Felecia M. Nave, PhD
President of Alcorn State University

Making History

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AWIS had the opportunity to connect with Felecia M. Nave, PhD, soon after being named President of Alcorn State University. An Alcorn State alumna, Dr. Nave received a Bachelor of Chemistry in 1996 and is the first woman president in the university’s 148-year history. She took the helm on July 1. She received both a Master and Doctorate of Chemical Engineering from the University of Toledo. Dr. Nave has been widely published in scholarly journals on topics related to science, technology, engineering, mathematics and minority students. She holds memberships in several professional organizations, including the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and American Society for Engineering Education. Dr. Nave is also an AWIS member. Alcorn is the oldest public historically black land-grant institution in the United States and the second-oldest state-supported institution of higher learning in Mississippi.

AWIS: What was your reaction when you learned about the unanimous decision to name you the next president of Alcorn State University?

FMN: When I learned that I was unanimously selected as the next President of Alcorn State University, I was overwhelmed with many emotions. It is truly humbling, and I am very grateful to those who contributed and participated in the process. I am very much aware of the huge responsibility that comes with being entrusted to lead such a great institution. In addition to being overjoyed, ecstatic, elated and feeling blessed beyond measure, I am very honored and proud that I have been afforded a once in a lifetime opportunity to come home and lead my alma mater, Alcorn State University. It is truly a proud moment for me, my family, and countless others who have supported and encouraged me throughout my career.

AWIS: What do you want others to know about Alcorn State University?

FMN: Alcorn State University has a very rich history. Nestled on 1,700 acres, it is truly a special place that exemplifies excellence, building character and cultivating greatness in its students. For 148 years, Alcorn has continuously prepared students to excel and be transformative leaders. Alcorn offers degree programs at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s level in agriculture, education, STEM, business, and nursing. We are currently awaiting final approval for our first doctoral program, a doctorate of nurse practitioner. Students take classes and conduct research in state-of-the-art facilities from a dynamic faculty. Alcorn is also known for its champion athletic programs and renowned marching band, the Sounds of Dyn-O-Mite with the Golden Girls.

Alcorn has alumni who are well positioned globally and are quite accomplished, particularly in STEM fields. Our alumni are accomplished inventors, political figures at all levels, academicians, scientists, actors, leading sports figures, lawyers, doctors, law enforcement, to name a few. We don’t just prepare our students to succeed, we prepare them to excel. You will find Alcornites all across the globe, and we carry the spirit of Alcorn wherever we go. We are a family!

AWIS: What’s been your criteria to achieving success in academia?

FMN: Throughout my academic career, I’ve used a number of strategies to achieve success. It is important to have some flexibility in your style because the environment is dynamic and everchanging. Additionally, the people you encounter along the way have different approaches and styles, etc.; thus, having discernment and a core value system is a must. What I will say is that there were core beliefs and values that guided my success.

1. Failure is not an option
2. Always strive for excellence
3. Run your own course and not someone else’s
4. Keep the important things close to keep you grounded – faith and family
5. Treat people with kindness and appreciation
6. Help others along the way and create opportunities for others to excel
I strongly believe that I am blessed and that I have consistently had people all along the way who believed in me. They looked out for me, gave me sage advice and helped position me for success. I try to always listen to the wisdom of others. I don’t think I know everything, and I take advice, even when the advance is a critique of me. I view the critique as an opportunity to be introspective and improve.

Additionally, I have worked hard, prepared, been a person of integrity, getting job done while not being afraid to take chances and take chances on other people, surrounded myself with smart people, built meaningful relationships and networks and made sacrifices. Finally, having a strong support system in my husband and children, and I include them as part of my success. I married well. Tracie and I have similar goals and outlook on life and success. He is my #1 cheerleader, celebrating my/our success yet pushing me when needed. This is important because you need that support.

**AWIS:** It’s no secret of the challenges, obstacles and barriers that women in STEM, especially women of color, are facing in all sectors of the STEM industry? What needs to happen to change this?

**FMN:** I don’t know that we will ever completely eradicate these challenges; however, as women continue to make great strides and break ceilings, changes will occur. But once women arrive, we must be willing to reach back and pull other women up into the club unapologetically. It is important that we are intentional in our efforts and contribute in a meaningful way to programs and initiatives that demystify STEM, not just to the students but the parents as well. We must, in plain spoken ways, articulate the benefits and joys of pursuing careers in STEM fields. [We must also] continue to support the broadening of STEM education and provide diverse and innovative programming that introduces girls to STEM fields and pathways for success. It is important for us to be more vocal and visible about women role models, particularly women of color, and to point to those who have successful professional and personal lives across so many different fields.

This is not a journey that we can take alone. We must also have advocates and allies amongst our colleagues, fathers, brothers and friends to encourage girls to pursue STEM and excel in the workplace. They must be courageous and bold, opposing barriers when they observe it amongst their peers. Being willing to speak up and speak out against it and offer to take women under their wings, to groom them for success. I am very fortunate that I can look across multiple phases of my educational and professional career and identify men who were extremely instrumental to mentoring me, promoting my success and clearing a path for success.

**AWIS:** AWIS recently released a leadership study and found that 83 percent of STEM professionals had their judgement or expertise in their area questioned and 82 percent believe they have to work harder than others to prove themselves. The numbers are worse for women of color. What are some of the challenges you’ve encountered?

**FMN:** Many of the challenges I faced fall into the typical categories identified in these studies. As early as my doctoral program, I encountered a number of challenges such as questioning of knowledge, faculty and peers who were not always welcoming and being the only African American woman in the program it led to feelings of isolation. Over time I internalized the experience but looked for other ways to build a community that would provide the support I needed to be successful. Unfortunately, I guess you can say I expected it in some way, given our country’s history.

What was more unexpected was the challenges I faced as an African American woman faculty at an HBCU from my male colleagues and sometimes other African American women. I was young, so this also played into the dynamic. However, I again found myself in a situation where colleagues carried dated philosophies toward women in the workplace and in some cases flat out sexist attitudes.

I quickly learned how to read the people and the environment. Once you understand the environment and players, you can tailor your strategies to accomplish your goals. In both cases, I found ways to succeed, identified allies, worked hard, found mentors external to the university and did my thing. Remember why you are there and execute your plan.

**AWIS:** There’s been some debate about the value of higher education. Many are opting to not pursue college for several reasons including the accumulation of debt, lack of employment in their specialized field, or inequitable pay. As an educator in front of this narrative, why should students invest in a higher education?

**FMN:** I strongly believe a college education is still the best investment one can make in themselves. The knowledge that
you acquire being in a college setting is more than just what you learn between the pages of the books but also the exposure and exchange of knowledge and experiences you have with people from varied backgrounds. It grows you and expands your worldview and understanding of diverse perspectives. Yes, it can be an expensive investment; however, there are affordable options for students today. When I graduated from high school, we had very few options, if any, to gain college credit before graduating. Today’s students have several options – from AP, dual credit, credit by exam, etc. – potentially cutting the cost of a college degree. Now, access to these opportunities are not always even across the country such that urban and rural students may not have access as others, which is another topic to explore. But, generally speaking, there are avenues to explore that can make college more affordable. We’ve all heard the statistics that only a small percent of athletics actually make it to the big stage and their longevity is short. Likewise, I venture to suggest that the number of non-degreed billionaires are just as minimal. Thus, if you are not willing to invest in yourself, then who will?

AWIS: How are HBCUs preparing students to compete globally and be part of the drive for economic success, whether here in the U.S. or abroad?
FMN: With the ever-expanding reach of the Internet and social media, your neighbor/competitor can be across the globe. Thus, it is important that we provide our students the opportunities to have their intellectual knowledge stimulated and broaden by having a world view. HBCUs are not new players on the international front. We are expanding our reach and building capacity and opportunities for our students through cultural immersion experiences such as study abroad, international internships or course revisions with international perspective. I encourage students to learn the world, keep their minds open and to engage in opportunities domestically and internationally. I also encourage them to participate in language immersion, culture (food, music, etc.). Many universities have developed MOUs with international institutions to support faculty and student exchanges and research partnerships.

AWIS: HBCUs continue to provide a solid education, but some are struggling or have closed their doors due to financial concerns including state funding or low enrollment. Throughout your academic career, you’ve been able to successfully fundraise. How do we address the financial crisis for some HBCUs and what role does the public and private sector need to play to support HBCUs and its students?
FMN: As states continue to decrease funding for higher education, institutions must identify alternative revenue streams to support operations and secure independence. Stable enrollment is a critical factor and source of institutional revenue. Additionally, we must increase alumni giving and increase our efforts to showcase the ROI of HBCUs. We are an answer to the diversity issue facing corporate America. Our graduates are diverse, have engaging and innovative mindsets and are prepared to contribute to the success of any company.

I believe it is important that we continuously assess our business operations, identify our niche and align resource expenditures with priorities and core mission. During my tenure at Prairie View A&M (PVAMU), I was able to consistently secure funding from foundations, government agencies, corporations, etc. in support of student scholarships, research and outreach programs. Funding from these agencies was critical to our efforts to increase awareness and access for students of color to STEM fields and in support of the development of faculty. To address the financial crisis, we must be more intentional in our investments and make sure we are aligning our resource allocations with our priorities. We must increase our development efforts, particularly among our alumni.

AWIS: You have a celebrated and distinguished career that inspires other women. What motivates you? What inspires you every day?
FMN: I am motivated by being able to serve in a profession that allows me to contribute to the growth and success of others. Waking up knowing that the work you do will make a significant difference in the life outlook of a student and that the outcome of the one can change the trajectory of a whole generation. I am also motivated knowing that I am fulfilling the hopes of my grandmother and honoring her sacrifice. She did not have the opportunity to complete high school, yet she understood the importance of
making sure that her children and their children would have access to a better life through education.

I am inspired by my four children who are creative beings and who keep me grounded. Throughout my journey, there have been numerous people who have mentored and supported me from K-12 teachers, church members, community, professors at Alcorn such as Troy Stewart among others, and professional supervisors like George Wright. Most importantly my family has always been a constant. I am at this place because #1 God and his favor and #2 because others believed I was worth investing in.

**AWIS:** Beyoncé (Queen Bey) gave homage to the history and culture of HBCUs in her documentary Homecoming. How do you see HBCUs continuing to shape American history and modern culture?

**FMN:** HBCUs, without question, have contributed to the history and culture of our nation and the world. We continue to develop and nurture creative minds that contribute to the continued advancement of society. We continue to be at the forefront of providing access to higher education for many students who would be left out. HBCUs provide an educational environment where students can come, grow and feel celebrated for their potential. We take diamonds in the rough, polish the roughness and develop them into future leaders. It would truly be a loss to this country and to higher education if HBCUs [did not exist].

**AWIS:** What is your vision for the future of women in STEM?

**FMN:** My vision is that we will continue to promote and significantly increase the number of girls excited about STEM and who ultimately pursue and excel in STEM-related careers. I envision that we will continue to break glass ceilings and lead innovatively.

**Dr. Felecia M. Nave** is a 1996 graduate of Alcorn State with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry. She received her master’s and doctorate degrees from the University of Toledo in Ohio. Dr. Nave has many years of experience as a leader in higher education. Prior to joining North Carolina Central University, she served in various academic and administrative roles at Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas from 2003 until 2018.