

Paine supporters say the college is too important to lose

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Friday, June 29, 2012

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Since its first class almost 130 years ago, Paine College has sent graduates to become lawyers, politicians, educators and scientists around the world.



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Dr. Sardar Yousufzai, an assistant professor of chemistry, physics and environmental sciences at Paine College, teaches a free six-week chemistry course for middle and high school students.

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Paine graduates flood the community today, from school superintendents to city commission members.

The school pushes money into the local economy through student and staff spending and acts as a living history book.

So, when Paine was sanctioned by its accrediting body June 21 for poor financial health and mismanagement of federal money with potential loss of accreditation, the warning was a reminder of what Paine has to lose and how costly it would be to Augusta if it failed.

“Paine opens doors for people who otherwise not many would open doors for,” said Deborah Rashada, a 2011 graduate of Paine. “They give people opportunity. So it can’t fail.”

Paine is one of 105 remaining historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, in the U.S.

According to Paine historian Mallory Millender, young people flock to Paine for a sense of community. The quality of education sweetens the deal, and with a student body that has never grown above 923, students receive individual attention.

“You get an unusually good education from the standpoint that you don’t get graduate assistants teaching the students at Paine. You get the very best professors,” Millender said. “Our professors ... work one on one and get to know the (students’) potential, and the students feel that.”

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University of Pennsylvania professor and national HBCU expert Marybeth Gasman said that black colleges give students a chance to learn from relatable role models.

A campus steeped in black history is also a way for students to escape racism, Gasman said.

“HBCUs provide an option for African-American students, one that nurtures them and supports them,” she said in an e-mail.

“I think it’s good to have a lot of different options for college. In addition, HBCUs are cultural treasures that we should all be concerned with and work to preserve. They are holders of history, art and stories of our past. They uplift students and propel them to new positions in life.”

The contributions

Apart from how Paine enhances students, its impact today can be seen in even more tangible terms.

Paine attracts students from across the nation who spend money and often stay to work in the Augusta area after graduation, said businessman and philanthropist James Hull.

The school brought \$36 million to the area in 2007, according to an economic impact study conducted by Mercer University professor of economics Roger C. Tutterow.

Hull said Paine also adds youth and intellect to the area as it enhances the culture and diversity of a Southern community.

In May, Hull donated \$10,000 to the \$250,000 James M. and Karen N. Hull Endowed Scholarship he established in 2008. Five students have been awarded the scholarship, and Hull said he would like to see more community leaders invest in Paine students.

“I don’t really care what race you are,” Hull said. “We’re interested and should help foster and support what needs to be a great institution. You think about the professors and the students, the graduates: They enrich and improve our community in, I think, ways that are obvious and ways that are unseen ... I think people also ought to think about Paine’s history. It’s so beautiful, and we’re just really blessed to have it.”

The history

Almost two decades after slavery was abolished, men from the Methodist Episcopal Church South, now the United Methodist Church, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America joined to establish a school to train black teachers and preachers.

According to Millender, Paine is the only college in the nation founded as a collaboration between black and white Southerners.

“Paine is a national treasure,” Millender said. “Paine is the national pioneer in race relations, and that’s not just in education. It’s the national pioneer in race relations – period.”

Paine graduates have assumed leadership positions around the world.

From Paine’s classrooms came Richmond County school Superintendent Frank Roberson, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history in 1978, and his predecessor, Charles Larke, who received his bachelor’s in mathematics in 1969.

Augusta politics has been filled with Paine alumni, from city commission members Johnny Hatney and Bill Lockett to Grady Abrams and Betty Beard.

Mack Gipson, a geologist commissioned by NASA to study pyramids on Mars in the 1970s, and Michael Thurmond, a former Georgia commissioner of labor, are also among Paine’s notable alumni.

The leadership at Paine has plans to make it a nationally recognized liberal arts institution, complete a \$7.5 million health and athletic complex, and increase enrollment past the current 891 students.

The spirit of the school is what Rashada said drew her in when she wanted to go back for an education after raising nine children. She also chose Paine to get a better understanding of black culture, which she said permeates many of the lessons and discussions across campus.

“I thought the school was just going to be like go to school, study for tests, pass exams, but I never thought about how it would impact me as a person, but it did,” said Rashada, who is a sixth-grade math teacher at Langford Middle School.

In almost every interaction with pupils, she said, Paine steers her instruction.

“We’ve had conversations in the classroom where we talk about life in general and we talk about people, and certain situations just take me back,” she said. “I reflect on what my professor would have said, and what they did say.”

The challenges

Black colleges are disappearing across the country amid financial crises. Gasman said many, such as Paine, are under-resourced and struggling to survive.

The number of black colleges has dwindled from 250 in the 20th century to 105 today.

Federal, state and private funding for HBCUs remains significantly lower than for larger schools, Gasman said. Because many HBCUs, including Paine, are tuition-driven, the drop in enrollment is crippling their financial base.

Some of the decline is attributed to competition from larger schools that are wooing the most talented students of all races to their campuses.

Despite the challenges to HBCUs as a whole and the internal turbulence at Paine, supporters remain optimistic. Millender said Paine will find strength in its alumni and leadership.

“Paine faces challenges now; Paine has faced challenges throughout its history,” he said. “But God loves Paine College, and Paine College is going to be all right.”