Cheyney University announces formation of Institute for the Contemporary African American Experience

*Thomas Jefferson University, Epcot Crenshaw Corporation, Starbucks Foundation among initial institute partners*

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CHEYNEY, Pa. — Top executives from Thomas Jefferson University and Epcot Crenshaw Corporation joined Gov. Tom Wolf on the campus of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania today as the university announced the formation of the Institute for the Contemporary African American Experience (ICAAE).

Jefferson University and Epcot Crenshaw are among the initial partners in the newly formed institute, which is intended to leverage Cheyney’s reputation and legacy as the nation’s oldest historically black university to study contemporary issues related to race, ethnicity, access and diversity in American society. Starbucks Foundation also will partner with the institute on a future research project.

The establishment of the ICAAE was recommended by the Cheyney University Task Force, which was appointed by the Board of Governors of Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education to help develop a new business model for the university. It is expected to serve as a catalyst and facilitator in creating networks, fostering communications and developing and testing solutions to contemporary issues among individuals, organizations and communities, working beyond the walls of the academic institution.

“This is an exciting new initiative for Cheyney University, one that will produce enormous benefits, not only for our campus community, but also for the larger region and the entire country,” said Cheyney President Aaron A. Walton. “It will be a center for research and the study of the important issues of the day. We look forward to working with all of our partners—those already on board and those who will join us in the months and years ahead.

“As the oldest historically black university in the nation, Cheyney University is the ideal location to house this institute. We already have a rich history; this new institute will help us to experience an even brighter future.”

Gov. Wolf, who has provided consistent support for Cheyney and who also participated in the announcement, praised the university’s efforts in creating the institute.

“Cheyney University is the perfect location for this new initiative that partners the oldest historically black university in our nation with Thomas Jefferson University – one of the oldest medical colleges in the country,” Gov. Wolf said. “This new institute will provide the kind of STEM learning and training that Pennsylvania needs to create a well-educated and skilled workforce and drive our economy forward.”

State Sen. Vincent J. Hughes (D-Philadelphia), a member of both Cheyney University’s Council of Trustees and the Cheyney University Task Force and who was involved in the discussions leading up to the creation of the institute, said he is proud of the university for taking on and leading such an important initiative.
“Understanding the topics the ICAAE aims to address is vital to the success of our state and nation, and it is crucial we continue to push for progress on issues of race, ethnicity, access and diversity,” Sen. Hughes said. “As a Cheyney Council of Trustees member, I have long believed that with the right mix of resources and initiatives, the university can grow stronger at its core, while it explores new vistas. The development of the institute illustrates that vision.”

“Today’s announcement shows that Cheyney, our nation’s first HBCU, and a jewel of the Pennsylvania State System, is on its way back to prominence,” added state Rep. Jordan A. Harris (D-Philadelphia), who also served on the Cheyney Task Force and is chair of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus. “The institute will serve as not only a think tank for the African American community, but a place where implementable solutions are developed. What better place than Cheyney for such an endeavor.”

Cynthia D. Shapira, chair of Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education’s Board of Governors and also a task force member, called the formation of the institute “an important step forward for the university.”

“This new institute will expand the important role Cheyney University plays in the state, the region and the nation,” Ms. Shapira said. “Cheyney is a university already rich in tradition; the establishment of the ICAAE will help secure its future, while providing students exciting new educational and enrichment opportunities; which, in turn, will help to ensure their success, both while enrolled at Cheyney and beyond.”

Jefferson, a comprehensive university that includes the Sidney Kimmel Medical College, one of the nation’s first medical colleges, and Cheyney will partner initially on a research project to analyze health disparities among diverse communities in the Philadelphia region. The two historic institutions also will develop a series of agreements to provide new opportunities for Cheyney University students to pursue graduate degrees at Jefferson University in a variety of healthcare fields.

“Today, a zip code is a better predictor of life expectancy than genetic code. Universities, health systems and communities can no longer shrug our shoulders and accept these health disparities as fact,” said Dr. Stephen K. Klasko, president and CEO of Thomas Jefferson University and Jefferson Health. “By joining Cheyney University and President Walton in launching its Institute for the Contemporary African American Experience, we are creating urgency around this pressing issue, engaging Cheyney students in researching community needs and working toward health equity in our neighborhoods.”

Epcot Crenshaw Corporation will re-locate its laboratory facilities to the Cheyney campus, launching the Crenshaw Institute for Applied Science and Technology. The Crenshaw Institute will initially be located in the McKnight Rogers building. The area surrounding the building will be developed to include administrative offices, analytical services laboratories, technology demonstration facilities, greenhouses and new aquaponics research and production facilities.

“Food, energy and water are inseparable from human well-being; and, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, these resources are linked to each other in extraordinary ways,” said C. Satish Smith, chairman and CEO of Epcot Crenshaw. “By continuing to work cooperatively with Cheyney University’s administration through the ICAAE, we have the opportunity to detail with certainty: when and where food, energy and water security is being examined; what interacting systems are being considered; and, by/for whom are these systems being secured.”
In addition to providing a vehicle through which to study contemporary issues affecting American society, the institute also will directly benefit Cheyney University students and faculty by providing opportunities for both to develop and participate in important research projects, including the one announced today in partnership with Jefferson University.

The Jefferson project will engage faculty, research staff and students on both campuses to initiate a Community Health Needs Assessment to identify the dominant health needs of African American communities in the Philadelphia region. Efforts may also inform work of the Philadelphia Collaborative for Health Equity, a recently launched initiative to close health disparities gaps in Philadelphia.

Cheyney students also will gain additional access to internships while enrolled in their undergraduate studies, as well as assistance in preparing for graduate school. Cheyney earlier this year established six new areas of concentration within its Bachelor of Science in biology program: pre-medicine, ecology/environmental biology, pre-nursing/health profession, forensics, aquaculture and cell and molecular biology.

The new concentrations provide a clear pathway for students to gain entry into a professional career. Additionally, these concentrations are in high-demand fields, and are likely to be attractive to students, assisting with both recruitment and retention.

The new concentrations also could help qualify students for admission into a variety of graduate and professional degree programs at Jefferson, including in nursing, medicine, physician assistant studies, physical therapy, pharmacy, biochemistry and molecular pharmacology.

Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was established in 1852 and is the oldest historically black university in the nation. It is one of 14 universities that comprise Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education. The State System is the largest provider of higher education in the Commonwealth, enrolling more than 100,000 degree-seeking students and thousands more in certificate and other career-development programs. Collectively, the State System universities offer more than 2,300 degree and certificate programs in more than 530 academic areas. Nearly 520,000 State System university alumni live in Pennsylvania. The State System universities are Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania. The universities also operate branch campuses in Oil City (Clarion), Freeport and Punxsutawney (IUP), and Clearfield (Lock Haven), and offer classes and programs at several regional centers, including the Dixon University Center in Harrisburg and in Center City in Philadelphia.

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Jefferson (Philadelphia University + Thomas Jefferson University) is a leader in interdisciplinary, professional education. Jefferson, home of the Sidney Kimmel Medical College and the Kanbar College of Design, Engineering and Commerce, is now a comprehensive university delivering high-impact education in 160 undergraduate and graduate programs to 7,800 students in health, science, architecture, design, fashion, textiles, business and engineering. The new Jefferson is re-defining the higher education value proposition with an approach that is collaborative and active; increasingly global; integrated with industry; focused on research across disciplines to foster innovation and discovery; and technology-enhanced. Student-athletes compete as the Jefferson Rams in the NCAA Division II Central Atlantic Collegiate Conference.
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Epcot Crenshaw Corporation is a research and development firm located in West Chester, Pa. It is engaged in a variety of areas, including the aerospace and automotive industries; energy and the environment; healthcare; manufacturing; information and data security; and physical security and defense. It develops innovative products and systems to deliver solutions for existing and looming environmental projects. Through its research partnerships with academic, private and public organizations, it seeks to bring both a local and global perspective to create comprehensive solutions for industrial sustainability.

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