

Op-Ed: We Can Acknowledge Problems and Still Stand for the Promise of Lane College

By Dr. Donald W. Comer, Interim President of Lane College

The recent *WBBJ-TV* report about student concerns over dorm conditions at Lane College has stirred anxiety in our community and empathy among alumni, parents, and partners. Students described mold, pests, water damage, and broken infrastructure. They said they pay for housing and expect safe and decent living conditions. Their frustration is real. These concerns deserve earnest attention from Lane's leadership, custodial crews, and our entire Jackson community.

At the same time, we must see these specific issues as symptoms of a deeper structural problem that predates the current academic year. Lane College is an independent, private Historically Black College whose students are overwhelmingly first-generation and low income. About 94 percent of Lane students are Pell Grant eligible, and roughly half of our students lack the personal ability to pay full college costs without aid. That means Lane operates with a deeply constrained revenue base. We do not receive direct appropriations from the state or local government for operations or capital needs. A private HBCU like Lane largely relies on tuition revenue, federal financial aid, modest endowment income, and philanthropic support to maintain programs and facilities.

The challenges we are seeing in student housing mirror trends that have played out at many HBCUs and colleges nationwide for decades. A 2018 Government Accountability Office survey found that a significant portion of HBCU building space needed repair or replacement and that deferred maintenance backlogs were widespread. Some institutions had millions in unfunded infrastructure needs.

Deferred maintenance is not unique to Lane. It is the delayed cost of taking insufficient capital investment for too long. Many colleges, especially smaller or tuition-dependent private institutions, have postponed necessary repairs because they lacked funds. The problem is so common that national higher education analyses show nearly half of all college students nationwide contend with housing insecurity and campus housing challenges.

Even elite universities with far larger endowments and state support have faced similar issues. At Howard University in 2021, students protested deteriorating dorm conditions under the hashtag *Blackburn Takeover*, drawing attention to mold, mice, and flooding before the administration committed to repairs.

That history does not excuse inadequate facilities at Lane. It explains why those conditions took root. For many years Lane, like many HBCUs, deferred maintenance because operating budgets could not absorb major capital costs while also underwriting financial aid, academic programs, student services, faculty salaries, and athletic competitiveness.

The good news is that Lane's trends have been improving. Leadership has worked to strengthen our financial base, recruit and retain custodial and maintenance staff, and target available funds to the most urgent needs. The College's response to the current situation, deploying additional cleaning and remediation resources and monitoring progress, shows a commitment to action rather than denial.

We also must celebrate Lane's broader impact and promise. Despite resource constraints, Lane College graduates go on to contribute strongly to Jackson, West Tennessee, and beyond. Our students become teachers, health professionals, engineers, business leaders, public servants, and entrepreneurs. The lifetime economic impact of HBCU graduates nationally demonstrates a powerful multiplier effect: tens of billions in lifetime earnings and contributions to community and economy.

In Jackson alone, Lane is an economic engine. The College attracts students from across the nation whose expenditures on housing, food, transportation, and entertainment support local businesses and create jobs. Our graduates return here as professionals and community leaders. The value of Lane extends far beyond classrooms and dormitories.

The focus today must be twofold. First, we must correct the immediate housing issues, so every student has a safe and supportive place to live. Second, we must build the long-term capital strategy, securing philanthropic investment, accessing federal and state HBCU infrastructure programs, and engaging private partners, to ensure deferred maintenance does not again erode student experience.

The students who choose Lane aim for upward mobility, meaningful careers, and a life of service. They deserve buildings that reflect that dignity. We must hear their concerns. We must fix the problems. And we must remind the community that Lane College, in the face of historic underfunding and structural challenges, continues to deliver on its mission to educate, uplift, and empower.