

Q-and-A: Morehouse leader Tiffany Bussey on growing Black businesses

Dr. Tiffany Bussey is founding director of the Morehouse Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center.

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Before start-ups became ubiquitous, while other universities rolled in endowments and as first-generation college students wondered how to kick off a business, Tiffany R. Bussey brought entrepreneurship resources to HBCUs.

For nearly 30 years, Bussey has been at the heart of leadership programs in Atlanta. Now, she serves as the director of the [Morehouse Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center](#) (MIEC). Under her stewardship, around 400 small businesses have been impacted, 850 jobs have been created, and there's been nearly \$82 million in revenue growth.

Bussey is a doctor of business administration, master of science, master of business and project management professional.

She grew up in Belize; lived in New York City and Washington, D.C.; and ended up in Atlanta.

Here, Bussey shares insight into what makes MIEC stand out from other programs.

Give us some context as to why it's so important that there's an organization focused on advancing students towards tangible, sustainable goals.

Last week was actually Founder's Week. We celebrated the start of the campus 157 years ago [in 1867]. We had alums coming back, founders, sponsors, and it all culminated with a fundraiser at the Hyatt Regency where we raised \$5.5 million dollars. Fifty percent of our students are from households with an income of less than \$40,000 a year, and 80% have some sort of financial aid or scholarship, so this is very important.

What types of businesses are your students drawn to? When we look at the businesses in the community, it's really about, how can they scale? This is our 20th year, so we've learned a lot. When we started, it was really, just as we teach, what is the major problem that we see? And back then we were looking at starting and scaling tech stories. Atlanta has changed a lot. The ecosystem has really grown with a lot more providers focusing on tech. When we look at Black businesses most of them, I would say about 38% of them, are really focused on services, health care services, low-entry-to-barrier services. We believe that if we can help scale businesses in other segments, we can then increase employment.

What are you currently focused on? We've touched about 400 businesses so far and we're really doubling down honing in on a specific industry. We're running a cohort right now, and this is our third cohort in construction. We think this is a really high growth area for Black businesses. We ran one in health care, which is another segment., and now we're doing the research and believe it's going to be green tech. Based on the President's new Invest in America Act, which focuses on green tech and sustainability, we think there's an opportunity there.

What challenges have you faced, and even conquered, while blazing this trail with MIEC?

I think one of the unique things about this work is that because it is not at the core of the institution, the leadership really have to get it. I think today, if I was starting that work, it would be more accepted, because today everyone is talking "entrepreneurship!" It's been at Morehouse for 20 years; we've certainly seen it grow. One of the focuses for Morehouse is that it's not in the business division, it belongs to the college. Like I said, we're one of the early thought leadersthis is really interdisciplinary work. Many of these [programs] on other campuses sit [within] the business school, and when we started that's where it was. And I really fought for it to be campus wide. We're also working with the community outside our gates, which is important.

You've spoken about the areas where you push your students to look inward and pull ideas from — what sorts of entrepreneurial ideas excite you?

I think it's our job as faculty members to push students and to say, "What is the big hairy problem in society particularly for who we are here at Morehouse?" We like to see social justice as part of our DNA, with MLK [Martin Luther King Jr.] being our most famous alum who spoke to that. So, if we are going to make changes in society, we should be trying to solve those problems. I think as we look at changes, there's climate change, lack of housing, there are some big social issues that we could ideate around and find innovation to solve them.

What is the biggest obstacle facing Black businesses in Atlanta?

Often in the Black community, we are entrepreneurs out of necessity. I couldn't find a job, so I had to create one myself. Or I lost my job and then now I'm doing this because we don't have the luxury of sitting around and saying, "I'm going to create something I've never seen before." So, most of ours come of that hustle. We know how to cut hair; we create a barbershop. Atlanta is considered to be the top city for Black-owned businesses in the country, but I've heard that 96% of those are "solopreneurs." So, we not only need to start Black businesses, but we also need to grow them. We need to scale them so they can employ others and create jobs.