

One College Turns Its Football Field into A Farm and Sees Its Students Transform

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At Paul Quinn College, where once there was a football field, now there's an organic farm. It's not just a symbol of renewal for this once-struggling historically black college in Dallas; it's where students work to pay tuition. As part of our Rethinking College series, Hari Sreenivasan explores how students learn to understand the expectations of a career while gaining a liberal arts education.

Read the Full Transcript

- **GWEN IFILL:**

Now we begin a special week-long look at the ways that some schools, educators and leaders are trying to transform higher education. The goal? To prepare students for the modern work force.

The series is called Rethinking College, part of PBS' Spotlight Education initiative, which features special programming examining today's challenges.

Tonight, Hari Sreenivasan visits Dallas, where an innovative college president is growing a new kind of student.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

At a Texas college, a football field that was turned into a farm.

- **MAN:**

We need to harvest about 10 pounds of radishes.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

The Tigers of Paul Quinn College lost more football games than they won on this field. So, nine years ago, when the historically black college on the South Side of Dallas was in financial crisis and had a 1 percent graduation rate, a new president turned everything over, including the football field.

So, did you envision this when you first saw the football field and the...

- **MICHAEL SORRELL, President, Paul Quinn College:**

No, no.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Michael Sorrell had no experience running a college. He had been a lawyer and White House special assistant, but he knew Paul Quinn couldn't afford a football program.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

There's more than one field of dreams, all right? Why should we tie everyone's future to athletic success?

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

He turned the football field into an organic farm that generates more than 20,000 pounds of organic vegetables every year, veggies that make it into high-end restaurants and into the Dallas Cowboys' stadium.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

I think this has saved our school. It saved it because it changed the narrative of the institution.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

The farm has become a symbol for a remade Paul Quinn College.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

We're the first urban work college in the country. And so our students learn what it means to be effective and to have job skills and work skills.

- **VINCENT OWOSENI, Student, Paul Quinn College:**

The app that records our work college hours is called UAttend (ph).

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Students are assigned jobs from day one.

- **VINCENT OWOSENI:**

So when I punch in, the dean of work college should be able to track that I punched in. And now it's recorded that I'm punched into work. Every student here has to work 150 hours to fulfill their work tuition.

- **JAMES HUNTER, Farm Manager, Paul Quinn College:**

Our goal is for them to be somewhere between nickel size to quarter size around.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

James Hunter is the farm manager.

- **JAMES HUNTER:**

Most of the students that work on the farm, they're not going to be farmers, and I don't want them to be farmers. I want them to pursue whatever they're interested in.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Vincent Owoseni is a business management major.

- **VINCENT OWOSENI:**

One basic principle about the farm is supply and demand. Let's say if a plant is going to be in demand around Thanksgiving time, around November, we're going to plant that late summertime. It helps you to understand the bigger picture of the farm, knowing about the customer, knowing about the economy of the farm.

- **JAMES HUNTER:**

So, Vincent, for instance, but we want to focus more on how to read financials or a balance sheet, what it takes when you're planning expenses or long-term revenue strategy.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Unless students are on the farm, they wear business attire, or face a steep fine.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

You want to run back and get your dress shoes, so that you can not get fined?

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

What's the fine?

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

So, there's two ways to handle the fine. You can either do 400 prayer squats or pay \$200.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Four hundred prayer squats for being out of dress code?

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

It's better than paying the fine.

Eighty-three percent of our students are Pell Grant-eligible, which means, by and large, that their families have a dysfunctional relationship with wealth and with work.

So if you have never been in an environment where you have come to understand the expectations of a career, because all you have ever seen is people be underemployed or unemployed, then how are you going to learn that?

- **JENNIFER MORENO, Student, Paul Quinn College:**

Good morning, everyone. My name is Jennifer Moreno. I'm a freshman. I'm from Ennis, Texas.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

For their first two years, Paul Quinn students are assigned on-campus jobs often ones that require contact with the public.

The idea is to improve communication and problem-solving skills.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

Our students are getting two forms of education. They're getting a rigorous liberal arts training, and they're also getting real world work experience.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

But students are not directly paid for their work. Instead, earnings go to the college to pay down their tuition.

- **STUDENT:**

This is where all your classes will be held.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Freshman Jennifer Moreno is a first-generation student whose parents are from Mexico.

- **JENNIFER MORENO:**

With the work program, they give you \$5,000. That goes toward your tuition. Coming from a low-income family, this was a great option.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

The students might spend their first two years working on-campus, as we make sure that they're properly prepared to be successful. Then, the last two years, they're working off-campus in companies or other businesses that are related to their career aspirations.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Senior Destiny Modeste is interning at Slingshot, an advertising agency in downtown Dallas. Her employer pays Paul Quinn College \$7,500 per school year for Destiny's work.

- **DESTINY MODESTE, Student, Paul Quinn College:**

Having the opportunity to work and help pay your tuition at the same time at an actual agency and see what they do on a daily basis, and then maybe, at the end, they offered a job, that's very important to me.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

There is no employment training program that will cost as little as \$15,000. This is an investment in improving the talent pool of your company and your office.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

So what's the incentive for an employer to keep that student around?

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

Well, don't keep them around if they aren't good enough, right? Our responsibility to them is provide a quality product.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Chris Hawthorne, who runs the intern program at Slingshot, says the partnership with an historically black college is important.

- **CHRIS HAWTHORNE, Slingshot Advertising:**

We have, as an industry, in advertising, struggled with attracting minorities to the field of advertising. So we started this relationship with Paul Quinn. We met Destiny, and she was fantastic.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

But as important as career and college are to Sorrell's vision, he also pushes his students to engage in community service.

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

We believe that colleges have a fundamental responsibility, if you're located in an urban area, to turn outward and address the needs of the communities you serve. We are in a food desert. There's no grocery store for four miles. Right? I mean, that's real.

People don't have access to healthy food. I mean affordable, fresh and healthy produce. We decided we have the ability to solve the problem, and we're going to go solve the problem.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

Is that what people come to college to learn?

- **MICHAEL SORRELL:**

Someone's going to figure out the urban issues. Why shouldn't it be the people who came from those urban communities that have a vested interest in those neighborhoods?

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

In keeping with that mission, the college donates 10 percent of the produce from the farm, named WE over Me, to the surrounding underserved community.

- **VINCENT OWOSENI:**

If you look at the need around you, and you look at your resource, you can, say, hey, I can use this space right here to grow what my community needs. Where someone else sees hopelessness, you see an opportunity.

- **HARI SREENIVASAN:**

In Dallas, for the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Hari Sreenivasan.

- **GWEN IFILL:**

And, tomorrow, Hari's series continues with the particular financial and cultural challenges Latino males face when it comes to earning a degree.

- **And online:**

While students have asked colleges and universities to do better in hiring more professors of color, institutions have struggled to live up to their pledges. Our partners at The Hechinger Report explore why.
