



Higher education's role in racial equality and opportunity

A conversation with college presidents

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2020 has brought profound change for colleges and students. Already rocked by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education communities are now coming together to support each other in the aftermath of a series of high-profile deaths in the Black community.

On June 8, Ellucian President and CEO Laura K. Ipsen asked three college presidents about how their communities are coping with these dual crises. In the open conversation that followed, the presidents shared their hopes for their students, their plans for the coming year, and their gratitude for the deep generosity of their campus communities. (Comments have been edited for clarity and length.)

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FEATURING:

Adam Breerwood,
President, Pearl River
Community College

Felecia M. Nave
President, Alcorn
State University

Aaron A. Walton
President, Cheyney
University



Joining the national conversation about race and equality in America

Guiding constructive change



“Together with Lincoln University, we issued a joint statement saying: **We call on students to focus their energy on bringing constructive change to the society in which we live.** We ask them to use the modern technology and resources that previous generations did not have as the means to adapt, to overcome inequities, and to change our communities for the better. Most importantly, we want our students to stay safe at all times, whether they decide to express their voices at home or in person at peaceful demonstrations.”

AARON A. WALTON, PRESIDENT, CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY



“For some of our students who’ve participated in local protests and marches, **it’s about making sure that they understand the matters at hand, that they are safe,** that we equip them with the tools and the information that they need. We stand behind them ready to assist them with programs, interventions, dialogue, and conversation.”

FELECIA M. NAVE, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY



“**We are in the midst of unprecedented change—a change that we are all proud to be a part of.** We are in one of the darkest times that our country has ever seen in a lot of ways. Maybe we deserve to be here. But a new day is coming. As institutions of higher learning, we can make a major impact.”

ADAM BREERWOOD, PRESIDENT, PEARL RIVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE





Taking care of the whole student

The importance of personal outreach and counseling



“We have administrators, faculty, and staff who have called our students, and I’ve made personal calls to do welfare checks, to congratulate them. **We even created a playlist to try and keep our community encouraged and let them know that we miss them.** We’re always trying to figure out ways to support them. It’s about their well-being, it’s about what they need. It’s important to hear their perspective to make sure that as we’re developing these strategies, they truly address where their concerns are and we’re able to deliver them in a way that they can hear and receive the interventions and the support that we’re trying to provide.”

FELECIA M. NAVE, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY



“Increasing numbers of our students are showing signs of significant stress. There’s also an increase in anxiety among students that just graduated this past May, in their pursuit of employment specifically. **Over 75 percent of our student body are first-generation college students and come from some very challenged environments.** As a result, all freshmen are assigned a success coach upon admission whose role is to provide so-called intrusive student support on nonacademic issues for all four years. We also continue to offer jobs, counseling services, resume writing assistance, and introductions to alumni.”

AARON A. WALTON, PRESIDENT, CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY





A helping hand from alumni

Mentorship, generosity, and proactive assistance



“They have been extremely responsive. They led a giving campaign and helped the university raise millions. Along with various sororities and fraternities, they have stocked our clothes closet for students in need. They also assist in supplying food and personal items at the university food bank. They stay connected to the university and to the students that live in their areas. It takes a village, as they say.

We’re all in this together.”

AARON A. WALTON, PRESIDENT, CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY



“Our alumni want to know how they can help. They’ve helped us establish a career class, they’ve established a food pantry to address food insecurity, and they’ve donated funds for students with challenges associated with COVID-19.

We’re a family and we treat each other like family.”

FELECIA M. NAVE, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY





Learning together as a community

Breaking down barriers and sharing what works



“Students don’t understand that they are more similar than different, and they still have a lot of barriers that are in place. **What we’re trying to do is teach them to break down those barriers, to be part of a bigger community.** We create an environment where they can communicate, where they can talk, where they can get to know each other. Hopefully they’re leaving our campuses and going out building better communities with those feelings.”

ADAM BREERWOOD, PRESIDENT, PEARL RIVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE



“We can learn from each other. It is critical that we come together and look for those best practices, make them scalable, and understand **it’s not a one-size-fits-all strategy.** What works in inner-city Philadelphia may not work in rural Mississippi, but there are some common things that we can all focus on.”

FELECIA M. NAVE, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY





Leading the way to a more just and equitable future

Listening, learning, and creating new opportunities



“We need to lead from the heart, be authentic, and listen to our students and the campus community. Yet we still have to prepare them, train them, give them that holistic development they need in order to be successful. **We must stand in the gap, help our students make sense of the senseless, and equip them with the tools to channel their feelings into positive actions and productivity.**”

FELECIA M. NAVE, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY



“Higher education spans far beyond the four classroom walls, so I’ve charged my faculty to continue to look at ways to develop and educate our students socially, morally, ethically, spiritually—not just academically—to try to develop compassion and empathy and understanding. That may not be comfortable for a lot of people in higher education. But right now we know that **higher education can serve as a catalyst for change.**”

ADAM BREERWOOD, PRESIDENT, PEARL RIVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE



“We as leaders set the tone for our institutions. To use an overworked business term, it’s all about transparency. **We have to look for and take opportunities to demonstrate diversity and inclusion in every aspect of the educational experience**—and that includes our vendors and others who serve the universities. We have to assume a higher level of responsibility in making sure that all of the touch points that are related to our universities are in tune.”

AARON A. WALTON, PRESIDENT, CHEYNEY UNIVERSITY



PATH

Progress • Accomplishment • Thriving • Hope

In response to immense student need in the wake of COVID-19, Ellucian and its partners have created PATH, a global awareness campaign and scholarship fund. The PATH scholarship will help support the educational goals of these at-risk students so they can continue their studies.

Ellucian and its executives are proud to have pledged \$1 million to kick off the campaign and have set a goal to raise \$10 million by April 2021.

To learn more, visit www.stayonpath.org



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