particularly at Fisk where there isn't much to do.

"Athletics is the only means of entertainment at Fisk. My cheerleaders were very, very excited. They were looking forward to next year," she said.

Keshea Morris, a junior and member of the women's basketball team, said she was upset and waiting to see what was going to come next for sports on the campus. She said she found out the news from a text message during Bible study. Like many other students and alumni, Morris wonders when the financial problems for the university are going to end.

"They said our school was always in debt. Why are these people hired if it's still the same problem with the finances? Where does it end? Where is the money going?" she asked. Hill, the senior physics student, said he also wonders what is happening to all of the money students pay in tuition and fees.

"We feel that we pay a lot more money than we're supposed to. We're not getting what we paid for," he said.

Hill said he also questions the university's profession of operating as a family when students had no say in the current changes.

"I'm sure you would consult your family about what they think they should do in a family crisis before you make an actual decision," he said. Solutions sought through campus committees

But Provost Kofi Lomotey told Black College Wire that a series of campus-wide committees, comprised of faculty, students and staff have been employed to evaluate the current situation at the school and come up with solutions. He said students can share their concerns with their departments or their student representatives on the committees.

Lomotey said that all levels of university staff and students are currently involved in the school's fundraising efforts. Spokesperson West said The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has given the school a \$1 million grant outright coupled with a \$2 million challenge grant which requires Fisk to raise \$4 million in unrestricted funds by June 30 in order to receive the grant. He said the university has raised \$1 million in the past 60 days through corporate donations and gifts from "all over."

"A lot of people who we have not heard from in quite a long time have come back to show their support and dedication," he said.

West said Fisk has averaged a fundraising goal \$3.6 million per year for the past five years and has met that goal. From this year on, he said the university plans to increase that goal.

The United Negro College Fund has partnered with Fisk to help the school pull through its financial turmoil.

John Donohue, executive vice president of development for UNCF, said it became clear in the fall that the university was struggling and UNCF was approached by the Mellon Foundation to help the school.

"Mellon was interested in helping Fisk, but they felt Fisk needed a partner with the skill sets and credentials to help them and that's how we got involved," he said. Donohue said UNCF started working with Fisk in November and at the time Fisk was in danger of not being able to make its payroll after the middle of December. He said there was even talk of the school having to close its doors. West contends there was never any talk of the school closing down.

Donohue said Fisk has a "two-pronged challenge": securing finances immediately to finish the year in the black and to come up with a new business model for the future.

"We have to change the business model so they can get out of this deficit position. It's not going to happen overnight," he said.

He added that his impression is the school is committed to getting out of this situation and because it is a "flagship

institution among HBCUs" they cannot allow the university to fail. Many point to the Fisk Jubilee Singers as the reason Fisk is important both historically and for the future. Matthew Kennedy, now 86 years old, directed and performed as a concert pianist with the Jubilee Singers from 1957 to 1985 along with his late wife, Anne Gamble.

His daughter, Nina Kennedy, has recently been showing a documentary on her father at film festivals across the country. The film, "Matthew Kennedy: One Man's Journey," details Kennedy's involvement with the Singers, which he described as a "marvelous experience."

Kennedy said he reads the paper every morning to look for the newest developments in Fisk's financial crisis.

"It's my alma mater and I taught there for 33 years and I feel that Fisk has a marvelous legacy to preserve and a most important position to influence coming generations," he said. Kennedy said he disagrees with the court's decision not to allow the school to share the Stieglitz collection with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art.

"I believe if [O'Keeffe] were alive today she would be in favor of doing anything to keep Fisk afloat in good financial condition," he said. He said it's "unfortunate" that the O'Keeffe Museum feels it must protect O'Keeffe's wishes by preventing Fisk from doing what "it feels it needs to do to actually protect the collection as well as to survive." Alumni, government support encouraged

Kennedy said that alumni need to come forward and support the university. Even though he is a "person of modest means," he said he contributes through an endowment he established at Fisk in honor of his wife, the Anne Gamble-Kennedy Matthew W. Kennedy Scholarship.

"I encourage my friends to support it where they can and I hope alumni who are in better financial condition will step forward and contribute more to the university," he said. Kennedy also said he thinks the administrators are doing all that they can right now and hopes for more assistance.

"The university, of course, is a treasure to the world and I hope our government will look into the possibility of directing more support to the university."

Other alumni are also calling for their fellow "Fiskites" to join in the fundraising effort. Crystal deGregory, who graduated from Fisk in 2003 with a B.A. in history and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Vanderbilt University, said even though Fisk needs millions of dollars, everyone with a vested interest in the school should contribute whatever small amount they can. DeGregory said she gives \$300 per year to the school and is a member of the alumni association.

"It's similar to church; whatever you can give, do so," she said.

Damien Frierson, a 2002 Fisk graduate in history, said he was upset to hear about the financial crisis at Fisk that seemed to come without warning.

"I remember going back last year for my five-year reunion and they were encouraging us to give and there was no mention of how deep in the hole we were," he said. Frierson is currently a corporate program officer and an adjunct instructor at Temple University.

He said every Fiskite has been "indoctrinated" with the school's history of "extreme highs and lows" in terms of financial struggles as simply a part of Fisk life.

As an undergrad at Fisk, Frierson said there was constant "yard talk" about the instability of the school's financial state, but students didn't pay much attention to it. He said he wonders how much students would know about the current crisis if it wasn't a major story in the media right now.

But he says the struggle gives the students something to rally around.

"We're privy to [the struggles] and we're told that you may talk bad about Fisk, but don't let anybody else talk bad about Fisk. You actually know what's going on now won't likely be the end outcome of what happens to the university," he said.

DeGregory said her role now is to be an advocate for effective change at the university.

"The most valuable thing that I can do right now is to be an advocate for the best interest of Fisk in the perpetual sense in that short-term quick fixes will not necessarily produce the long-term yields that we're looking for," she said.

Provost Lomotey said Fisk's struggles are not unique to the university, but rather the plight of small, private liberal arts

schools nationwide.

"We rely very heavily on tuition payments and we live basically from year to year," he said.

Lomotey said there is "no question in my mind" that Fisk will raise the needed money by June 30 to receive the challenge grant from the Mellon Foundation, even though the university is in the present crisis because of an inability to raise money.

"I'm convinced that people are serious about ensuring we address the situation currently," he said.

DeGregory said struggle is a part of Fisk and she hopes the university will pull through. "It hasn't been the road paved with gold, but it has been a road of triumph," she said.

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