



HBCUs ARE NOT ALL THE SAME:

My Experience at
Texas Southern University,
an HBCU in Houston, Texas

Stanley B. Lemons



September 3, 2026

I am a 60-year-old African American man who long wanted the experience of attending a Historically Black College or University, or HBCU. In the fall of 2021, my family and I moved to Houston so I could enroll in a Doctor of Education program at Texas Southern University, one of the largest HBCUs in Texas. What began as a hopeful and meaningful opportunity eventually became painful and disillusioning.

This is not an indictment of Texas Southern's history or significance. Rather, my experience shows how leadership issues and the protections afforded public universities can leave students feeling unheard, disenfranchised, and unprotected. I hope my story encourages reflection about how institutions treat the students they serve.

At Texas Southern, I progressed steadily through the doctoral program, took three or four classes each semester, and completed my coursework with a 3.88 GPA. I also passed my comprehensive exams on the first try. My dissertation focused on HBCU undergraduate students' perceptions of writing skills, a topic I believed could help students at HBCUs and beyond. The study involved a sample size of 189 first- and second-year students from Morehouse College, Paul Quinn College, Southwestern Christian College, and Texas Southern University.

As I neared completion, the process began to unravel. My doctoral adviser, Dr. Holim Song, suggested presenting my research in a way that, in my view, would compromise its integrity and conflict with university protocol as well as prior research approvals from my full dissertation committee. I raised my concerns with Dr. Song and my dissertation committee, including Dr. Jafus Cavil, the interim dean of the College of Education. Weeks before my expected defense and December 2024 graduation, Dr. Song resigned as chair of my committee. I was stunned. (See Exhibit A)

Dr. Jacqueline Smith later became my adviser and dissertation chair, and Dr. Toya Conston joined as statistician. After two rounds of edits, Dr. Conston gave verbal and written approval of my dissertation (See Exhibit B). Because of Dr. Song's resignation, Dr. Smith and I agreed that I would reenroll for the spring 2025 semester and defend my dissertation in February, with graduation in May (See Exhibit C). That decision came with additional tuition costs.

Then, on January 27, 2025, I received an email from Dr. Smith and Dr. Conston asking me to remove sections of the dissertation they had approved about a month earlier. I reached out to Texas Southern leadership for guidance, including President James W. Crawford III and Provost Carl Goodman, but less than five days later, both Dr. Smith and Dr. Conston resigned from my committee. Once again, my graduation was in jeopardy.

I tried to keep moving forward. In February 2025, I scheduled what I hoped would be my dissertation defense in the TSU library. My wife and two library staff members attended, but no one from my committee came. (Watch the 7-minute presentation video clip, <https://youtu.be/FRS1x4lyWtU> si=iLJXi0hhYtzKye1) I later wrote multiple letters to university officials seeking help. In one, I shared that I was the first person in my family to earn a college degree and that my mother, now 87, had once been invited by Amherst College to serve as honorary grand marshal at my graduation there (See Exhibit D). I had hoped she would also see me receive a doctorate. Texas Southern never responded.

As May approached, I sought a court injunction to compel university leaders to meet with me and resolve the dissertation and graduation issues. But I withdrew the request after I could not find affordable legal representation.

I was not allowed to defend my dissertation or graduate that spring.

During the summer of 2025, TSU finally provided a fully constituted committee: Dr. Ronnie Davis, Dr. Viveca Grant, Dr. Reginald Todd, and Dr. Shannon Verrrett. Yet I later learned through court testimony that the new committee had gone through the entire fall semester without reviewing my dissertation. Dr. Reginald Todd, the new chair, testified that getting the full committee to provide feedback “slipped my [Dr. Reginald Todd’s] mind” and that he, Dr. Reginald Todd, had “dropped the ball” (See Exhibit E).

I returned to court in February 2026 to seek an injunction requiring TSU to create a path for me to defend my dissertation and graduate on May 8, 2026. Because TSU is a public university protected in many ways by sovereign immunity, the Texas Attorney General’s Office represented the university in court.

As a pro se litigant, I had to navigate the process on my own. I did not fully understand how much protection sovereign immunity can give public universities or how difficult it can be for students to get answers. I paid tuition to Texas Southern and followed the process, yet getting responses from the university remained difficult. I reached out to Texas Southern University President James W. Crawford III multiple times, but even to this day he has remained unresponsive to my letters and meeting requests for more than a year and a half as I have tried to complete my degree (See Exhibit F). I also petitioned the court to compel Texas Southern University to participate in mediation in an effort to reach an amicable resolution, but the university, through its attorneys, opposed mediation, citing sovereign immunity as a justification for its position to not participate in mediation and, in my view, to remain accountable only to itself. I could not help but ask why a place I once considered safe would treat me in a way that I felt was so unfair.

During this past spring 2026 semester, Texas Southern unenrolled me from the university without my permission or due process, an act I consider a violation or denial of educational access under federal civil rights laws. On April 28, 2026, the university, on its own initiative, issued a \$413.56 partial refund of my tuition, representing only a fraction of what I paid Texas Southern during

my years at the school (See Exhibit G). The latest communication from three of the four dissertation committee members regarding the status of my dissertation was conflicting and unreasonable, as the trial court later noted, and it blocked my ability to complete my degree.

Today, I carry more than \$125,000 in student loan debt from my doctoral studies at Texas Southern—regrettably, with no degree to show for my time and money. I once proudly called Texas Southern University “my HBCU.” (See Exhibit H) Now I feel deep disappointment about what happened.

I want the doctorate degree from Texas Southern University that I earned and paid for, and I want to be made whole for the financial and non-financial harm caused by the university’s actions and those of its officials.

Stanley B. Lemons

Stanlemons2@thesecrettowing.com

404.869.1290