

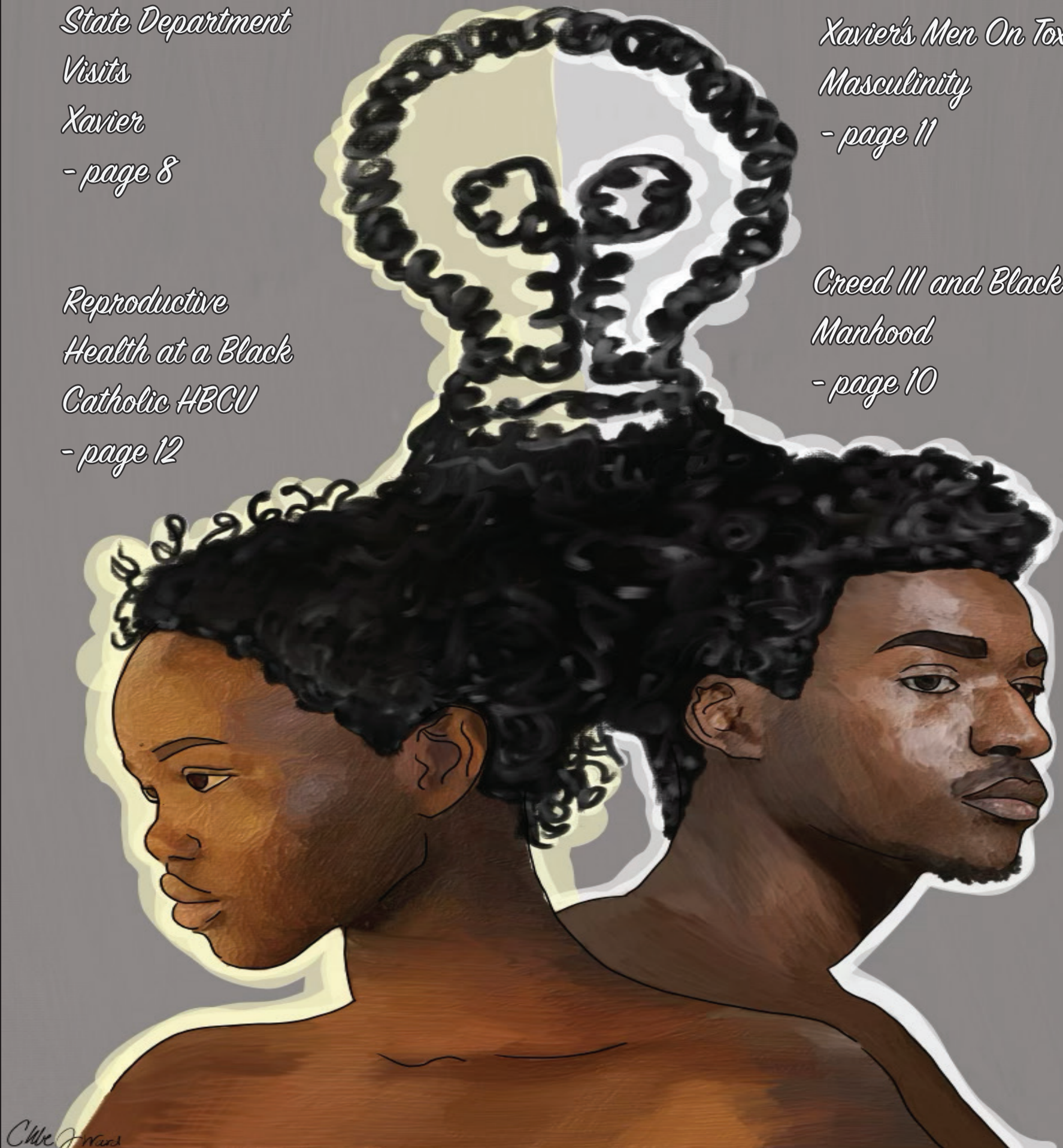
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# State & National News

## STATE DEPARTMENT VISITS LOUISIANA HBCUS TO STRENGTHEN FOREIGN SERVICE DIVERSITY PIPELINE



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As the U.S. Department of State seeks to diversify its ranks to better reflect the United States and its foreign partners, a group of diverse foreign service officers have been deployed to HBCUs in Louisiana to encourage students to pursue careers to serve abroad.

U.S. Ambassador Gentry Smith, the Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security Services and his team of foreign officers visited students and administrators at Xavier on Thursday, Feb. 23. The visit to Xavier was the group's second stop as they started their tour of Louisiana's HBCUs in Baton Rouge, La. with Southern University.

"The Secretary of State has made it one of his principle priorities to ensure that the persons who represent the United States around the world look more like America, so diversity, equity, and

inclusion is a major part of that," Smith said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's push for diversity in the Department of State is a shift from how the State Department has looked in the past. Traditionally, African Americans and other underrepresented groups have been less likely to be foreign officers for the State Department, especially in its senior ranks. After a study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2020 found the number of senior Black diplomats to be decreasing for the first time since the Clinton Administration, the Department of State began to diversify its recruitment.

"HBCUs are our diversity for African Americans and our contributions to diversity in this region," said J. Nathan Bland, the Diplomat-in-Residence for the Central South region.

Bland, a career foreign service officer for over 15 years, is responsible for recruiting candidates for the State Department.

Bland said the recruitment of HBCU students ended stereotypes about the ethnic and academic background required to have a career with the Department of State.



Assistant Secretary of State Gentry Smith for Diplomatic Security Services shares State Department career opportunities with Xavier students as part of his tour of HBCUs in Louisiana.

"People used to say that the State Department is pale, male, and from Yale, meaning white men from the Northeast at lead institutions," Bland said.

But that is no longer the case. According to the National Museum of American Diplomacy, over 25 percent of the State Department's civil servants are African Americans. They also make up 5.4 percent of foreign service generalists and 9 percent of specialists. Smith himself is the first Black diplomatic security service special agent to serve as assistant secretary of state.

Smith encouraged students to not let their current majors hinder them from being interested in a Department of State career. Security Engineering Officer Ralph Gaspard shared his experience as an example of the State Department's career opportunities for several majors. Gaspard, a Xavier alumnus, joined the Department of State after graduating in 2003 with a physics degree.

Gaspard said that as a

member of the Department of State's Senior Foreign Service of Underrepresented Groups organization, he was glad to return to his hometown and his alma mater on behalf of the Department.

Diversifying the country's diplomatic corp is a reflection of the growth of racial and ethnic diversity in the overall job sector that benefits the State Department in strategic ways. With countries like Russia and China investing in Africa, the United States is stepping up its outreach on the continent.

In December 2022, the Department of State hosted the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C. The three-day summit aimed to strengthen America's diplomatic ties to Africa as an emerging geopolitical force.

According to Bland, the recruitment of more Black people into the Department of State could help the State Department show the similarities between the United States and Africa.

"There's not many of our adversaries that can say that they have people who are from Africa, from India,

from Latin America. Russia can't do that. China can't do that," Bland said. "So having us African Americans, even though we may have never been to Africa, there's still a certain affinity."

One of the barriers to joining the foreign service was access to internships, some of which were unpaid in the past. Students with economic hardships often were unable to pursue such pipelines into the State Department. Smith and Bland encouraged students to apply for paid fellowships and internships with the Department of State. Smith concluded his tour of HBCUs in Louisiana with a visit to Dillard University on Feb. 24.

"HBCUs, in my opinion, is an area in which that has not gotten the attention that it deserves," Smith said. "It is not known the quality, the capability, and the brilliance that is engrained and is present in all HBCUs, and it would be negligent of the government to overlook that."

**Students interested in more information should email Foreign Service Officer J. Nathan Bland at [DIRCentralSouth@state.gov](mailto:DIRCentralSouth@state.gov).**



Diplomat-in-Residence J. Nathan Bland speaks to Xavier students during a town hall meeting on Thursday, Feb. 23 in the University Center Ballroom.