

Prairie View defeats duplication

By James Wright and
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BALTIMORE (NNPA) - In the midst of a growing number of reports of program duplication and other program approvals that undermine higher education integration, recent actions by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board serve as a beacon against the encroaching darkness.

Prairie View A&M, Texas' oldest Black public college, recently defeated an attempt by a larger, traditionally White university to duplicate its programs.

"The board tried to reach a decision that it thought was in the mutual interest of different institutions involved and that's what happened," said Texas Commissioner of Higher Education Raymund Paredes in an interview.

About three to four months ago, the University of Houston, a traditionally White, urban university with branches in the suburbs and an enrollment of about 13,000 students, submitted a proposal to the board to create a satellite campus in fast-growing northwest Houston.

However, Prairie View A&M officials, with the support of the Texas A & M University Board of Regents, Prairie View's governing board, balked because it would have violated federal laws that call for the enhancement of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and prohibit program duplication as part of state's agreements to desegregate higher education.

"When we heard about this proposal four months ago, we went into action [and] we started asking questions about our status with the [U.S. Department of Education's] Office for Civil Rights," said Tyra Metoyer, a Prairie View spokeswoman. "We contacted the board of regents, our chancellor, and a number of state legislators as well as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Our president, Dr. George Wright, said that all of the universities should be on a level playing field but this proposal would have compromised Prairie View."

Under the OCR agreement and the Texas Priority Plan, the state is required to bolster programs and facilities and foster student diversity at its HBCUs. Prairie View, a land-grant institution

located in Waller County, about 40 miles northwest of Houston, draws about 40 percent of its 8,000 student body from that area and the UH campus would have become a competitor for this market of students.

The UH proposal called for an offering of basic core graduation courses, advanced classes in business and technology and graduate level courses. If the prospective UH students took their courses at the new site, they would commute only 15-20 miles, whereas, they would

have to drive about 50 miles to get to the downtown main campus in the city.

Metoyer said efforts to negotiate a compromise with the University of Houston fell through.

"The University of Houston was not willing at all to cooperate as far as what programs we could duplicate or what programs we could share," she said.

Eventually, the coordinating board approved the proposal, recognizing the growing student population, but with several last minute re-

visions.

One of the conditions called for UH to offer space to Prairie View in the new facility. And another gave the HBCU right of refusal to certain programs and prohibited UH from offering those programs until 2012.

"We want to protect public institutions and extend education opportunities in expanding parts of the state," Paredes said of the provisions. "We just felt Prairie View was trying to get a foothold in the area, whereas, UH is larger and more visible,

and to simply allow UH to offer courses would jeopardize Prairie View in that area of Houston."

They were conditions, however, that UH found it hard to accept.

"We are committed to supporting the state's 'Closing the Gaps' initiative to meet the growing need for higher education resources in Texas. Establishing a campus in northwest Houston, where there is such a clear need for upper-level and graduate programs, would be a considerable challenge, but we were

prepared to undertake it," said UH President Jay Gogue in a written statement. "However, these additional restrictions placed on us make it impossible to proceed. It's no longer financially viable."

Metoyer said, however, she thinks this saga is not over.

She said, "I think the University of Houston will try something else, so we at Prairie View will be ready to fight again for survival."

James Wright and Zenitha Prince write for Afro Newspapers.



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