

EBONY

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How Private Funders Help Black Students Get an Education

Many African Americans aiming for a college degree find themselves just short of their goals due to finances, but there are angels who look for deserving students to help out.



On a Sunday morning in April, dappled sunlight streamed through the stained glass windows of Rankin Chapel on the campus of Howard University. Seated in the wooden pews was an assembly of African American students plus professors, the university president, clergy and community members—all on hand for a special ceremony that awarded scholarships worth at least \$12,000 each to eight deserving students.

The cash is enough to pay for one full semester at the school, where undergraduate tuition last year topped \$22,000. The gifts came courtesy of the Artishia and Frederick Jordan Scholarship Fund. Founded in the late 1970s, it is named for the late Frederick Douglass Jordan—an African Methodist Episcopal bishop and Howard alum—and his wife. Now celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the family-run fund has taken the seed money of its original benefactor, invested wisely and watched it grow. To date, the Jordan Fund has awarded more than \$1.6 million to students at Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

The Jordan Fund is not alone. Hundreds of thousands of Black students nationwide apply for and receive privately funded college scholarships—monies that are often granted with a different set of rules than traditional school-granted scholarships.

“Some of the best and brightest students matriculate at HBCUs, and many are the first-generation in their families to attend college,” says Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Ph.D., president of the Jordan Fund board. “But one major issue is how they will finance their higher education. They often struggle. We want to ensure these scholars are given the necessary support to succeed.”

Millions of Americans take out loans to pay for college. According to federal statistics, approximately 40 million Americans have student loans, and of that number, about 40 percent are African-Americans. Meanwhile, the median income of Black households is \$34,600 as compared to \$58,300 for White households, U.S. Census Bureau data shows.

"No one should be prevented from attending and graduating from college simply because their family cannot afford it," says Heather C. McGhee, president of Demos, a New York-based think tank that promotes economic and political equality. "But increasingly, low income students and students of color are graduating with enormous debt. And many are dropping out before they earn a degree, still owing significant amounts of money."

A 2015 Demos report entitled “Debt for Diploma,” notes that “just 20 years ago, fewer than half of graduates needed to borrow for a bachelor’s degree,” but now “three in four students must take on debt if they want to graduate.” The analysis further reveals that African American and low income students borrow more money (and more frequently) than Whites while pursuing degrees.

Joy Stradford, a 2015-2016 Jordan Fund scholar, is among the students who have faced challenges while cobbling together cash for school.

“As the daughter of a single mother, I have always struggled financially,” says Stradford, who lives in New Jersey. “Last year, I was not approved for a student loan and my mother told me I was going to have to come home and stop my education at my dream school. This scholarship was God-sent.”

Other African American philanthropists such as Eddie and C. Sylvia Brown of Maryland; Bernard and Shirley Kinsey in California; and Calvin and Tina Tyler in Nevada have shared their wealth with HBCUs. Additionally, celebs—Oprah, Usher and Tom Joyner, to name a few—are helping put young people through college.

“Private donors have a unique opportunity to acknowledge students who would not fit within typical scholarship portfolios, students who may not have strong academic backgrounds, but their on-campus leadership, community organizing skills and entrepreneurial talents deserve to be recognized,” says Jessica Johnson, executive director of The Scholarship Academy, which offers services aimed at helping high school and college students identify cash resources and produce competitive applications.

By redefining what is considered “scholarship-worthy,” she says, “private scholarship donors can ultimately create their own platforms to celebrate the accomplishments college students are making on campus and in their communities.”

A 2012 report from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors indicated that African Americans donated 25 percent more of their income than Whites and other ethnic groups. That same report suggested nearly two-thirds of Black households made charitable donations to the tune of \$11 billion annually.

“We have enough disposable income in the community to solve our college education woes, period,” says Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. “We’ve always given to the Black church. To the extent that we truly value education, we have to show that with our conduct and our money.”

Launched in 1987, the fund that bears the name of America’s first Black Supreme Court Justice impacts an estimated 300,000 students at 47 member institutions. To date, more than \$250 million in scholarships and related support have gone to TCMF students and member schools. The organization boasts an average graduation rate of 97 percent for scholarship recipients, who have gone on to earn undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degrees.

Another well known fund, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), in 2015 received more than 100,000 individual gifts through its direct mail and online program, raising more than \$6.5 million.

That’s not to say small gifts aren’t appreciated, and it doesn’t take much for an individual to help.

“The average person gives us about \$64,” says Larry Griffith, Senior Vice President of Scholarships and Programs for UNCF. “I tell people that you can give up coffee for a month and help send a student to college.”

Irvine, of the Jordan Fund, says helping a student attend college is beneficial not only for African-Americans who have historically utilized higher education as a ladder of opportunity, but for the entire nation.

“You don’t need an elaborate bureaucracy to give as individual or start a family fund,” she says. “Think about the legacy you’re creating. It will live on.”