

# Clafin University: Tiny South Carolina school shoots for the stars

BLACK-COLLEGES



By Ernie Suggs - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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ORANGEBURG, S.C. —

When Henry N. Tisdale interviewed to become the president of Clafin College in 1994, he had one demand.

Tisdale, a 1964 graduate of Clafin, knew it was a good college – but not a great one. “I made it clear that I wasn’t leaving Delaware and uprooting my family to maintain the status quo,” said Tisdale, who at the time was the senior vice president of academic affairs at Delaware State University. “Clafin may be a good institution, but good was not good enough. I was coming to move it to a new level and make it one of the best liberal arts institutions in the South.”

“I was hopeful that it would be a vision that others would buy into,” he said.

Clafin, founded in 1869 by the United Methodist Church, doesn’t come readily to mind when you’re listing the nation’s top HBCUs, like of Howard, Spelman, Hampton, North Carolina A&T, Morehouse and Fisk.

But by several metrics, Tisdale has succeeded in pushing what is now Clafin University into the conversation.

In U.S. News and World Report’s latest ranking of the nation’s Top 20 historically black colleges and universities, Clafin clocked in at No. 9 among the 74 black colleges listed. It was the seventh year in a row that the school has cracked the Top 10.

Forbes and Washington Monthly annually list Clafin as a “Top Tier” institution and in 2015, HBCU Digest named the tiny college in Orangeburg, S.C., “HBCU of the Year.”

“When people think of HBCUs there is a list of 10,”

Tisdale said. “I want Clafin to be always among that list of 10. I want Clafin to be known for the things that we do. And we are committed to sustaining that.”

As part of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s three-part series examining the viability of the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Clafin was one of several colleges the newspaper visited to get a sense of how some HBCUs are faring in 2018.



*Dr. Henry Tisdale, president of Clafin University, talks with students as they walk to a cafeteria in Clafin University campus in ... [Read More](#)*

## ‘We are not a secret anymore’

As a private school heavily dependent on tuition and fees, Clafin is trying to control its own fate.

The school has an endowment of about \$24 million dollars – comparatively low among all colleges but competitive among HBCUs. The endowment was under a million dollars when current vice president

of institutional advancement Whittaker V. Middleton started working for Claflin in 1982.



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*Dr. Henry Tisdale, president of Claflin University, says that before he became the school's president, he told his interviewers that "Claflin ...* [Read More](#)

In 1982, the percentage of alumni donating to the school was 9 percent, and the largest single sum anyone had given was \$15,000. In Middleton's first year, 11 percent of the alumni gave \$42,000.

By 2016, more than \$1 million was donated by 52 percent of the alumni, one of the highest percentages in the country and by far the highest percentage of any black college.

Claflin is one of only four HBCUs – including Spelman, Lane and Bennett — that even exceed 30 percent. Only 11.2 percent of all HBCU graduates donate to their schools. Between 2013-2015, only 2 percent of graduates at both Fayetteville State University and Texas Southern University gave back.

With the general lack of alumni support coupled with the fact that many HBCU freshmen are still first-generation college students and more than 70 percent of all students receive some kind of federal financial aid, HBCUs have tried to close the financial gap, in part, with the help of federal loans for students and a capital financing program to build or renovate facilities. In recent years, those efforts have been hampered by tightening regulations to get student loans from 2011 to 2015, when the current national enrollment decline began.

"African-Americans, when they give, they like to see results immediately," said artist Leo Twiggs, a 1956 graduate of Claflin and the school's Distinguished Artist-in-Residence. "If you give \$100 for a new building, you want to see that building the next time you come on campus. That is not reasonable but, at Claflin, we are seeing immediate results of our giving."



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*Prominent alumni Leo Twiggs, left, and Cecil Williams look some of their works at Claflin University. "African-Americans, when they give, they ...* [Read More](#)

Claflin recently broke ground on a multimillion-dollar, 33,000-square-foot health and wellness complex. In addition to alumni giving, Claflin has been aggressive in raising large sums. In 1987, Claflin conducted its first major capital campaign, raising \$6 million in a \$5 million campaign. In 1995, they set out to raise \$20 million and raised \$30 million.

In 2006, the board convinced Tisdale that his \$100 million goal was too ambitious and convinced him to settle on a \$94 million campaign. They raised \$105 million.

"For too many years we have been saying that we are the best-kept secret," said Middleton, who recently won the United Negro College Fund's Cecelia E. Washington Award for fundraising. "We are not a secret anymore. We have positioned ourselves where more persons, foundations and donors want to give to us."

## **Undefeated and confident**

One of the most popular t-shirts in Claflin's bookstore reads "Undefeated Since 1964," a reference to the foot-

ball team. Claflin dropped football after the 1964 season to save money, focus on other sports and stress academics.

“We wanted our flagship to be academic excellence,” said Tisdale, who graduated from Claflin with a degree in mathematics the same year the football team folded. “It wouldn’t be the band or the football team or the athletic program. It would be academics.”



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*For seven years in a row, Claflin University in Orangeburg, S.C. has cracked the Top 10 of HBCUs ranked by U.S. ...Read More*

When Tisdale returned to campus, the school had an open admissions policy. He changed that.

According to data provided by the university, in 2016, 78 percent of freshmen returned to college for their sophomore year. The latest six-year graduation rate was 56 percent. Both rates are exceptionally high for HBCUs.

Last fall, Claflin admitted 524 freshmen, the most in the school’s history. With 2,100 students currently enrolled, the school is aiming for a goal of 2,500 by 2020.

“We made a decision that we want to bring in a different mix. To be more selective,” Tisdale said. “We wanted it out there that we were looking for the best students in the country.”

### **‘I always felt welcome and home’**

One of the first things Tisdale did when he was hired was hire his wife, Alice Carson Tisdale, to develop

Claflin’s honors college.

In the language of her students, Alice Carson Tisdale keeps it real. She demands that the 233 students in the college dress up at least four times a week, with Fridays reserved for school colors. They are expected to be leaders, from editing school publications to running for student government president.

“An honors program, when you have some of the best and brightest minds, raises the standards of any university,” she said, adding that 96 percent of the college’s 2017 class graduated in four years. “Each student comes with their own fingerprint. It is called Claflin Confidence.”

In a conference room in the honors college, six nattily dressed students (it was Thursday), sit around a conference table to discuss the day’s events and crack jokes. It looks like a diverse, academic all-star team.



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*Dr. Randall Harris, assistant professor of Chemistry, helps students in a lab at Claflin University. (HYOSUB SHIN / HSHIN@AJC.COM)*

Jessica Tolbert, the current SGA president, sat across from Dominique W. Riggins, last year’s president. Riggins says he rejected overtures from Morehouse College, which recruited him out of Albany. He sits next to Charleston’s Janelle Green, who was headed to Spelman but let her grandmother persuade her to go to Claflin, where she won a scholarship.

Thalia Butts, a freshman from Decatur, was on a recruiting trip to George Washington University, when she bumped into a Claflin recruiter, who happened to be on campus the same day. She ditched GWU and

came South.

The only student in the group for whom Claflin was first choice was Andrea Moyer. Moyer, who is white, grew up in black neighborhoods and went to poor black schools whose college field trips didn't always include Clemson and the University of South Carolina.

"It seemed that the HBCUs really pushed you to excel, and I always felt welcome and home when I visited," Moyer said. "I always knew I was coming to Claflin."

But at the head of the table was the example of that "Claflin Confidence." Holding court was Sagar Ghimire, a freshman who came straight to Claflin from Nepal. He was talking so fast that Riggins slipped him a note to slow down.

Ghimire ignored it. Riggins rolled his eyes. They knew the story anyway. Ghimire was telling them how he is moving back to Nepal to run for president after he graduates.

"He tells us every day," Alice Tisdale said. "And we can't wait until it happens. We are all going to be there for his inauguration."

### **'Like the heavens had opened up'**

Across campus, Isaiah McGee, who pulls double duty as director of choral music at Claflin and the dean of the school of humanities and social sciences, the largest school on campus, preps his concert choir for one of about 100 performances this year.

"We are the official ambassadors for the school," said McGee. "Most schools have marching bands and football. We have the choir, which has been a major component of the school since the late 1800s."



*Students during a choral rehearsal at Claflin University. Isaiah McGee, director of choral music at Claflin and the dean of the ... [Read More](#)*

In 2012, after hearing the choir perform at the dedication of the Ronald E. McNair Life History Center in Lake City, philanthropist and financier Darla Moore gave the choir \$1 million.

At a ceremony later, Moore said the choir sounded like "the heavens had opened up."

At a recent rehearsal, it was easy to believe that. With McGee conducting from the middle, Daquan Benford and Leiloni Campbell stood on either side of the choir and took turns soloing on the spiritual, "Lord, If I Got My Ticket."

When they finished, they simply walked back to their spots and waited for the next song.

Two visitors sat in the back cried.