The Siege of Chicago State University

By Hermene D. Hartman

The Chicago Tribune recently ran a front-page story on Chicago State University (CSU) and its fiscal audit deficiencies. The story cites a recent audit that found 41 "audit findings."

Chicago State has been in a turnaround mode since Dr. Wayne Watson took the helm.

In previous administrations, there was clearly mismanagement of funds where the president had questionable expenses. One president, for instance, charged cruise trips for her family back to the school.

What's interesting is that the Tribune forgot to report that the University of Illinois, in the same audit period, had 43 "audit findings," yet not one word, let alone a front-page headline, was written on the same.

There is something that has not come out in the press, because Watson thinks it should not be revealed.

But this single fact speaks to his integrity, strength, true grit, determination, and dedication to the CSU in particular and education in general.

Watson has been in a sea of controversy since he "applied" for the presidential position; he has been called everything from a political insider to a crony.

But Watson has worked, on average, 12 to 18 hour days including weekends, for the students and faculty at Chicago State University with no pay.

Because of technical difficulties and legal complications with the State of Illinois regarding his pension, Watson worked for over a year and a half with no paycheck.

Crazy or dedicated?

He has been on a mission. I don't know many who would have worked with his fervor and passion for no pay. He is underpaid.

Watson's commitment to the "audit findings" is to assume full responsibility to address and resolve each issue as he moves the university forward. In place is a "Corrective Action Plan" that ensures that the findings are resolved.

The audit has raised questions about fiscal matters existing prior to Watson's tenure.

The audit began in the summer of 2009. Watson assumed the presidency of Chicago State in October of 2009.

So, the audit period is not entirely his; some of the citations belong to the previous administration and it is totally unacceptable to "blame" Watson for things that happened before his tenure. His team was put into place by March of 2010.

Watson has been attacked in the media for some of the people he has fired at CSU as he has challenged what amounts to political patronage and political employment at the school.

Dealing with political patronage is always challenging, but rather than being applauded, Watson has been media scorned for his professional efforts to make Chicago State more productive and efficient.

Upon taking his position, he walked into an educational fire. The triage of academic challenges threatened the life of the university with accreditation issues, financial mismanagement and human resources, with limited controls.
More Than Meets The Eye

Watson was on his way to a life of retirement after leaving the City Colleges of Chicago as its long-time chancellor when the CSU Presidency came about.

Friends and community and business leaders urged him to apply, recognizing his educational record and knowing the reality of the trend at CSU.

The trend is that the school was being postured for a takeover by another state school, or a land grab, and it may not have continued to serve the African-American community as it has.

The student population of Chicago state is an older working student who typically has a family and who might be the first in his/her family to graduate.

The typical student may not go to school continuously but may come and go for a semester or a year due to family and/or work challenges that are usually financially based.

The reality of Watson's CSU tenure is that the morale on campus has moved from negative to positive, and freshman student enrollment has increased.

The rates of retention and graduation have increased. Faculty and administration have been right sized. Incompetence has not been tolerated.

The worse misconception of the audit report states that students were not being billed for tuition during the spring semester.

Actually, the billing process was undergoing a transformation of notification from paper to electronic and the actual collection of tuition and fees increased.

Some of the audit findings were found from internal self discovery and brought to the attention of the state auditors by Chicago State University staff itself and corrective actions were in progress, prior to the state audit.

Watson's administration gave incoming freshmen iPads, providing students with the capacity to download books rather than hard copies.

CSU graduates nearly 20 percent of African-American students attending a public university in the state. The federal government has cut Pell grants and in these hard times, Chicago State University students will be hit hard by the Pell grant cuts.

State legislators have called for a hearing resulting from the Tribune story. I hope they also call for one for the University of Illinois and their audit findings, which were more than Chicago State's.

Indeed, we need accountability and responsibility in state funding, but the context and accuracy of the findings should be fair and honest and then let the chips fall where they may.