The Case for Cheyney University And Its Continued Value to the Commonwealth

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Historical Background and the Context

Cheyney University is the oldest Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) institution and is the only historically black university in the State System and one of over 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities in America. Cheyney University has one of the most diverse faculties in the State System, and brings a history of producing outstanding African American leaders in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Nationally, about 19 percent of African Americans age 25 and over hold a college degree compared to about 33 percent of other Americans. According to an article written in 2011 by the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, Pennsylvania ranks 49th, in America, when comparing adults age 25, and over, who are pursuing college degrees. Additionally, according to a survey of adults in the United States who have bachelor’s degrees by counties, approximately 12 percent of African Americans in Philadelphia County have college degrees compared to 30 percent of white Americans ([http://chronicle.com/article/Adults-With-College-Degrees-in/125995/](http://chronicle.com/article/Adults-With-College-Degrees-in/125995/)).

The earliest version of Cheyney University was named The Institute of Colored Youth, and it was founded in 1837 by Quaker Fred Humphreys to provide higher learning to persons of African descent, so that they could gain suitable education and skills to contribute to the Philadelphia region and the Commonwealth. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Cheyney University has opened doors to opportunity, when other doors were closed, to generations of persons of African descent and other Americans. Some of the leaders produced by the Institute of Colored Youth in the 19th century include class valedictorian (1858), teacher, and activist Octavius Catto and 1863 graduate Rebecca Cole (who continued to become the second African American woman in America to earn a medical degree). Leaders who graduated from Cheyney University in the 20th century include CBS journalist and American icon, Ed Bradley; CN Comcast Political Analyst, Robert Traynham; entrepreneur Sam Patterson; Medical doctor and surgeon Kenneth Bridges; University Chancellor Gladys Styles Johnson; Educational leader Dr. Juan Baughn; numerous excellent teachers for the region, and CEO and president Robert W. Bogle.

The 21st century graduates of Cheyney University are just beginning to distinguish themselves. However, the legacy of Cheyney University is being carried forth by 2009 alumnus Dominique Curry who plays with the St. Louis Rams (in the National Football League); by Walter Lewis, a 2010 graduate, who is pursuing an advanced degree in computational biology at Carnegie Mellon; by Martina Randall, a 2009
graduate, who is working on her medical degree in podiatric medicine at Temple University; and by Ezekiel Crenshaw who is pursuing his doctorate at Drexel University. There are also 2011 graduates who hope to pursue legal degrees or advanced degrees in the STEM areas.

Despite a history of less than abundant funding or endowments, Cheyney University has managed to add value to the lives of thousands of citizens and to enhance the intellectual capital of the Philadelphia region and Commonwealth. Further, the current graduation rates of persons of color from institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth, the region, and America still demonstrate the need to continue the work of Cheyney University.

It has been acknowledged that the Philadelphia public schools have seen growth in the overall graduation rate over the past three years. But the rate is still too low for the 21st century knowledge economy. Nonetheless, researchers Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz, in *Unfulfilled Promise*, provide extensive details on why high schools students’ graduation rates are less than 60 percent. Their research demonstrates that there is much work that needs to be done to increase student achievement in Philadelphia.

Moreover, other researchers reveal that students of color (African American and Hispanic) are graduating from high school at lower rates than their white counterparts, taking fewer Advanced Placement courses, and envisioning less a future that involves college. Cheyney University is one attractive option for these students, and other students, who need a more personal interaction with professors and adults who are positive role models.

**Cheyney University Offers a Unique Value**

While Cheyney University has been a small liberal arts institution since it joined the Commonwealth’s State System of Higher Education in 1983, it offers a unique value to many students of color and others who have not been advantaged by the various post secondary institutions and/or familial backgrounds. For the last five years, for example, Cheyney University has accepted an entering class of about 400 students who, though talented and deserving, would be lost in some other institutions of higher education. These students, who are survivors of their secondary schools, still tended to have been either neglected or invisible in their secondary institutions. They come to Cheyney University with
hopes that they can remedy the educational misfortunes of the past, and with hopes that they can leave the University as competitive graduate students or wage earners in a global economy.

Cheyney University offers a unique value to these students, and the Commonwealth, because it accepts students through a holistic examination of their potential. This means that the admissions staff examines the students grade point averages, letters of recommendations, background information, and admits students who have the determination and potential to succeed—these students might not have score as highly on their SAT or ACT tests as students entering other institutions of higher education—yet they are deserving of a chance.

Once these students are accepted, they are monitored by the newly formed University College and the Academic Success Center. The professionals in these areas are experienced counselors, role models, and adults who care about the success of each student. They get to know the students’ stories, their talents, and their hardships. As the students pursue through their majors, a University staff person monitors and solicits requests for internship experiences. Cheyney University is committed to obtaining internship experiences for each student who wants to participate in such an experience. These internship experiences allow students to develop the social and work skills needed to be successful in the work world after graduation. As students near graduate, they work with staff in the Career Services area to develop the appropriate resume, demeanor, and techniques for securing a job in which they can succeed. Because of the small size of the University, these services and interactions with students are more personal and more forceful in directing their life choices.

It is the University’s goal, through Student Affairs, to have each student engaged in some type of activity to connect to the University community. These activities include Greek organizations, academic societies, residential learning communities, the choir, athletics, the band, and/or other such groups.

The University is currently constructing its first new residence hall in the last 30 years. This 400 bed residence hall will feature residential learning communities in which students will be encouraged to participate in to develop academically and to transition into responsible and mature adults. The residence halls will also be used as other venues to help expose students to cultural and social activities.
Academically, the University community has expressed a strong interest in the development of centers of excellence in areas that include media and fine arts, natural and applied sciences, and urban education. The establishment of centers of excellence is a means for highlighting and improving academic programs; focusing grant activity and fundraising; garnering external support for the development of quality academic programs; and directing public service activities. Particularly, each center of excellence will be comprised of an advisory council that correlates the academic program to industry needs and identifies and acquires resources for the center of excellence. The University is currently focusing on the development of its first center of excellence—communications media, fine arts, and entertainment arts. With the construction of its new science building, the University is also developing its center of excellence in natural and applied sciences. Cheyney University has a strong science department. The University comes in second in the State System of Higher Education in its production of grants for research. The Call Me MISTER Program has begun the reestablishment of teacher education and the development of teacher leaders at Cheyney University.

According to data distributed by the State System of Higher Education in 2006, Cheyney University is a major employer in Delaware County, employing approximately 300 employees and creating a total employment impact in the county of an additional 260 jobs. Moreover, the University generates more than 102.3 million annually in direct and indirect business stimulus, including $30.8 million per year in Delaware County alone. This later figure encompasses spending by the institution, faculty, staff, students, and visitors. Further, the University attracts grants yearly which translate in economic development. In the current academic year, the University has already attracted an additional 7 million dollars in grants and external funding. The University also contributes to economic development in the region by conducting training through the Workforce & Economic Development Network.

Thus, Cheyney University, through it work with talented, but disadvantage students and families, and the development of centers of excellence will mirror state and regional plans and will prepare diverse persons to take needed leadership roles in the 21st century in communication media, fine arts, and entertainment arts; natural and applied sciences; and urban education.

Without a doubt, one of the successes of Cheyney University has been its Keystone Honors Program. After about a decade of operation, the Keystone Honors Academy demonstrates how successful the students of Cheyney University can be with appropriate monetary and human resources. Furthermore, the Honors Academy is an example of a center of excellence with economic development benefits that
will continue to be realized for future generations. In the 2007-2008 academic year, there were 250 students enrolled in the Honors Academy. Approximately seventy of those students graduated in the 2008 Spring Commencement. Keystone Honors Academy Students are high achieving students who were attracted to pursue higher education at Cheyney University with academic scholarships. The retention rate of Keystone Honors Students is approximately 86 percent.

Without the competitive scholarships offered to these high achieving students, the Commonwealth might have permanently lost some of these high achieving students to other states. In order to attract these students to Cheyney University, the institution created a desirable living and learning environment which included a refurbished living and learning residence hall, private bathrooms, computer resources, attractive furnishings, a Dean for the Honors College, and a more robust honors environment of seminars and mentors. As expected many Keystone Honors Academy students continue to pursue graduate study in the Commonwealth through the Bond Hill graduate program and contribute to the intellectual capital of the region and nation. The continuation and expansion of the Keystone Honors Program is crucial to the success of the Commonwealth and the remediation of the low college going rate for targeted groups.

Without a doubt, Cheyney University continues to fulfill its historic mission to provide access and opportunities to African Americans and other developing leaders. Moreover, it is contributing to the intellectual capital of the 21st century. Alumni of Cheyney University continue to contribute to the progress and well-being of America in many cities, disciplines, and venues throughout the world. Now, Cheyney University – this venerable American treasure – must make a case to continue the work it does with disadvantaged and low-income citizens of the Commonwealth and Americans whose families have contributed to this country since the Mayflower.

The success of the Keystone Academy demonstrates what is needed to produce more intellectually competitive citizens for the Commonwealth.