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Byron Dobson: Budget cuts force HBCUs to redefine what works

A sensitive initiative being undertaken by Howard University, the nation's largest private black institution of higher education, was published this week in the Washington Post.

The story outlined the challenges for Howard President Sidney Ribeau as he considers a review of the university's academic programs and the school's mission. Ribeau is looking at what majors the Washington, D.C.-based university can target for cuts — as many as 20 undergraduate programs — so that Howard can focus its resources on its core majors and other programs that make it one the world's most respected institutions.

This article caught my attention because, in Tallahassee, Florida A&M University President James Ammons has raised the warning flag that he must make some tough decisions at FAMU in light of very serious state budget shortfalls. Public universities have had millions of dollars stripped from their budgets in previous years, to the point that more dramatic belt-tightening is needed.

Universities across the country are being forced to take a critical look at their offerings, enrollment and the number of degrees awarded in certain majors. They're considering how to continue to offer salaries that will attract the top professors and students to their campuses.

These decisions appear to be critical to Historically Black Colleges and Universities because of the special role these institutions have served. They attract and produce some of the country's top graduates, while at the same time giving a chance to students who might otherwise not go to college.

Universities such as FAMU and Howard must continue to adjust to this paradigm change in higher education.

An October report in Diverse: Issues in Higher Education noted that Grambling State University in Grambling, La., is merging some academic programs to save $10 million over the next two years, that Dillard University in New Orleans is reducing its number of majors, and that Spellman College in Atlanta is working with Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University in offering a teacher-certification program.

According to the Washington Post report, Howard's president is looking at closing or cutting back 20 undergraduate programs and an equal number of graduate
offerings. Targeted are majors in philosophy, anthropology, the classics, hospitality management and nutritional sciences. Another critical major, in African Studies, is being considered for the list, according to the Post report.

Meanwhile, Ammons has announced that the School of General Studies, the School of Graduate Studies and a research laboratory in Panama City all will be closing.

FAMU Provost Cynthia Hughes Harris said the university simply cannot continue to offer such programs as it is repeatedly faced with budget cuts such as the $30 million in state money in the past three years.

The loss of the School of General Studies is expected to have a major impact, as professors on campus have noted that significant numbers of students continue to struggle with basic skills needed to keep up with the academic demands.

In an address to faculty this fall, Ammons said, "We can no longer continue to be the best in everything. For years that has been the FAMU way. FAMU has to evolve."

In the past, Howard and FAMU, among other HBCUs, have had strong rivalries in competing for the nation’s top black students based on what they had to offer and the reputations that preceded them.

Now both universities find themselves being forced to take a hard look at what majors and what programs are worth investing in as they brace themselves for long-term survival.

Those decisions are not likely to be easy. But in the end — as in business, government and households where it's necessary to pare down to the basics — the most resilient universities, not those most resistant to change, will survive.

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