

Historic AME school receives major gift to aid revitalization efforts

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In late September, Wilberforce University received a gift of \$1.2 million from an anonymous donor to launch a matching gift initiative for its #WilberforceUnite campaign. The African Methodist Episcopal-affiliated school—the oldest historically black college in the nation—has been trying to raise funds since being placed on probation by a regional accreditation agency earlier this year due to its ongoing financial struggles.

“This gift is tangible recognition that the Wilberforce University renaissance is real,” university president Elfred Anthony Pinkard told the *Christian Recorder*, the AME Church’s official newspaper. “As a university community, we are absolutely committed to the hard work required for institutional transformation. Our work has begun in earnest, and this gift serves as an urgent reminder that we must remain vigilant and focused on excellence and high performance.”

Financial and legal struggles have plagued the school for years.

In 2014, *Inside Higher Ed* reported that Wilberforce was forced to borrow from its endowment to cover \$9.7 million in deficits. Two years later, according to the *Dayton Daily News*, the school cut \$750,000 from its payroll and put ten acres of the campus up for sale—hoping to lease back the property. Then, in 2018, two companies sued Wilberforce for a combined \$3.5 million, alleging the school had failed to pay for security and construction services.

Yet even before the anonymous gift, it seemed things were turning around for Wilberforce. The 2018 freshman class was one of the largest in recent history: about 300 students, according to local media coverage.

“I know there are colleagues of mine from other institutions reading that and saying ‘those numbers are small,’” Pinkard told the *Dayton Daily News* at the time. “But for Wilberforce and where we have been over the last five years, that is a significant increase.” The hope, Pinkard added, is that the increased tuition revenue will help the school get back on track.

Wilberforce's no. 1 fundraising goal is to improve student housing. In 2014, it was reported that campus buildings had depreciated in value by \$18.5 million. At the beginning of 2019, a burst pipe closed one dormitory for four months, forcing students to move temporarily to a nearby hotel. Other fundraising plans include financial aid for students and faculty and staff development.

The anonymous donor's stated purpose was to "reinvigorate" fundraising efforts, and in his statement to the *Christian Recorder*, Pinkard said he is hoping for the same.

"We challenge everyone to donate today and show your support for the nation's oldest private HBCU, Wilberforce University," he said. —*Christian Century* staff