

TESTIMONY OF

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TO THE

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR &
PENSION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

CONCERNING

SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE
TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL

November 30, 2022

Witness Biographical Background:

A native Arkansan, Mr. Curtis Wright had devoted his professional life to the affairs of college students. He has an extensive background in residence life, diversity education and creating co-curricular experiences that complement the educational mission of the academy. Mr. Wright is currently Vice President for Student Affairs and Interim Vice President for Enrollment Management at Xavier University of Louisiana, in New Orleans, Louisiana. At Xavier University, Mr. Wright oversees Residence Education, Health and Wellness, Campus Police, University Athletics, Student Activities, Dining Services, Housekeeping, the University Bookstore, the Postal Center, the Copy Center, the ID Office, Campus Ministry, Veteran Affairs, and Inclusion and Social Justice. He also works alongside admissions, financial aid and the registrar's office.

Prior to this role, Mr. Wright served in various roles including the Dean of Campus Life and Chief Diversity Officer at Wagner College on Staten Island, in New York City. Prior to Wagner College, Mr. Wright worked in multicultural affairs at New York University and in minority advocacy, student activities, Greek Life and residence education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. A proud first-generation college student, Mr. Wright holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of Arkansas, a Masters in Adult Education from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and completed coursework (ABD) towards a Doctorate in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied the intersection of desperation and privilege and the role that strategic partnerships play between college campuses and the communities in which they reside.

Executive Summary

Subcommittee Chair Casey, Subcommittee Ranking Member Cassidy, Chairperson Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pension's (HELP) Subcommittee on Children and Families, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

It is an honor and privilege to sit before you this morning as the Vice President for Student Affairs and Interim Vice President for Enrollment Management at Xavier University of Louisiana. Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel of the sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and is the only institution of higher education in the country that is both Catholic and a historically Black college or university (HBCU).

Xavier's mission since 1925, in part, has been to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing our students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. We do this by cultivating a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means – including research and community service. Our students can engage in a world class practical liberal arts curriculum while living out the mission of our university.

I was asked to testify before the Committee today to address the importance of strengthening the continuum of mental health support for all adolescents, particularly in the years leading up to and during the transition from high school to college. I will do that, and of course I will also offer a particular lens which allows me to address the issues confronted by African Americans and those choosing to matriculate at HBCUs.

Chairman Casey, most students who entered Xavier University of Louisiana in August, have never known a world without Facebook or war. While I learned how to exit the building in a single file

line in preparation for a potential fire, my students have learned how to “run, hide or fight” their way out of an active shooter situation. They are all too familiar with social, political and racial unrest in this country, and they have probably participated in more marches or rallies than most of us in this room. They have lived through global economic recessions that resulted in some family members losing their jobs, homes and overall financial instability. They are also still in the midst of a global pandemic that caused the entire world to stand still and reimagine what normal looks like. Some of these young people lost multiple family members due to COVID related illnesses, in part, because they lacked access to affordable healthcare and, also, had family members whose primary source of income meant their status as front line workers was non-negotiable. Whether they are from Staten Island, Chicago or New Orleans, they were well acquainted with loss, long before the pandemic as they routinely attended candlelight vigils, memorials and funerals for friends who died due to gun violence, drug addiction, or suicide.

What our students at Xavier experience mirrors what their peers are experiencing across the country. In a 2022 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled, “Overwhelmed: The real campus mental-health crisis and new models for well-being”, researchers suggest:

The prevalence of anxiety and depression is rising across the country, particularly among young people. College students of all ages are more distressed than ever before, and increasing shares are enrolling with mental-health histories, in terms of diagnoses, treatment, and medication.” Institutions like Xavier University are challenged to recreate systems of care and support to meet the growing needs of a very different student body.

According to data cited in a 2022 article in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, “By nearly every metric, student mental health is worsening.” During the 2020–2021 academic year, more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem, according to the Healthy Minds Study, which collects data from 373 campuses nationwide (Lipson, S. K., et al., *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 306, 2022). In another national survey, almost three quarters of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress (National College Health Assessment, American College Health Association, 2021). While students and the lived experiences they bring to campus have evolved and changed, the funding to take good care of those students has not although the demands for that funding have increased dramatically.

Penn State’s Center for Collegiate Mental Health shared, “That rising demand (for mental health care) hasn’t been matched by a corresponding rise in funding, which has led to higher caseloads.” Nationwide, the average annual caseload for a typical full-time college counselor is about 120 students, with some centers averaging more than 300 students per counselor (CCMH Annual Report, 2021). The number of students seeking help at campus counseling centers increased almost 40% between 2009 and 2015 and continued to rise until the pandemic began, this is according to data from Penn State University’s Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH), a research-practice network of more than 700 college and university counseling centers (CCMH Annual Report, 2015).

We, like so many of our peers, know that we can’t do it alone and are developing strategic relationships with our K-12 partners and our parent community. We’ve learned that the habits of self-care that our students bring with them are informed, in part, by their environment. Access to healthcare, specifically mental healthcare, is not always readily available to students who come from rural areas, inner cities or economically depressed communities. Most colleges and universities are the direct beneficiaries of the Coronavirus Aid, Recovery, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Public Law 116-136; the

Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HERF II) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, Public Law 116-260; and the HEERF III authorized by the American Rescue Plan (ARP), Public Law 117-2. These critical legislative lifelines allowed colleges and universities to maintain university life for our students throughout the pandemic. In fact, at Xavier, we were able to expand the reach of our Counseling and Wellness office by adding additional therapists, offering enhanced services and training our community on mental health first aid. The traditional HEERF funding along with the funding allotted specifically to HBCUS, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) were used to increase these services. We are acutely aware that these funding sources have an expiration date, and while we are working alongside community partners to identify other resources that may fill the gaps that will be left as the funding sunsets, one of our asks today is that sunset deadline be extended through at least August 31, 2026.

The HBCU bomb threats of 2022 have altered the higher education landscape for every student studying at an historically Black college to better their life. For this specific set of institutions, only to be singled out and threatened repeatedly has caused our students—Black students already who have likely overcome significant societal pressures to find themselves on the verge of a life changing degree—untold mental anguish and stress. Although the the prosecution of those who maliciously caused this situation is a law enforcement issue, the impact on our students is not. Specific mental health focus should be directed to us as the sole recipients of these threats. The Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) Appropriations bill for FY 2023 should have language that guides the funding for National Joint Terrorism Task Force’s ability to harden campuses specifically to HBCUs instead of generally extending the funds to states who do not report back to Congress which institutions receive it and likely award the funding to their “flagship institutions.” Additionally, the Senate HELP Committee must pass the IGNITE HBCU and MSI Excellence Act (H.R. 6893) to improve HBCU facilities, harden the campuses to reduce the likelihood of these kinds of threats, and allow the cyber-related infrastructure to be strengthened enough to track these threats when they occur.

While the national landscape as it relates to mental health with young people can appear bleak, I like my fellow Arkansan, President William Jefferson Clinton, *still believe in a place called Hope*. I’m hopeful because of the resilience of our students and the generation from which they come. However, for them to achieve success, we must dismantle outdated systems that were not designed for their success. So, Madam Chair, I want to leave you with some recommendations:

- Similar to guidance offered by the Office of Civil Rights related to Title IX, the Department of Education should consider offering guidance on mental health first aid to support educators and administrators for all K-16 institutions which receive federal funding.
- The Department of Education should consider extending the funding period for the HEERF I, II, and III as well as the HBCU, TCU, and MSI set aside funding until August 31, 2026, which will allow colleges and universities to continue to provide uninterrupted coordinated care to our students as they transition to campus.
- HELP must push the Senate to “redline” H.R. 6893, the IGNITE HBCU and MSI Act to improve HBCU facilities in response the HBCU bomb threats and increase a sense of security on the campuses. The FY 2023 CJS Appropriations bill must also include guiding language to direct funding to HBCUs to harden their campuses in response to the HBCU bomb threats.
- Financial stress is one the of most prevalent causes of anxiety for students entering college across the country. Congress should continue to advance common-sense

legislation to reduce the costs of higher education and support President Biden's plan to address college debt through limited student loan forgiveness.

- As previously mentioned, students arrive on campus with few coping skills as well as co-morbidities that impact their academic success. Earlier intervention would provide those students with the strategies and resources that they could equip them with tools for success. With that being said, Congress should follow the lead of Senators Casey and Cassidy and pass S. 4472 the Health Care Capacity for Pediatric Mental Health Act and S. 2550, the RISE Act.

For more information and details regarding my remarks, I ask that you read my written testimony submitted for your review.

Full Testimony

History of Xavier

Xavier University of Louisiana is the only historically Black and Catholic institution nationally recognized for its science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curriculum, while remaining close to its liberal arts roots. Xavier's mission is to create a more just and humane society by preparing its students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. This preparation takes place in a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means, including research and community service.

As of Fall 2021, the University has 245 full-time faculty members who offer courses in over 50 majors on the undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and first-professional degree levels. Xavier's current enrollment is 3,604. Of these, 2,749 are undergraduates and 236 are graduate students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. In addition, there are 613 students enrolled in the College of Pharmacy, which offers the Master of Health Science in Physician Assistant Studies, the Master of Science in Pharmaceutical Sciences, and the Doctor of Pharmacy, and 236 students are enrolled in Masters and Doctoral programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. Xavier's student body is 77% African American, with approximately 39% from Louisiana, primarily from the New Orleans area. The balance comes from 41 other states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and several countries. Fifty percent of our students have an expected family contribution of below \$2,500. Thirty percent of our students are first-generation students. (first-generation students have lower retention and graduation rates). Xavier welcomes students who are spread out across the academic profile spectrum and has a proven track record of meeting students where they are and filling educational gaps to assist in their perseverance to degree and beyond.

As a private HBCU, Xavier is one of the members of the United Negro College Fund, Inc., or UNCF.

Introduction

Subcommittee Chair Casey, Subcommittee Ranking Member Cassidy, Committee Chairperson Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pension's Subcommittee on Children and Families, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

It is an honor and privilege to sit before you this morning as the Vice President for Student Affairs and Interim Vice President for Enrollment Management at Xavier University of Louisiana. Xavier was founded by Saint Katharine Drexel of the sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and is the only institution of higher education in the country that is both Catholic and a historically Black college or university (HBCU).

Xavier's mission since 1925, in part, has been to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane society by preparing our students to assume roles of leadership and service in a global society. We do this by cultivating a diverse learning and teaching environment that incorporates all relevant educational means – including research and community service. Our students can engage in a world class practical liberal arts curriculum while living out the mission of our university.

Before the Committee today, I will to address the importance of strengthening the continuum of mental health support for all adolescents, particularly in the years leading up to and during the transition from high school to college. I will also address unique challenges of students who are first generation college students, students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those who are attending HBCUs.

Chairman Casey, most students who entered Xavier University of Louisiana in August, have never known a world without Facebook or war. While I learned how to exit the building in a single file line in preparation for a potential fire, my students have learned how to “run, hide or fight” their way out of an active shooter situation. They are all too familiar with social, political and racial unrest in this country, and they have probably participated in more marches or rallies than most of us in this room. They have lived through global economic recessions that resulted in some family members losing their jobs, homes and overall financial instability. They are also emerging from a global pandemic that caused the entire world to stand still and reimagine what normal looks like. These young people have lost multiple family members due to COVID related illnesses, in part, because they lacked access to affordable healthcare. Additionally, for the student population we serve, the vast majority of their parents were front line workers, and because of that the members of their households have been more exposed to the coronavirus pandemic. Whether they are from Staten Island, Chicago or New Orleans, these students were well acquainted with loss, long before the pandemic as they routinely attended candlelight vigils, memorials, and funerals for friends who died due to gun violence, drug addiction, or suicide.

We, like so many of our peers, know that we cannot confront our students mental health challenges alone, and we are developing strategic relationships with our K-12 partners and our parent community. We have learned that the habits of self-care that our students bring with them are informed, in part, by their environment. Access to healthcare, specifically mental healthcare, is not always readily available to students who come from rural areas, inner cities or economically depressed communities. Most colleges and universities are the direct beneficiaries of the Coronavirus Aid, Recovery, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Public Law 116-136; the Consolidated

Appropriations Act of 2021 and its Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund II (HEERF II), Public Law 116-260; and the HEERF III which was authorized by the American Rescue Plan (ARP), Public Law 117-2. These critical legislative lifelines allowed colleges and universities, like ours, to maintain university life for our students throughout the pandemic. In fact, at Xavier, we were able to expand the reach of our Counseling and Wellness office by adding additional therapists, offering enhanced services and training our community on mental health first aid. In addition to the HEERF funding received by almost every college and university, the specific funding allotted only to HBCUs, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) has been instrumental in the accomplishments above. We are acutely aware that the provisions of three pieces of legislation have an expiration date and are working alongside community partners to identify other resources that may fill the gaps that will be left as the funding sunsets. However, we would like the Senate HELP Committee to consider passing an extension of the funding through August 31, 2026.

Mental Health on College Campuses

What our students at Xavier experience mirrors, what their peers are experiencing across the country, even though there are some real, unique, and necessary to mention experiences recently at HBCUs. In a 2022 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled, “Overwhelmed: The real campus mental-health crisis and new models for well-being”, Researchers suggests the following:

The prevalence of anxiety and depression is rising across the country, particularly among young people. College students of all ages are more distressed than ever before, and increasing shares are enrolling with mental-health histories, in terms of diagnoses, treatment, and medication.” Institutions like Xavier University are challenged to recreate systems of care and support to meet the growing needs of a very different student body.

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The Xavier University Community Response

At Xavier University of Louisiana, and institutions like us, we are working across the campus to address the growing mental health challenges of our students. At Xavier specifically, we have expanded the reach of our Counseling and Wellness office by using HEERF funding to add additional therapists and mental health counselors. Relatedly we expanded offerings around campus to empower students with the tools to address commonly known stressors, which include:

- Mindfulness and Meditation
- Time Management/Study Skills/Financial Literacy Workshops
- Creating Virtual Parent Communities
- Enhanced Fitness and Wellness Options

Recognizing the need to deepen the pool of individuals prepared to respond in emergency situations, we engage in Mental Health First Aid training. These workshops provide student leaders, faculty, and staff with basic skills in identifying mental health concerns and connected them with resources to support students before a crisis arises.

One of the major projects introduced at Xavier University is the “Take A Minute RU Ok” campaign. Guided by the notions of connection, commitment and community, students, faculty and staff are encouraged to engage in intentional self-care. Through workshops, social media and random acts of kindness, the community is routinely exposed to information about how to connect to something outside of themselves, challenged to follow-through on commitments, and invited to be involved in a community that cares.

Our unfinished work requires us to build alliances with faith communities, K-12 partners, and community groups, to share resources. We know that our students come to us from communities that have not always placed value on asking for help. Central to our efforts will be exposing our students and families to resources in their communities along with the need to reduce the stigma attached to accessing mental healthcare. We are heartened by the work that lies ahead.

HBCU Bomb Threats

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Commonsense Solutions

As it relates to mental health and our young people, the national landscape can appear bleak. However, I have much in common with my fellow Arkansan, President William Jefferson Clinton: *I still believe in a place called Hope*. I'm hopeful because of the resilience of our students and their generation. For them to achieve success, we must dismantle outdated systems that were not designed for their success. So, Chairman Casey and Ranking Member Cassidy, I want to leave you with some recommendations:

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Conclusion

It has been an honor to present this testimony. I thank the Committee for addressing this important issue. As a leader in higher education, I know the benefits of early screening, the impact of developing coping strategies, and the importance of empowering families to train their children to become problem solvers. We must address the mental health concerns of our youth as the stakes have never been higher and our collective work should be a priority of every American. I'm grateful to the Committee for leaning into this very difficult conversation and Xavier University of Louisiana stands ready to serve as a resource and community partner.