

**U.S. Senate, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee**

**The Honorable Senator Kay Hagan  
The Honorable Senator Rand Paul  
&  
Honorable Members of the HELP Committee**

**“STRENGTHENING MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS:  
Best Practices and Innovations for Student Success”**

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**Testimony Presented by:**

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**STRENGTHENING MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS:  
BEST PRACTICES AND INNOVATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

**Introduction**

Good morning. Chairwoman Hagan, Ranking Member Paul, and Distinguished Members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, my name is Dr. D. Jason DeSousa, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Retention for Fayetteville State University (FSU). Thank you for inviting me to testify about student success and the best practices that are being implemented at FSU.

Additionally, please allow me to thank Fayetteville State University's Chancellor James Anderson and Provost Jon Young for the support and resources that they have provided me to implement practices that undergird student success for the University's students. I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr. George D. Kuh, Indiana University Professor Emeritus of Higher Education, for guiding and mentoring me through graduate school at Indiana University.

I am a proud graduate of Morgan State University, an HBCU in the state of Maryland. As an undergraduate, the enriching educational experiences, effective mentoring, and supportive campus environment, helped shape the person I am today. Based on my high school performance and standardized test scores, I was fortunate enough to be accepted to Morgan State University. It was Morgan's "talent development" philosophy that inspired my confidence and motivated me to be a resilient student with superb habits of the mind—habits that prepared me for graduate school at Bowling Green State University (Bowling Green, Ohio) and Indiana University Bloomington (Bloomington, Indiana). I would be remiss if I did not mention the role of my academic adviser, Mrs. Margaret Barton, who set the very highest levels of academic and personal expectations for others and me. Every HBCU has a Margaret Barton—one who academically challenges students yet nurtures and supports them.

My career in education includes several stints on seven public and private HBCU campuses. On those campuses, the enrollments ranged from 850 to 9,000 and I have seen first hand what works and where resources are needed to gain more success. I hope you will leave today with a better understanding of what we are doing at Fayetteville State to create success for all students and in particular for those who traditionally underperform or face significant challenges as non-traditional students.

**Background on Fayetteville State University**

Fayetteville State University (FSU) is a comprehensive, regional constituent institution of the University of North Carolina. Founded in 1867 to prepare teachers for the children of recently-freed slaves, the core aspect of FSU's mission is to "... promote the educational, social, cultural, and economic transformation of southeastern North Carolina and beyond." The institution continues to serve its original purpose and mission to provide quality education to underserved populations. The student population demographic is 66% African-American, 5% Hispanic, 75% Pell eligible, and 20% military-affiliated (the highest percentage of students (of total enrollment) in the UNC system). In addition, nearly half (49.2%) are adult learners and 95% of our students are in-state most of whom come from the region which is largely rural.

FSU has six Strategic Priorities, with "Retention and Graduation" expressed as its first priority. Given our emphasis on student access, success, and persistence to graduation, this year the Washington, DC-based "Institute for Higher Education Policy" named FSU as an "Exemplar Institution for Access and Success" for its commitment to high-impact access and success practices that are particularly targeted to improve underserved North Carolina populations. (FSU joins California State University-Northridge, Florida State University, and Miami Dade College in this distinction.)

Some of the University's "Points of Distinction" include the following:

1. The University of North Carolina General Administration's "Teacher Quality Impact Study" listed FSU's School of Education as producing highly effective teachers of science and English.
2. As of 2012, FSU enjoys the distinction of being the only UNC institution to house on its campus an International Early College High School.
3. FSU is one of 20 high performing institutions, with higher-than-predicted graduation rates according to the Indiana University-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Institute. FSU joins other high performing schools such as Macalester College, Miami University of Ohio, University of Kansas, University of Texas El Paso, and University of Michigan.
4. The University actively supports the military by developing specialized online courses and offering classes on military installations in North Carolina and Fort Sam Houston in Texas.

The university has a longstanding commitment to student success with an institutional culture characterized by academic challenge and support. Student success and achievement initiatives include increasing admission standards, policy changes, strengthened academic support and advisement, and implementation of support programs for underrepresented groups, consistent data analysis.

### **BEST PRACTICES AND INNOVATION AT FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY**

At FSU, African American males represent the lowest performing campus sub group. We are making strides in turning that around. On average, during the period of 2005 to 2010, male students have accounted for 36% of first-time, first-year students in contrast to females. The average rate at which males persisted to graduation during such periods and for which four-year data were available was 10%, demonstrating FSU attracted a small proportion of men and, more troubling, graduated them at lower rates. Because most academic performance measures showed that males were underperforming, FSU was intentional about initiating a set of student success interventions for male students, starting in spring 2012, with a unique “Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Retention and Male Initiative” (AVC) position. A Coordinator for Academic Resources, Supplemental Instructor, Program Associate, and a cadre of peer tutors and mentors augment the senior-level Academic Affairs position.

FSU’s male initiatives—the “Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence” (MILE) and the “Boosting Bronco Brothers Transition to FSU Initiative” (B3)—take advantage of over \$400,000 in Title III funds to develop targeted student success initiatives and practices. Taken together, the MILE and B3 serve 205 males, which represents 18.4% of the target group of first-time male freshmen (1,114) or 12.3% of the total male student population at FSU (1,667).

In its initial year, the initiatives helped increase the fall-to-fall retention of males from 67% in 2010 to 74% in 2011, a seven percentage point increase. As was stated earlier, males who participate in the BRONCO MILE program were retained at a significantly higher rate (84%) than non participants (66%). In addition to its emphasis on academic success, the University’s male initiatives now focuses on financial literacy—a desired institutional outcome—through a new summer course entitled “Black Men Banking on Their Future,” a hybrid-type course, which has a field study component on Wall Street in New York City, NY. FSU’s male initiatives helped attract a College Access Challenge Grant from the University of North Carolina General Administration (system office)—only one of five institutions to receive the grant for the purpose of strengthening male mentoring.

FSU's strong relationship with Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) has enabled both institutions to take their male initiatives to a more innovative level. Through The Links, Inc., FSU and FTCC have been collaborating over the past two-years to better increase transfer rates from FTCC to FSU. FTCC's "Male Mentoring Program" and FSU's MILE now partner to create opportunities for men of color transferring to FSU to connect with a MILE peer mentor before entering FSU. While the initial grant did not require both male initiatives to partner together, Chancellor Anderson and FTCC President Larry Keen insisted on this innovative practice, which has been yielding positive results.

Accordingly, many HBCUs are improving African American male college completion rates through similar innovate programs, including the Morgan State University MILE and the North Carolina Central University Centennial Scholars.

### **Other Innovations that Undergird Student Success**

In addition to the afore-mentioned initiatives, these additional programs have improved access and success for underserved populations at FSU: (1) Faculty Development; (2) Collegiate Learning Assessment; (3) CHEER Scholars Program; (4) Learning Communities; (5) Student Fairs for Selecting Majors; (6) Academic Support—Learning Center, Supplemental Instruction; and (7) Pre-College Outreach. I will expound here on just a few of these.

- CHEER Scholars Program (Creating Higher Expectations for Educational Readiness), which began in 2002, is a residential summer bridge for incoming freshmen who do not fully meet FSU's admission standards. Serving 20% to 25% of FSU's first-year students each year, the program provides college access to students who perform poorly on standardized tests. Studies indicate that high school GPA is a strong predictor of college success, while standardized tests (SAT and ACT) are poor predictors, yet those tests continue to be the cause of denying college admission to good students. From 2008-2012, over 99% of CHEER participants (549 out of 554), all of whom were denied full admission due to standardized test scores, earned a C or better in both summer courses, allowing full-time enrollment in the fall.
- Female Students find support through two unique programs: "Saving Our Sisters" (SOS) and "Strong Sisters Soaring" (S<sup>3</sup>). These programs provide academic support for first-year females who were admitted on a provisional basis because of low GPA and or test scores. The latter is an initiative designed to address health issues for women.
- Learning communities are sets of linked courses, usually exploring a common theme. Instructors in learning communities work together to develop the theme and coordinate the course content. Students enroll in all of the courses linked through the learning community. By linking together students, faculty, and courses, learning communities

create more opportunities for enrichment, interaction, and exploration. For the last two decades the research on learning communities indicates that when they are structured effectively they almost always have a positive impact. Since 2009, nearly 80% of entering freshmen have participated in learning communities each year. Learning community participants at FSU have higher GPA's than students who are not in learning communities (2.5 to 2.04 in fall 2012) and return for the second year at a higher rate than students who are not in learning communities (75.4% to 60%).

- As it relates to Pre-College outreach, the Office of College Access Programs provides a broad range of high-quality college preparatory services annually to an average of 3,000 youth low-income/first-generation students, their parents and professional development services for educators who teach at Title I Schools. The Office includes national youth programs Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), Talent Search, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math & Science and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. In addition, AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service to America), an anti-poverty program, is housed in the Office of College Access Programs to provide capacity building for mobilizing local resources to achieve sustainable solutions. Ninety percent (90%) of the students are of color with graduation rates of 91% and college placement rates of 75%.
- Financial Aid education is also a major priority for this population of students. Financial Aid education begins prior to enrollment with the FIRST STEPS program. FIRST STEPS is a program that helps prospective first-time students and their families take the first steps toward success at FSU, to include placement testing, advisement, registration, and financial aid counseling. During the financial aid counseling, students and families discuss decision-making related to financing their college education, including instruction on debt-burden, financial literacy, and true cost of education. Once enrolled the priority order of financial aid packaging is always free money (grants, scholarships); loans are packaged last as needed up to one's cost of attendance. Where loans are offered, students must go online to accept and if a new borrower (entrance counseling has to be completed) before funds will disburse. New initiatives in planning for academic year 2014-15 are: in person loan counseling sessions (schools did this before automation), and hiring of a Default Manager (many schools are going this route with the new default guidelines).

## **Conclusion**

Fayetteville State University is working hard to ensure federal investments are yielding high returns. Additionally, we are doing our part to leverage resources by partnering with majority institutions and others to provide greater academic support services to our students. I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.