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President

February 23, 2009

To: Editor, New York Times

From: Beverly Daniel Tatum, President, Spelman College

Re: Factual Inaccuracies in “Economy Hits Hard on Black Campuses”

As president of Spelman College, I must object to the factual inaccuracy of the February 19 article by Shaila Dewan, “Economy Hits Hard on Black Campuses.” Specifically, it stated “Spelman, an Atlanta college for women that is among the wealthiest and most prestigious historically black colleges, has eliminated 35 staff positions and is projecting a \$4.8 million deficit next year after a decline in its enrollment.” I am aware that the on-line version of the article has been changed and now explains that Spelman “has eliminated 35 staff positions to compensate for a projected \$4.8 million deficit next year after a decline in enrollment,” yet even this change does not correctly state the facts at Spelman College.

Here is an accurate statement of the situation at Spelman: This year we have seen more students struggle to meet their tuition payments, and our enrollment is 55 students below what we expected it to be (a 2% decline), and we have curtailed spending to accommodate that loss in income and insure a balanced budget. Looking ahead to next year, we recognized that we might again see a dip in enrollment even though our applications are at an all-time high (nearly 6,000 for 550 spaces in the entering class) because so many of our current students are struggling to find the funds they need to continue. We projected a \$4.8 million shortfall in income based not only on anticipated changes in enrollment (perhaps 5%), but also an expected loss in endowment income due to declines in our investment portfolio (a problem we share with many other institutions), a challenging fundraising climate, and rising expenses such as utility costs and health care benefits. Our decision to notify our employees now of staff reductions we will take in 2009-2010 was a prudent step designed to give them time to plan and to insure that we can bring forward a balanced budget for next year as we have for at least the last 35 years.

Attributing our budget decisions to declines in enrollment alone is factually inaccurate, and is made more injurious by beginning the article with the sad story of Morris Brown College, whose enrollment has declined from 2600 to 151 following the loss of accreditation and eligibility for federal financial aid in 2003. The author acknowledges that Morris Brown’s difficulties are not due to the current economy but “stem largely from financial mismanagement” and therefore irrelevant to the primary subject of the article. However using this example to set the opening context of the article suggests that the slow demise that Morris Brown is experiencing is a fate awaiting the other HBCUs mentioned when, in fact, the pro-active steps that they are taking to

control budgets are examples of strong financial management in the face of a difficult economy, the kind of fiscal oversight that increases the likelihood of long-term health. In this case, Spelman College and the other HBCUs mentioned are more similar to Harvard, MIT, Dartmouth, and Smith – all of whom have announced budget reductions for the coming year – than to the failing Morris Brown.

This is not a minor point. There is a long-standing journalistic tendency to paint all HBCUs with the same brush of inadequacy which veils the success of schools like Spelman College, which has been an engine of social mobility for Black students for decades, boasting a graduation rate of nearly 80%, and carries the recognition of the National Science Foundation as one of the top baccalaureate producers of African American female Ph.D. scientists in the nation. Majority institutions are rarely subjected to this kind of group stereotyping.

Despite these concerns, however, the article does highlight the important challenge that those institutions that serve large numbers of low-income African-American students face because these underserved students are from economically vulnerable communities. The fact that there are so many talented students of color from underrepresented communities who have succeeded in high school and are succeeding in college, but are now at risk of being forced out of school by the impact of rising unemployment, losses in home equity, and shrinking access to private student loans is a concern of national consequence. At a time when we want to encourage more young people to strive for the kind of academic excellence that our nation will need to remain globally competitive, a generation of black middle school and high school students are watching their older brothers and sisters fall short of the goal of a college degree because they could not find the funds to continue. Returning home with debt and no degree is a worst-case outcome that damages not only the student but the community to which he or she returns. This is a consequence we should all be concerned about, and it is a story worth telling. It deserves to be told well.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Beverly Daniel Tatum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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