

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Choosing Cheyney: Why Cheyney University is Still a Choice for College Bound Students

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Zachary C. Brown is the Assistant Director for Student Recruitment and Retention in Purdue University's College of Agriculture Office of Multicultural Programs. Zachary's research has focused on the mentorship of women and underrepresented graduate students, the Black experience at 1862 Land-Grant Universities, HBCU college choice and transition, university presidential leadership, and AG+STEM K-12 educational interventions.



*There was a long period in America's history when the only quality education available to young Black people was at a school designed and designated for them, where they could be included, respected, and encouraged. While Cheyney University—the first HBCU in America—remains committed to ensuring a nurturing environment for our students, our work does not stop there. Our vision is to become the premier educational model for*

*excellence in academics, character, and social responsibility. So, when our students graduate, they are academically prepared, they have the character necessary to thrive, and they have a social conscience that is needed in today's world. Through support systems, career-informed curricula, paid internships, and public-private partnerships, we are equipping our students to be leaders in the careers that await them—and in life.*

**Aaron A. Walton, President**  
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania

## INTRODUCTION

'Problems mount at Cheyney University, the oldest HBCU,' 'Cheyney University faces enrollment, financial problems,' and 'Are Historically Black Colleges Dying?' are some of the headlines that were written five years ago about Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (Cheyney University), the nation's first and oldest historically Black college or university (HBCU). At the time, the institution experienced a host of issues ranging from financial deficits, significant enrollment declines, probation due to accreditation concerns, high leadership turnover, and graduation rates below the national average. Many believed that the institution would close its doors. Since 2015, Cheyney University has made remarkable progress. Under the leadership of President Aaron Walton, the university

saw a 51% increase in enrollment (*Philadelphia Tribune*, 2020), affirmed its accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Snyder, 2019), and worked diligently with the Governor of Pennsylvania to eliminate \$40 million in debt to balance its institutional budget. The institution has also established strategic partnerships with corporations and organizations, identified and sustained new streams of revenue, created holistic and data-driven trauma support for all students, and has chartered a new Institute that will serve as a hub and facilitator for addressing contemporary social issues. The University has dramatically transformed, despite being on the brink of survival. Anchoring this research in the voices and stories of Cheyney University students, this brief seeks to tell the story of recovery and restoration for Cheyney University. More specifically, we will examine the motivations and college choice process of current Cheyney University students, who decided to enroll at the institution amidst turmoil and in spite of Cheyney's embattled history and tattered reputation. In addition to sharing the qualitative insight provided by Cheyney students, we will offer recommendations for institutions — Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs, that are in similar positions, college-going students looking to enroll at HBCUs, and parents who are looking to send their children to institutions that value, embrace, and honor their cultural identity.

## BACKGROUND

In 1832, Quaker and philanthropist Richard Humphreys bequeathed a portion of his estate (valued at \$300,000 in 2021) to open a school for the descendants of the African race. On February 25, 1837, the African Institute was established from this bequest. Several weeks later, the name was changed to The Institute for Colored Youth (ICY). This pivotal decision made it possible for modern HBCUs to exist within the current higher education landscape. The history and impact of Humphreys and ICY should not be discounted as we reflect on the past and make plans for the future. In 1837, 28 years before the Emancipation Proclamation and two years after the education of Black people (not yet recognized as citizens) was outlawed, the ICY was established. This progressive push is the beginning of the history and story of HBCUs and Cheyney University. The Institute for Colored Youth paved the way for the establishment of more than 100 institutions dedicated to the education of Black people, including neighboring Ashmun Institute in 1854 (later to become Lincoln



University) and Wilberforce University in 1856. By 1880, more than 45 HBCUs had been established, almost entirely in the South. By 1932, there were 117 HBCUs in operation. Serving as a model to other HBCUs was not ICY's only role – the school also influenced the nation. From the inception of the ICY, there was a commitment to change that started a legacy of firsts in areas such as art, medicine, law and leadership.

Cheyney alumnus, Julian Abele, class of 1896, was the first Black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Fine Arts. Abele changed the landscape of Philadelphia by designing the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Free Library of Philadelphia. Alumna Rebecca J. Cole, class of 1863, changed the face of medicine, becoming the first Black woman to graduate from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and the second Black woman to become a physician in the United States. In subsequent years, the ICY was renamed Cheyney Training School for Teachers (July 1914), Cheyney State Teacher's College (1951), Cheyney State College (1959), and eventually Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (1983). Today, Cheyney University represents a national treasure, as the oldest institution of higher education whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans. Today, Cheyney alumni, recognized globally, affectionately known as living legacies continue to make contributions in business, medicine, education, law and policy.

## CHEYNEY IN 2020

In 2008, Cheyney's enrollment was about 1,470 full-time students and by 2015, the enrollment had dropped to just under 700, a sharp contrast. Table 1 shows the five-year trends for the institution. The Fall 2015 numbers are representative of where the University was, after a few years of rapidly declining enrollment. The numbers are at their lowest in fall of 2018. In that same year, the institution hired a new President, Aaron Walton, who came with a plan to "shrink to grow" to improve University outcomes, including retention, graduation and enrollments. In 2018, Cheyney also changed the enrollment strategy from open - enrollment to actively recruiting higher caliber students. This strategy was designed to elevate the profile of University to attract a different type of student. In fall 2020, the University showed promise for a transformative enrollment year, projecting a total enrollment of 685, which would be an



an 11% increase over 2019. In addition, the University hoped to enroll at least 277 new freshmen (30% increase over 2019 entering class). While, Cheyney did not quite reach the projections, they came impressively close. The 2020 enrollment year closed with 627 total students and 222 new first time, full-time freshman students.

President Walton's arrival brought an overall shift in institutional priorities and leadership. He brought 40 years of business and industry experience, including turning around companies at the "fledgling" stage and making them profitable. In an interview with President Walton, his vision and focus for Cheyney University's future was made clear. Walton holds the view that the current higher education model is only sustainable for institutions with large endowments. He believed that for Cheyney University to survive, there was a need to assess its overall financial

TABLE 1: ENROLLMENT AT CHEYNEY 2015-2019

	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019
Undergraduate Fall Enrollment	686	709	723	469	618
Change from prior year	-31%	3%	2%	-35%	32%
Total Freshmen Applications	1,708	2,345	3,268	2,943	3,199
Change from prior year	-31%	37%	39%	-10%	9%
Total Enrolled New Freshmen	230	187	213	102	213
Change from prior year	-32%	87%	14%	-52%	109%

standing. Walton's planned assessment of the university was focused on identifying institutional assets that could be re-envisioned as opportunities and spaces for growth. For example, under his leadership it was identified that Cheyney was sitting in a valuable location with numerous buildings left unoccupied. Through a relationship with Mosaic Development Partners, he wanted to identify potential industry partners that could rent the empty spaces on campus. In turn, this would provide additional financial income for the university and create internship opportunities on campus. Walton shared that his vision was larger than the university, however. He was pursuing partnerships that could "benefit the Chester and Delaware County locations...looking at how we help the state, because we are a state-owned institution." President Walton wants to ensure that Cheyney is seen as a valuable asset within the state, while also ensuring the university is prepared to sustain its existence through partnerships without the endowment funds found at larger institutions.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence students' decisions to enroll (college choice) at Cheyney University. In this study, we used a qualitative design to understand how and why current Cheyney University undergraduates decided to choose Cheyney University for their higher educational pursuits. The semi-structured

protocol consisted of 13 primary questions grouped around three areas: Cheyney, College Choice, and Retention. Participants were asked to reflect on their college choice process, their decision to apply and select Cheyney University, and their decision to enroll. The research team analyzed data from 20 in-depth semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and a demographic survey. All interviews, which lasted 30-60 minutes, were conducted via phone or Zoom. Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The research team used peer debriefing, axial coding, and member checks to confirm accuracy of interpretations and conclusions.

A qualitative approach to this topic was selected to best capture the rich, descriptive nature of the college choice process of participants as it related specifically to Cheyney University. Typical studies that explore HBCU college choice look at current Black high school students who may select an HBCU in the future. However, this study's sample consists of current Cheyney University students.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the study included students enrolled at Cheyney University during the Spring 2020 semester (See Table 2). Study recruitment emails and letters were shared with the general student population at Cheyney that asked students to complete a study-interest survey. All students

**TABLE 2: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Participant	Hometown	Major	Classification
Participant #1	Atlantic City, NJ	Biology	Senior
Participant #2	Philadelphia, PA	Criminal Justice	Freshman
Participant #3	Harrisburg, PA	Psychology	Junior
Participant #4	Chester, PA	Biology	Sophomore
Participant #5	Philadelphia, PA	Biology	Sophomore
Participant #6	Coatesville, PA	Psychology	Senior
Participant #7	Philadelphia, PA	Psychology	Sophomore
Participant #8	Philadelphia, PA	Psychology	Sophomore
Participant #9	Camden, NJ	Biology	Junior
Participant #10	Queens, NY	Communications	Freshman
Participant #11	Philadelphia, PA	Business Administration	Freshman
Participant #12	Lancaster, PA	Biology	Freshman
Participant #13	Jersey City, NJ	Hotel, Restaurant, & Tourism Management	Junior
Participant #14	Trenton, NJ	Early Childhood Education	Freshman
Participant #15	Philadelphia, PA	Graphic Design	Freshman
Participant #16	Philadelphia, PA	Not provided	Senior
Participant #17	Philadelphia, PA	Psychology	Sophomore
Participant #18	Brooklyn, NY	Not provided	N/A
Participant #19	Philadelphia, PA	Business Administration	Sophomore
Participant #20	Philadelphia, PA	Hotel, Restaurant, & Tourism Management	Freshman

that completed the survey were contacted, and twenty students agreed to be interviewed. Approximately half of the participants were freshmen or sophomores. Students from a wide range of majors were included within the study, and most students considered their hometown to be in Pennsylvania. Student names presented are pseudonyms that the researchers randomly selected.

CHEYNEY STUDENT BODY CHARACTERISTICS	FRESHMEN CLASS STATISTICS (FALL 2020)
Fall 2019-2020 Freshmen Retention Rate: 56%	222 New Freshmen
83% of students from Pennsylvania	84% In-State (51% from Philadelphia)
Average age of student body: 20	Average HS GPA of 2.91
232 honors (Keystone, Humphries, and BOG scholars)	SAT range (25th to 75th percentiles) 840-1040
463 On Campus Students (74%)	463 On Campus Students (74%)
72% Pell Recipients	72% Pell Recipients
Student to Faculty Ratio: 13 to 1	Student to Faculty Ratio: 13 to 1

FALL 2020 ENROLLMENT			
	Women	Men	Total
Degree Seeking	389	236	625
Non-Degree	2		
Total Undergrads	391	236	627

*Additional demographic data can be found in the Appendix.*





## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the analysis of the interviews, we identified several areas that aligned across the 20 current students concerning their decisions to enroll at Cheyney University and students' resulting experiences. These areas included college choice, institutional/HBCU awareness, and systems of support (administrators, faculty, staff, and peers). The area of college choice focuses on the primary reason(s) that led students to select Cheyney University. Institutional/HBCU awareness focuses on the knowledge that students hold regarding HBCUs, generally defined and specifically related to Cheyney University before enrolling in the institution. Lastly, systems of support focuses on the structure of institutional support within Cheyney that were perceived by students. The perceptions held by students in each of these areas included negative, positive, and neutral views.

## COLLEGE CHOICE

During the interview process, students were asked to describe the reasons that led them to apply to Cheyney and later whether there were any regrets regarding the choice. Data revealed many reasons that students chose to attend Cheyney University, but two areas consistently appeared at the forefront of students' minds. A number of students who were residents of the State of Pennsylvania shared that they chose to attend Cheyney due to their respective hometowns' proximity. One student shared that "Cheyney was far enough away that I'm not home, but it's close enough to where if I needed to be home, I could get there." This sentiment was shared by many students that felt choosing Cheyney allowed them to leave home for their collegiate experiences while still residing within a safety net accessible by their families and loved ones. Multiple students also expressed that the relative cost of attending Cheyney and the apparent funding opportunities led them to apply to the

university. A Fall 2019 first-time enrollee shared that “Cheyney’s not that expensive when it gets compared to other state schools.” The university’s tuition cost and location were seen as major values by most of the 20 students interviewed.

While cost and location are seen as an added value, a small number of students expressed discontent with the university’s overall size. This discontent was severe enough for students to suggest a desire to switch universities if they could return to the moments before they enrolled.

If I had the option to choose a different... or choose again... I’d probably go to a bigger school...Coming to Cheyney, I realized how small it was, but I didn’t realize how small it was, until halfway through my freshman year. You literally know everybody. It’s an extended family... Sometimes it’s a bad thing because, if you don’t like somebody in your family, and you see them every single day, all the time, it causes friction. And there’s really nothing that you can do, that nobody else doesn’t know about.

Students recognized the value in a close-knit school and saw the negatives of the community being so small. Concerns regarding institutional size were also mirrored in how students reported that they felt Cheyney had little to offer in campus life. One student expressed that “I was literally on campus for 16 hours a day, doing absolutely nothing. When I didn’t have class, there was absolutely nothing to do. That really bothered me, doing absolutely nothing for the majority of the day...” There was an apparent sense of claustrophobia amongst some students due to the overall size of the university as well as the institution’s location in rural Southeastern Pennsylvania.

### INSTITUTIONAL/HBCU AWARENESS

The students we interviewed shared varying levels of knowledge regarding Cheyney University and other HBCUs. Few students were aware of Cheyney University or the fact that it is an HBCU prior to applying, but for those who were aware, they provided anecdotes of pride in their selection of the university. One sophomore exclaimed that “it makes me really proud to go there knowing it was the first HBCU, this school kind of paved the way for us to have an education.” Leaning towards the middle

ground, students such as Lexi, a sophomore, who knew of Cheyney, but shared “it wasn’t like how I knew about Howard or Lincoln...It was just like I heard of it once in a while.” There were also cases where students had no knowledge about Cheyney or HBCUs in general. Jessica, a student from nearby New Jersey, reported, “No. I’d never heard of Cheyney University. I didn’t even know I had an HBCU so close to where I lived...I didn’t know about HBCUs.” Jessica also shared that she wasn’t aware of Cheyney’s HBCU status until after enrolling.

Some students held awareness of the university’s negative portrayal. In some cases, students shared that negative stories marred their knowledge of Cheyney. Signet, a freshman, shared that during her early application stages she had heard of the university’s accreditation and debt struggles, which caused her to be “nervous about the way the school was run.” Similarly, Janet, a graduating senior, expressed that before her start, “all I knew was the negative...you never really hear about all the good that goes on here.” In both cases, the students shared that the negative stories they heard were less worrisome as they entered into life as a Cheyney student and found themselves not as concerned due to positive experiences.





## SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

### CHEYNEY ADMINISTRATORS

In addition to the HBCU awareness and other factors that prompted students to enroll in Cheyney, we found that the administration at Cheyney has played a significant role in ensuring that students feel welcome, safe, and part of the institutional community. Some students spoke extensively about how those in administrative positions often sought to provide them with holistic and genuine support and treated them as whole beings as opposed to students who simply enrolled at the institution.

Highlighting the kind of support students receive from administrators, one Cheyney student, Sadiq, shared,

They helped out with my schoolwork. They helped out with my business [skills] emotional, spiritual, anything that they could try to get their hands on just to try to help out any student they could. They did that.

In particular, students spoke about the offices and staff members that were instrumental in their success at the institution. They spoke highly about the opportunities they have been afforded and the resources they have been introduced to as Cheyney students and shared how those experiences positively influenced their academic and career trajectories. The life coach and school therapist were two key administrators that students enthusiastically spoke about. Aujanae, a sophomore at Cheyney shared,

I would say another area would be the school therapist. Because at first, I was just working with him for community service, but then I reached out to him on a more personal level and he was able to really guide me. That's another thing that I can say about Cheyney is that they have a great therapist on their campus that truly cares about the students and hears them out. His doors are open, his email is open anytime that you need him.

Misty, a sophomore at the institution, agreed with Aujanae's perspective about the school therapist and expressed similar sentiments about the support received from him, "I go and a couple of my friends go, and he's been really helpful honestly to me and my personal growth and development."

The administrators at Cheyney are influential in the overall experience that students have at the institution and in many ways contribute to the reasons why students choose to stay at the institution and the pride they have developed in the school.

Although many students spoke positively about the support they've received from administrators, a minority of students also shared a need for increased interaction, support, and transparency from Cheyney administrators. One student, Jaime, shared a desire for enhanced honesty and transparency related to the state of the university and the happenings surrounding the school's accreditation, stating:

I want to say my expectations from the staff and the administration, I expected a lot more communication with things that were going on. Cheyney almost lost its accreditation, actually, this past November and we didn't know about it. Us students, they didn't tell us about that. They didn't tell us about that until a week before they voted on it. We saw it on the news and we were asking, "What was going on?" And they said, "The administration would say something about it," we didn't know about it. That would have been something nice to know in orientation, because if the school would've lost its accreditation, we would have pretty much lost that money.

Another student, Frankie, shared the following about his interactions with Cheyney administrators,

It's like they're there, but I just think they could do a lot more with just talking with their students and in general. I feel like the only time they really talked to us is if something is wrong, but not just if it's a normal day. Sometimes some of them come off kind of standoffish, but there are some that generally do try to get to know the students. So it's a mix and it just depends on whoever you're dealing with.

Overall, there are certainly some areas where administrators can improve, but many students found them to be helpful in their success. One student sums it up best, "The professors and administrators at Cheyney are so dedicated to the students. They do everything for the students. I really appreciate that."



## CHEYNEY FACULTY

In our interviews, we also found that many students had positive portrayals and perceptions about Cheyney faculty. Similar to many studies on HBCU faculty support, we found that students at Cheyney felt that the faculty were vital to their retention at the institution (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010; Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010; Gasman & Nguyen, 2016; Goings, 2016). The majority of students in our study spoke about the accessibility to faculty and how that helped them do well academically. One student shared,

I think a lot of the relationships on campus, between faculty and students, are very informal. I feel I can almost talk to them at any time. They actually tell you, talk to them at any time, call them, text them, FaceTime them. If you need something, they're there for you.

In addition to this student's account of faculty accessibility, another student shared how Cheyney's small size aided in her accessibility with her faculty, she shared, "But we just have a personal relationship, more of like she'll help me find jobs or anything like that. Or if I need any advice, she'll talk to me. And I feel like going to a bigger school, not a lot of people have the opportunity because there's like a hundred people in your class. We have a team, and there's probably like 23 of us.

Misty reiterated how the small size of Cheyney has helped her feel as though she is part of a family. She shared,

Definitely the family culture. When I applied, it was in my mind that I wanted a small school because my school was pretty big and I did want something smaller. But once I got there, I do really enjoy the connections that I can make with my professors because it is so small. So, I wouldn't trade that for anything. So, I would tell people, and I would choose Cheyney again, because you really do get to make connections with your professors and you get to meet people and the opportunities presented are really great.

The support from faculty far extends typical academic support. One student shared the following anecdote about a particular faculty member who offered him support when he was most in need, "I would tell him about [my] problems. I had no food, I was starving, and I lived an hour

and a half away. And he would literally go out of his way to buy breakfast, to keep in his office, so that every time I came to see him, he would give breakfast to eat, or he'd give me water bottles to take back to my room."

Faculty also contributed to student's self-efficacy by providing them with advising related to career achievement and goal development. According to Darren, his department chair and advisor, helped him to actualize his dreams related to hospitality management. He shared,

[My] professor, the head of the hospitality program, I'm really close with him. I actually came in as a business major, and then I changed my major to hospitality at the end of my first fall semester. [We] sat down and had a conversation about my plans, my goals, and what the program could offer. Ever since I expressed to him my goals and my plans, he's been working with me to make sure that I meet those goals and plans and have a foundation before I leave Cheyney University and start my career. That was very important. I have about three mentors at Cheyney that I go to about different things. I think that's important. [They] have been my key supporters for emotional [care].

He added,

My advisor has always pushed me, we go to conferences, always pushed me to be involved. He always selects me to go to conferences because he knows my aspirations and goals, and he knows that I'm networking. He knows that I'm dedicated to what I want to do, so he always looks out for me and makes sure that he gets things for me, always pushing me to apply to things, and always sending me places to represent Cheyney.

This kind of support echoes the support that is often found at HBCUs, and speaks to the value of mentorship and how critical it is for young students to have access to faculty, staff, and administrators who believe in their potential (Castellanos, Gloria, Besson, & Harvey, 2016; Lancaster & Zu, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2008). The experiences with faculty support have helped students feel that they belong on the campus and that they have their needs met. The support from faculty at Cheyney was transformative for many students, they felt respected, and valued within their community.



One student so eloquently described the experience that he's had at the institution by stating, "I've been on Cheyney's campus before and when I did talk to the faculty and teachers there, it felt like they wanted the best for me. I wasn't just any number or just some random student. I felt like they were fully invested in my success and helping me grow to be the person that I wanted to be..."

### PEER SUPPORT

Peer support has also contributed to the experiences of Cheyney students. Some students shared that peer support has helped with their feelings of belonging at Cheyney and contributed to their retention. One student shared, "I'm going to be completely honest, those are the only two reasons why I'm even considering... I have a couple of friends here, a couple of really strong relationships here, and that's the only reason why I'm considering giving Cheyney another chance in the fall."

A couple of students spoke about student organizations' value in developing lasting relationships, networks of support, and safe spaces to talk informally about the experiences they may be having at the institution or in their personal lives. Akim, a first-year student at the institution, shared how an organization he joined offered him support as he navigated his first year. "We have this thing called Barbershop for males at Cheyney, it's like a big brother program, but it's just somewhere,

a safe space where you can talk with other guys and talk about the future and just what's on your mind and whatnot. And that's helped a lot." Frankie, a sophomore shared, "I'm just in a lot of organizations on campus. So I get to bond with different groups of people. So I feel that's where my sense of family comes in, just because a lot of us can connect through the different organizations that we're a part of."

Additionally, for many students, the pride they've developed for the school has allowed for a closer bond with other students at the institution. This shared connection to the history and legacy of the institution makes a difference in students' experiences. One student shared, "Like I said, it's like a sibling relationship. We don't necessarily, you don't have to like each other, but when it comes down to it, if it was us against somebody else, we would always bond together. You could always talk trash about Cheyney to each other, but as soon as another school comes and talks trash about Cheyney, now it's, "We love Cheyney, with all our hearts." Another student shared,

I would say everybody is loyal. So let's say like, if a couple of students from Cheyney went to Morgan State's homecoming, they don't be bashing Cheyney as, oh, it's a bad school. They represent Cheyney as like, "Yeah, Cheyney is my home. I represent. Cheyney's in my blood. It's in my veins and I will ride with the Cheyney wheels until I die."

This loyalty to the institution contributes to the respect that students have for one another and allows for increased support across the student body. Students have connected over their pride for their small HBCU, but also over their love of the legacy and history that the institution boasts. The connections they have made help with retention and allow them to feel more at home on campus. A family-like environment from every angle keeps students proud of Cheyney, keeps students returning each semester, and pushes them to reach their dreams of success. These stories are all testaments to the culture that Cheyney fosters and the kind of support Black collegians may need to find safety within their campus environments. Peer, staff, and faculty support are all relevant to a student's satisfaction with the institution and Cheyney can be viewed as an model for creating such a milieu for student retention.

## DISCUSSION

According to Williams (2019), family, peers, institutional characteristics, fit, and cost are the most significant factors that influence Black students who apply and choose to attend HBCUs. This study supports that information, but adds additional insight into how Cheyney students find pride in their institution and affinity on campus. This study's themes, college choice, institutional awareness, and systems of support all contribute to student retention, student success, and overall sense of belonging; all of which create positive experiences for students at Cheyney.

The findings from this study also reveal what many studies on HBCUs have revealed with regard to HBCUs being sites for Black student support. In a study conducted by Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2010), researchers found that the racial composition at HBCUs, positive peer and faculty support, and the existence of on-campus role models have a positive effect on academic success, particularly for Black men. Similarly, Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) study highlights how the supportive HBCU environment, a milieu in which students can find support that extends far beyond the classroom, is a model for Black student success. The stories shared by Cheyney students mirror these findings.

Findings from this study can inform administrators at Cheyney University and also provide helpful information for other HBCU administrators who may be experiencing similar enrollment changes. Given Cheyney's sharp decrease in enrollment, and its increase this past year, observers may be interested in the motivations of students who chose to return to Cheyney. This research provides a glimpse into what factors have played a role as to why students continue to choose Cheyney despite negative press and an uncertain institutional future.

These findings can be helpful as Cheyney continues to evolve and to attract new students. As the institution works to recruit a new class and aims to retain their current students, this information can further strengthen the connection students feel to the institution and improve student factors that influence college choice. Not only are these findings helpful to Cheyney, but they can also be helpful to all HBCUs as they consider the factors that encourage students to apply and then stay at

their institutions. HBCUs can use this to leverage their available resources and provide Black students an experience unlike any other institution. These findings can also be beneficial to PWIs as they consider ways to better support Black students and as they aim to create safe spaces for students of color.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

Our recommendations include improving visibility through positive marketing, using external resources, and developing campus infrastructure to support students. Our participants noted that the institution has done little to promote Cheyney's positive contributions and historical importance. Multiple students reported that they were unaware of Cheyney's history or status as an HBCU within the state of Pennsylvania. These students also reported only seeing the negative side of Cheyney through online media rather than the positive aspects such as scholarships, systems of institutional support, and a myriad of other benefits the institution has to offer. HBCU leaderships and their media teams need to proactively disseminate positive and accurate information about their institutions, both within and outside of their surrounding communities. It is not enough to rely on word-of-mouth or perceived historical importance. HBCUs must take time to develop a positive public appearance in multiple forms of media and spaces to ensure potential stakeholders are keeping them in consideration for future enrollment or partnership. Cheyney's use of Mosaic Development Partners is a prime example of the strength of using external partners to help facilitate university goals. Mosaic helps Cheyney to identify partners and cultivate business relationships that align with the needs of the university. Pulling in external sources can help prevent university capacity from becoming overloaded or stretched thin. An external partner for facilitating university business can lead to improved operation in the short or long-term, depending on the length of the partnership. Universities might also further consider the importance of building their campus infrastructure for supporting students. This can help students feel more comfortable and at home on campus and can lead to greater student satisfaction.



## FOR RESEARCH

This study was confined to the investigation of college choice as it relates to Cheyney University (an HBCU) and was limited to participation of current students (all demographics) at Cheyney University. Future research that seeks to explore HBCU college choice should not only isolate student characteristics and external influences but should also include the characteristics of the HBCU(s) being investigated. This could help to make more meaningful comparisons between the student and the HBCU of their choice.

## CONCLUSION

Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was one of the nation's first institutions developed to serve and educate Black students. Since the institution's inception, it has provided students with opportunities to succeed academically. Despite the turmoil that the institution has faced in the public eye, the findings from this study reveal the institution's impact on student satisfaction. Students feel supported and prepared to go on and make lasting and positive social change in the world. The struggles that the institution has experienced is a result of many factors, yet, students who chose to attend the institution are proud of the institution's legacy, have created camaraderie around the institution's history, and have found an extended family at Cheyney. These factors cannot be understated and this brief unveils the perspective from students who feel like choosing Cheyney was the best choice for them.

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## APPENDIX

STUDENT CLASSIFICATION	FALL 20	%
New Freshman	222	35%
New Transfers	36	6%
Freshmen, Continuing	71	11%
Sophomore	103	16%
Junior	87	14%
Senior	106	17%
Non-Degree/Visiting	2	0%
Total Headcount	627	
Total FTE (Undergraduate)	625	

ENROLLMENT BY RACE			
	Women	Men	Total
Undergraduate			
American Indian	1	0	1
Asian	3	4	7
Black	309	187	496
Hispanic	48	24	72
Pacific Islander	0	0	0
White	1	3	4
Two or More Races	22	6	28
Not Reported	7	12	19
Total	391	236	627

FALL 2020 ENROLLMENT			
	Women	Men	Total
Degree-seeking	389	236	625
Non-degree	2		
Total undergrads	391	236	627

### RETENTION RATES OF FIRST-TIME BACHELOR'S DEGREE SEEKING STUDENTS

Entering Fall Cohort Term/Year	Freshmen Cohort Total	Number of Students Retained	Percent Retained
Fall 1998	235	148	63%
Fall 1999	254	155	61%
Fall 2000	291	169	58%
Fall 2001	292	178	61%
Fall 2002	247	158	64%
Fall 2003	378	214	57%
Fall 2004	422	235	56%
Fall 2005	400	254	64%
Fall 2006	438	244	56%
Fall 2007	278	173	62%
Fall 2008	316	180	57%
Fall 2009	392	214	55%
Fall 2010	475	215	45%
Fall 2011	261	169	65%
Fall 2012	316	171	54%
Fall 2013	343	189	55%
Fall 2014	229	101	44%
Fall 2015	100	65	65%
Fall 2016	181	97	54%
Fall 2017	202	74	37%
Fall 2018	102	71	70%
Fall 2019	213	119	56%
		5 Year Average	54%
		10 Year Average	55%
		PASSHE 10 Year Average	76%

Note: Retention rates are measured from the fall of first enrollment to the following fall. PASSHE represents the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

### BACHELOR'S DEGREE GRADUATION RATES OF FULL-TIME, FIRST-TIME DEGREE SEEKING UNDERGRADUATES

Entering Fall Cohort Term/ Year	4 Year Graduation Rate	6 Year Graduation Rate
Fall 1998	12	29
Fall 1999	11	29
Fall 2000	12	29
Fall 2001	11	29
Fall 2002	10	22
Fall 2003	13	24
Fall 2004	13	24
Fall 2005	13	24
Fall 2006	11	23
Fall 2007	9	25
Fall 2008	11	26
Fall 2009	6	17
Fall 2010	5	16
Fall 2011	8	26
Fall 2012	7	15
Fall 2013	12	26
Fall 2014	21	26
Fall 2015	23	
Fall 2016	8	
5 Year Average	14	20
10 Year Average	10	22
PASSHE 10 Year Average	36	57

Note: The 4-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates are calculated using the number of students who completed a bachelor's degree from a cohort of students who entered the institution. PASSHE represents the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.



# ENROLLMENT HISTORY

Term/ Year	Undergrad	Graduate Head Count	Total Head Count	Annual Increase/ Decrease	Cummulative Increase/ Decrease	% of Increase/ Decrease
Fall 2005	1,401	159	1,560	15	-183	1%
Fall 2006	1,495	172	1,667	107	-76	7%
Fall 2007	1,319	117	1,436	-231	-307	-14%
Fall 2008	1,333	155	1,488	52	-255	4%
Fall 2009	1,402	86	1,488	0	-255	0%
Fall 2010	1,508	78	1,586	98	-157	7%
Fall 2011	1,141	59	1,200	-386	-543	-24%
Fall 2012	1,224	60	1,284	84	-459	7%
Fall 2013	1,179	33	1,212	-72	-531	-6%
Fall 2014	997	25	1,022	-190	-721	-16%
Fall 2015	686	25	711	-311	-1032	-30%
Fall 2016	709	37	746	35	-997	5%
Fall 2017	723	32	755	9	-988	1%
Fall 2018	469	0	469	-286	-1,274	-38%
Fall 2019	618	0	618	149	-1,125	32%
Fall 2020	627	0	627	9	-1,116	1%
			Last 5 Years	-84		-12%
			Last 10 Years	-959		-60%

ENROLLMENT BY DEPARTMENT AND PROGRAM			
	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL
<b>HUMANITIES</b>	59	43	102
Communications Arts	13	14	27
Liberal Studies: General	7	5	12
Liberal Studies: Business			0
Liberal Studies: Education	8	3	11
Liberal Studies: Government	8	6	14
Liberal Studies: Philosophy	2		2
Liberal Studies: Art Therapy	1		1
Fine Art: Art	12	3	15
Graphic Design	3	10	13
English	5	2	7
<b>SOCIAL &amp; BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES</b>	113	30	143
Psychology	56	11	67
Social Relations: Criminal Justice	36	15	51
Social Relations: Sociology	18	2	20
Social Relations: American Political Studies	3	2	5
<b>BUSINESS, EDUCATION, &amp; PROFESSIONAL STUDIES</b>	77	78	155
Business Administration	43	60	103
Business Admin: Marketing*		1	1
Business Admin: Management		1	1
Hotel, Restaurant & Tourism Mgt	12	7	19
Rec & Leisure Mgt	6	3	9
Early Chil Educ/Dual Cert Special Ed	2	3	5
Early Child Educ PK-4	14	3	17

<b>NATURAL &amp; APPLIED SCIENCES</b>	105	61	166
Biology: General	65	25	90
Biology: Pre-Nursing/ Health Professions	10	1	11
Biology: Ecology/ Environmental Sci	1	1	2
Biology: Pre-Medicine	19	4	23
Biology: Forensics	2		2
Biology: Aquaculture			0
Biology: Celll and Molecular			0
Computer & Info Sciences	5	22	27
Mathematics	3	8	11
Undeclared	35	24	59
<b>Total Degree Seeking</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>625</b>
<b>Non-Degree Seeking</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Total Undergraduate Students</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>627</b>
*Program in Moratorium			