



THE POWER OF PERSUASION

HBCU presidents surmount the stain of accreditation woes by communicating their vision to parents and prospective students.

BY LEKAN OGUNTOYINBO

As president of Morris Brown College, a small unaccredited institution in downtown Atlanta, Dr. Stanley Pritchett knows he has a tough job convincing parents and students to enroll. His problem is compounded by the fact that he has little money in the budget for marketing.

So when he gets the opportunity to talk to prospective students, he has a pitch prepared: The college offers a quality education at about 50 or 60 percent the cost of most colleges in the area. The class sizes are small. Its graduates are generally successful. One was even accepted to law school. Several others have gone on to graduate school. And many are gainfully employed. The college is moving toward reaccreditation. It has the resources to operate successfully. It maintains a balanced budget.

The pitch is hitting home with a few. This fall, according to Pritchett, 30 freshmen will enroll at Morris Brown, bringing the school's student body to 90. Pritchett says 20 of these freshmen are recent high school graduates.

It is an amazing feat for a school that lost its accreditation seven years ago for a wide variety of academic, financial and administrative reasons. Students at unaccredited colleges do not qualify for financial aid from the federal government.

Many employers will not hire graduates of unaccredited schools. Many colleges will not accept their credits. And graduate and professional schools at accredited universities rarely admit them as students.

Yet several historically Black colleges and universities that have either lost their accreditation or face the threat of losing accreditation remain in business. Through a combination of rebranding, reinventing themselves, revamping the curriculum and good salesmanship that communicates vision and a genuine interest in educating young adults, they still attract students. They sell the small class sizes and, in some cases, lower tuition rates. Others explain to students that they will have to pay something out of pocket and then the colleges go out and raise funds to make up the difference. And some are quick to stress that the factors that led to their accreditation problems are financial and not academic.

However, they are not thriving. In its heyday decades ago, for example, Morris Brown had approximately 2,800 students, according to Pritchett. Paul Quinn College in Dallas once boasted between 900 and 950 students. Before it lost its accreditation in 2004, Barber-Scotia College in Concord, N.C., had 600 students. The college had 24 students last year and expects between 40 and 50 this year, according to Barber-Scotia's president, Dr. David Olah.

Paul Quinn College President Michael Sorrell's (center) recruitment pitch to prospective students and their parents includes details about the institution's revamped curriculum, aggressive retention program and nurturing environment.

But they are surviving and managing to attract true believers in the form of students, parents and donors — however few.

Allison Jones, a senior at Morris Brown majoring in business and economics, is one of those true believers.

"Our class sizes are very (small)," says Jones, who transferred from Dillard University a couple of years ago and who says that except for the first semester she has received scholarships to cover her tuition. "We actually have one-on-one time with professors. At a lot of schools you can't do that. Things are so personal here that you have no choice but to get good grades. We're still an (Atlanta University Center) school and we are in relationships with students everywhere."

Olah says Barber-Scotia, stripped of accreditation in June 2004 for a variety of issues, including questions about grade changes, faculty qualifications and the integrity of courses offered, is reorganizing and rebuilding through steady growth.

"Most postsecondary institutions focus upon the intellectual (the mind) but have conceded the hand (community service) and the heart (spiritual development) to other segments of the population," Olah

said in an e-mail. "BSC continues to offer programs that assist in (the) 'whole' student and personal growth, thereby producing well-rounded individuals who should have a better understanding of the challenges of a global economy and (are) better prepared to meet the challenge of that society.

"In the reorganization, the (board of trustees) wanted to focus upon three academic programs with plans to increase the number of programs as identified by (our) student population ... after regaining accreditation. The (board of trustees) believes that the three programs capture the mission of the college ... undergraduate degree programs in religion, energy and business entrepreneurship."

Paul Quinn, an African Methodist Episcopal-affiliated college, retained its accreditation through a court injunction last year. The Commission on Colleges of the SACS revoked its accreditation because of problems with the school's finances and student outcomes, but Paul Quinn officials took the matter to court. The legal battle continues, and, although Paul Quinn remains accredited, the matter has taken its toll.

"The issues with the accrediting body have had a chilling effect on enrollment," says President Michael Sorrell, a Duke-educated lawyer who has run the college for the last three years.

He said enrollment last year was 151. Even before the problems with accreditation began, he says, enrollment had been falling steadily. But the accreditation problems coupled with his turnaround plan that implements higher academic standards, holds students to their financial commitment and applies more stringent rules of conduct for students, which include a dress code, also affected enrollment, he says.

Sorrell is attempting to reposition Paul Quinn as a school on the path to becoming one of America's great small colleges. The college is implementing a core curriculum that makes writing and public speaking integral parts of each course. Approximately \$1.5 million has gone into capital improvements on the campus: 13 abandoned buildings are in the process of being demolished; there is a new roof on the student union building; classrooms and the student lounge are being renovated; and the landscape is being upgraded and will now include sprinklers.

Observers say Sorrell comes across as a dynamic, hands-on administrator with a fresh vision. That perception appears to have an impact on parents, students, alumni and donors. During the past school year, Sorrell says, the college raised \$1.7 million in outside funding.

And student enrollment is expected to rise to 200 this fall.

"A loss of accreditation does not mean all hope is lost for Black colleges," says Jarrett Carter, founding editor of HBCU-digest.com and executive director and founder of the Center for HBCU Media Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that agitates for stronger media advocacy for HBCUs. "Students and alumni shouldn't look at it as a death sentence. If anything, it can be taken as a sign that something needs immediate positive action. Very rarely would you see an institution that is about to lose accreditation that wouldn't make a significant change."

He points to Paul Quinn College as an example of a college that is trying to make this kind of significant change.

Inspiring Confidence

Like Pritchett at Morris Brown, Sorrell has a pitch for prospective students and their parents as well. He talks up the revamped curriculum, an aggressive retention program that is designed to get students to complete their degrees in five years or less, the rising standards, the small class sizes and the nurturing environment. He tells parents that the college has had a budget surplus for two consecutive years.

Then he tells the parents what their children can expect when they first get there.

"I tell them that the students will call you first semester and want to come home," he says. "They will tell you that I am unfair, too strict, make them write papers in class and that they hate the dress code. Tell them you love them and hang up."

One of those parents who recently bought his pitch is Stephenie Washington, a Memphis, Tenn., mother whose son Brandon will attend Paul Quinn this fall. The two had never heard of Paul Quinn until Brandon's high school basketball coach, an alumnus of the school, suggested it to him.

They decided to check it out.

"We went on Memorial Day weekend," says Washington, an administrative assistant at IBM. "We visited schools in Tennessee and Arkansas. Paul Quinn was

by far the best we visited. It is small. The staff and faculty and everyone appear concerned about the needs of students. To top it off, the president took two hours off his schedule to meet with parents and students. We were in awe of the visit. He has goals for students and a vision for the school. Before I could even talk to Brandon, he told me, 'Mom, this is where I want to go.'"

Before visiting, she says, the accreditation question had concerned her and she felt much better about the matter after talking it over with Sorrell.

"He told us about previous things that had taken place," she says. "We were just positive and believe that everything is going to be OK. That school should have never had its accreditation taken away. They should have never touched that small school. I believe in the vision. Believe in what's going to take place. I believe the Lord won't lead us somewhere knowing that something bad is going to happen."

Fred Henley, a lawyer and management consultant in Dallas and father of a senior at Paul Quinn, said he too was moved by Sorrell's message.

"The guy is sharp and you just can't get around that," says Henley, a third-generation HBCU graduate. "Everything he said made sense. My impression has been that the school and Sorrell have delivered and more. My daughter is now doing an internship full-time with HP out in Plano, (Texas). The reality of it is there are kids at the University of Texas, big-name schools that are looking for jobs. Struggling Paul Quinn was the thing that opened the door for her full time at HP. That says a lot about the confidence of the product being produced."

Carter says presidents of troubled schools like Morris Brown and Paul Quinn can follow a blueprint that inspires confidence in parents, alumni and prospective students by being candid and demonstrating the visionary leadership.

These college leaders, he says, can "talk to parents and say everything is what you say it is, but we want you to look at this plan and realize we're not just sitting back. We're being aggressive about getting other accreditation and making the kinds of connection with the community and corporate bodies that legitimizes that. We have new leadership in place and a plan in place to distance ourselves from past struggles." ■