

Fisk University financial crisis cuts into athletics

*By Shauntel Lowe
Special to Sentinel-Voice*
NASHVILLE (NNPA) — Clad in his Greek letters, Fisk University senior David Hill would make his way to the annual homecoming basketball game, on the lookout for his fraternity brothers, old and young, of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. They might embrace or just say hello, the older Omegas doling out pieces of wisdom to the younger frats. But not anymore.

"Usually, everyone has a homecoming football game. We just have a basketball game. And now, we're not even going to have that," Hill said.

Amid a deepening financial crisis, Fisk administrators recently announced that they were ending all of the university's NCAA athletic programs after this year and will develop a system of intramural sports in their place.

According to a statement by Provost Kofi Lomotey, released Feb. 25, the Nashville university views the move as an opportunity to involve more students in sports.

But many current students, alumni and faculty see the loss of the sports program as potentially devastating to student life on campus.

"It decreases the camaraderie between students now that you don't have a function or an event where students get together. It decreases school pride. What are you rooting for other than your academics?" said Hill, who is majoring in physics with plans for a career in astronomy.

The move is just the latest strategic shift for the university, which has been struggling to gain traction in its race to raise funds before it runs out of money.

Financial struggle is nothing new or uncommon at Fisk, known for the historic fundraising efforts of its student chorus, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who traveled throughout the United States and Europe in the early 1870s to raise money for the school. The group is honored with Jubilee Hall on the Fisk campus.

But this period of struggle for the university has attracted nationwide attention as Fisk has battled in court over the right to sell, or at this point simply keep, the 101-piece Stieglitz collection of modern art given to the university in the 1949 by renowned artist Georgia

O'Keeffe, wife of photographer Alfred Stieglitz. The university has tried to sell pieces of the collection and proposed a \$30 million deal to share the collection with the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, founded by Wal-Mart heiress Alice L. Walton, according to The Associated Press. In February, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, N.M., heir of the O'Keeffe estate, argued that the agreement between O'Keeffe and Fisk forbids selling or sharing any portion of the collection and Judge Ellen Hobbes Lyle of the Chancery Court of Tennessee ruled that this proposition violated the wishes of O'Keeffe.

Now the O'Keeffe museum is trying to reclaim the entire collection on the grounds that Fisk violated the terms of its agreement with O'Keeffe and has forfeited its rights to the collection. Fisk and the museum made closing arguments in that case before Judge Lyle on Feb. 19 and are currently awaiting a ruling that could take up to 30 days.

Fundraising efforts stepped up

Meanwhile, Fisk is scrambling to get a hold on its financial situation through fundraising and budget cuts. University spokesperson Ken West said the university annually spends \$263,075 to support the athletic program while only generating \$10,000 in revenue from an NCAA grant for participating in certain games. West said none of the school's approximately 100 athletes are on scholarships related to their participation in the NCAA Division III sports. He said the university expects the intramural program to cost \$60,000 annually.

While West said no revenue is generated from ticket sales or concessions, JoVan Kears, Fisk's sports information director and head cheerleading coach, said non-students are charged \$5 to attend basketball games.

Kears said there is often miscommunication between the administration and the athletic department.

It appears that miscommunication is at the heart of many of the university's fiscal and organizational problems. Kears said on Feb. 18, the coaches and directors in the athletic department found out the school would no longer be participating in the NCAA Division III.

"It was really just a sur-

prise to the majority of us," she said. The evening of Feb. 19, the university held a town hall "family" meeting and announced the decision.

"As they were telling about the fundraising efforts, they kind of slipped in that the athletic department would end June 30 as far as participating in NCAA," she said. "Most of us just assume that we won't have a job. We just realize it's over."

Keshea Morris, a junior and member of the women's

basketball team, said she was upset and waiting to see what was going to come next for sports on the campus. She said she found out the news from a text message during Bible study. Like many other students and alumni, Morris wonders when the financial problems for the university are going to end.

"They said our school was always in debt. Why are these people hired if it's still the same problem with the finances? Where does it end?"

Where is the money going?" she asked. Hill, a senior physics student, said he also wonders what is happening to all of the money students pay in tuition and fees.

He also questions the university's words about operating as a family when students had no say in the current changes. "I'm sure you would consult your family about what they think they should do in a family crisis before you make an actual decision," he said.

Solutions sought through campus committees

But Provost Kofi Lomotey told Black College Wire that a series of campus-wide committees, comprised of faculty, students and staff have been employed to evaluate the current situation at the school and come up with solutions. He said students can share their concerns with their departments or their student representatives on the committees.

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