



Orlando's United Negro College Fund brings back fundraising walk for underfunded HBCUs

*By Shauna Muckle
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ORLANDO, FL (July 28, 2022) – Orlando's United Negro College Fund, a major funding source for Central Florida's historically Black colleges and universities, will host its signature fundraising event in-person on Sept. 17 for the first time in two years.

The UNCF Walk for Education is held by individual chapters across the U.S. each fall. The event is in its 15th year in Orlando and funds UNCF's scholarships for underserved and minority students and donations to HBCUs.

Orlando's chapter focuses on fundraising for Daytona Beach's Bethune-Cookman University, an HBCU with a student population of 2,624.

The entry fee for the walk is \$30. UNCF wants to increase its attendance from the 400 attendees that typically turned out during pre-Covid years, said **Gwen Hewitt**, the area development director for UNCF's Orlando chapter. The goal is to raise \$85,000 from the walk.

Representatives from the University of Central Florida, Rollins College, Bethune-Cookman and Florida A&M University, a public HBCU, will attend the event and offer information to high schoolers. Career booths also will be stationed at the event with job and internship opportunities for students.

Having in-person access to resources will be a key addition to an event that for the last two years was conducted virtually, Hewitt said.

UNCF has more than 400 scholarships available to first-generation and minority students. Awards average about \$6,000 and support students attending 1,100 colleges across the U.S., including both HBCUs and predominantly white institutions.

Along with funding individual students' higher education, UNCF has supported 37 private HBCUs since its founding in 1944.

HBCUs typically are underfunded for two reasons: below-average endowments and low tuition costs, Hewitt said. That leaves organizations like UNCF to fill in the gap.

Smaller endowments mean HBCUs have less money to spend on capital improvements. Already, the schools prioritize getting quality faculty and keeping tuition costs low relative to other private universities, meaning facilities are often severely outdated, Hewitt said.

“In an effort to keep tuition affordable, the decision of most HBCUs is to defray the expense of the infrastructure to make sure more students can attend.”

The average tuition for a U.S. private school was \$38,185 in the 2021-22 school year, according to U.S. News and World Report. In comparison, 2022-23 tuition at Bethune-Cookman is \$25,190.

A small development team also limits how much HBCUs can fundraise internally, said **Sherry Paramore**, vice president of institutional advancement at Bethune-Cookman.

“Staffing is probably the largest challenge for HBCUs. If you look at UCF and their development offices, they probably have 30 people, and we have maybe five. When our team is so small, UNCF has to fill that gap to cultivate and reach more donors. It helps expand our reach and bring in additional dollars.”

Fundraising for HBCU endowments is part of why UNCF holds its Walk for Education, Hewitt said.

Alongside UNCF, Black sororities and fraternities have helped build endowments up.

Tiffany Moore Russell, an Orlando native and the South Atlantic regional director of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, said her organization has raised \$8 billion for HBCU endowments nationally. Funding those endowments is key to ensuring HBCUs continue to be a viable option for Black youth, she said.

“We know that endowments help with the sustainability of many higher education institutions. For us, it’s promoting them as an option for our young people and exposing them to what they have to offer. We’re trying to support them financially and make sure they are sustainable.”

HBCUs aren’t just an affordable academic option for Black students, Hewitt said. They also have a significant economic impact in the communities surrounding them.

A report by UNCF on the economic impact of HBCUs found that Bethune-Cookman generates \$136 million in annual spending in Daytona Beach and creates 1,469 local jobs.

Students and faculty spend money on housing and retail options in the community, Paramore said. The university also draws crowds of 50,000 or more for events like homecoming and graduation, which translates into more spending on lodging and retail in Daytona Beach.

The report also found that the total annual economic impact of HBCUs is \$14.8 billion nationally, and the schools generate 134,090 jobs for local and regional economies. Florida’s other HBCUs include Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Florida A&M University in Tallahassee and Florida Memorial University in Miami Gardens.

An Orlando native, Tiffany Moore Russell, has been named the South Atlantic regional director of Alpha Kappa Alpha, one of the largest Black sororities in the nation — and she plans to increase the group's economic and community impact in Central Florida and elsewhere.

Initiatives include launching a Black women-led digital banking institution, funding HBCU endowments and more.

For starters, AKA wants to release its own digital banking institution, For Members Only Federal Credit Union. It will be the first Black-led, woman-owned and sorority-led digital banking organization in the U.S., according to the sorority's website. "To be able to have an online mobile digital banking system owned by Black women is huge because it promotes Black wealth. It promotes Black dollars," she said.

The Orlando area has five AKA chapters: one at the University of Central Florida and four graduate chapters of working professionals. The last time someone from Orlando occupied Russell's position was 60 years ago, she said.

AKA is a sprawling organization that extends beyond college campuses. The 114-year-old sorority has 325,000 members and over 1,000 chapters in the U.S. and abroad.

Danette Anthony Reed was named AKA's new international president and CEO in July. As South Atlantic regional director, Russell will be responsible for carrying out Reed's five community impact initiatives in her territory of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

Those initiatives include:

Strengthening sisterhood: Russell said expanding outreach and community between chapters is always critical to AKA.

Empowering families: This prong involves "looking for multigenerational approaches to fortifying families in our community," Russell said. That includes addressing childhood hunger, promoting positive mental health and giving back to senior communities.

Promoting economic wealth: Russell said she will focus on promoting homeownership and helping Black communities understand credit and financing, among other economic equity initiatives. AKA also is diving into the banking space itself with its For Members Only Federal Credit Union.

Caring for the environment and reducing waste: Action in the community related to this pillar could include chapters launching community gardens or community clean-ups.

Advocating for social justice: The last pillar will focus on voter registration, mobilization and other forms of Black civic participation.

Russell plans to focus on making sure AKA members are physically present in their local communities and holding events, including in Orlando. She also will expand the sorority's work with data and documenting community impact that way, she said.

Additional initiatives will include supporting other Black-led institutions, like historically Black colleges and universities, known as HBCUs, Russell said. AKA has raised \$8 billion to support HBCU endowments.

HBCUs typically have smaller development offices compared to larger colleges and universities, said Sherry Paramore, vice president of institutional advancement at Bethune-Cookman University, an HBCU in Daytona Beach.

“If you look at UCF and their development offices, they probably have 30 people and we maybe have five. If you have 30 people each with a \$1 million goal, you can raise \$30 million easily. I'm the only one on the team right now who's raising money. It's hard to reach that level unless you have donor capacity to bring in the mega-gifts.”

External fundraising sources like AKA are often key to bringing in more donors and sustaining capital improvements while keeping tuition costs low, she said.

Russell, an Orlando native, said she never expected to become a lifelong member of a sorority before she went to college. AKA drew her in as a student at the University of South Florida. She joined the organization in 1994.

“When I got to USF, I saw the AKAs on campus and they were the leaders. For me, this young girl from Orlando, I was like, ‘I want to be a part of that.’”

Russell said she has had the opportunity to act as a mentor herself by facilitating workshops, educating on social justice panels and chairing conferences in Orlando.

“I've been marrying two worlds — my sorority has been bringing economic impact to the community I serve. It has helped me grow as a leader: how to motivate people to follow you, how to move people to bring about change.”

Russell is the Orange County Clerk of Courts. She holds a bachelor's in political science from USF and a law degree from Florida State University College of Law.

AKA is one of nine Greek organizations included in the National Pan-Hellenic Council, a coalition of Black sororities and fraternities founded in 1930.