

# A College President Slept Like a Freshman for 2 Nights. Here's What He Learned.

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August 15, 2018

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## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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By Emma Pettit August 15, 2018



At this year's freshman orientation at Morehouse College, David Thomas, president of the historically black men's institution, was one of the new arrivals in Graves Hall. "I had a pretty rough night the first night," he says. Students later told him: "None of us sleep on the mattress. Didn't your mother come and make your bed?"

Courtesy of Morehouse College

New freshmen at Morehouse College got to know an unusual neighbor during orientation: David A. Thomas, president of the historically black men's institution in Atlanta. For two nights, he slept in Room 116 of Graves Hall, a dormitory. Thomas, who took office in January, is the first Morehouse president in 50 years who did not graduate from the college. Though he applied and was accepted, he couldn't afford the tuition, the [Associated Press](#) reports.

Instead, he attended Yale University, where he eventually earned a Ph.D. Thomas taught at the Harvard Business School and was a dean at Georgetown University before he became Morehouse's 12th president.

Since this is his first full academic year in office, Thomas wanted to immerse himself in the student experience. That meant sleeping on a college-issued mattress, sharing snacks with fellow freshmen, and staying up past midnight. Thomas spoke on Wednesday with *The Chronicle* about the nights he spent in the campus's oldest building. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q. So where did this idea come from?**

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**A.** One of my senior leaders, the vice president of student affairs, and I had been talking about how to make ourselves much more student-centered in every aspect of the school. He suggested it'd be good and informative for me to spend a couple of nights during orientation week with the freshmen, and it coincided with the fact that this is my first freshman class that I'll be with for the entire year. I immediately thought, "This is a brilliant idea," and said yes.

**Q. Can you describe the room? What did it look like?**

**A.** My room was a single. It's probably about 16 or so feet long and maybe 10 feet wide. Your basic single dormitory room. The building was built in 1889, so the walls are thick. It has air conditioning, and it's comfortable. They had a few things on the wall to decorate it for me: the Morehouse flag and a poster of Martin Luther King Jr. Somebody had put in a couple of books in case I was going to be that rare freshman who spends that first night in college reading.

**Q. How did you spend that first night?**

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**A.** I went around to a number of the house meetings [dormitories are called houses at Morehouse], and just spoke to the students fairly briefly. I spoke to them about emphasizing the four-year graduation rate, and that they needed to get focused on it now. I talked to them about how, wherever they go, they represent the college. I also talked to them about health and wellness. You're preparing them to be leaders, and you can't lead others if you don't take care of yourself.

**Q. How'd you spend your second night?**

**A.** My second night I slept much better. There's no visitation for freshmen, so my wife didn't visit me in the hall. But she sent over about four bags of goodies. So I became the most popular freshman in the dorm when I walked in with bags of good-to-you but not necessarily good-for-you treats. I spent a good hour and a half in the common room just talking to a number of the students. I probably got to bed about 1 o'clock in the morning.

**Q. You never got the chance to stay in a Morehouse dorm before now. How did that affect your outlook going into this experience?**

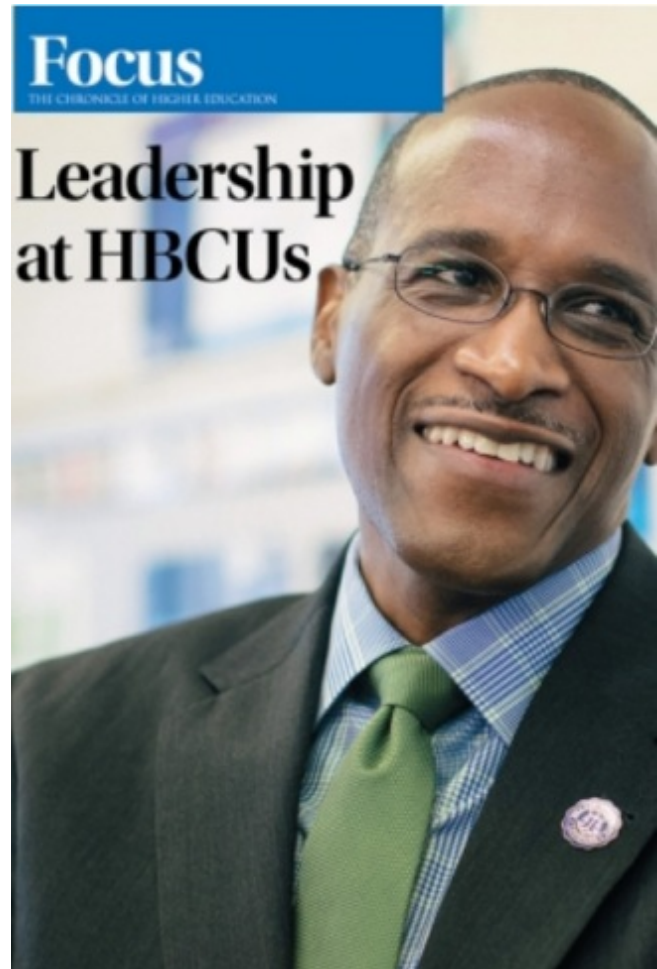
**A.** It contributed significantly, in particular because the first day of orientation has the theme “Welcome to the House.” It’s totally designed by the students. It just made me think, “Gee, what did I miss not being here 44 years ago?” Then when I went to the house, it was great being able to talk to the students, figure out what’s on their minds, watch their parents drop them off and make their beds, and have them laugh at me because I didn’t know that I should bring a bed pad to put over the school-issued mattress. So I had a pretty rough night the first night. The next day, they were like, “None of us sleep on the mattress. Didn’t your mother come and make your bed?”

**Q. What were some of the things freshmen talked about with you?**

**A.** We made a very conscious effort to emphasize graduating in four years. We’ve set a goal to raise our four-year graduation rate to a minimum of 70 percent. [It’s currently at 38 percent.] A lot of the students wanted to talk about, What do I really need to do to stay on track? Why do you think some people don’t graduate in four years? Students talked about what their majors were, or what they thought they would major in. Otherwise, it was just a lot of joking and bantering.

**Q. Improving Morehouse’s four-year graduation rate is something you’ve talked about before. What steps is the college taking to make it happen?**

**A.** There are three levers we have to focus on. The first is policies and practices of the school. We totally redesigned our advising system to make it more proactive and intervention-oriented. We’ve developed ways of identifying students who aren’t yet off track, but are showing indicators that they could move off track. We’ve changed our policies with regard to dropping courses. You can no longer drop courses late in the semester, which we’ve already seen has a positive effect on the number of courses students are passing. We are also looking at creating much more integration between the academic-advising side of the house and the student-affairs side of the house.



## The Mission and the Challenges of HBCUs

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Students at historically black colleges and universities are disproportionately from low-income families and often academically underprepared. The colleges themselves have limited financial resources. Strong, inspired leadership is needed to help them thrive and, sometimes, survive. This 24-page collection looks at the issues that presidents of historically black institutions must contend with. Download the collection [here](#).

The second lever is the culture among the students with regard to the four-year graduation rate. If you're in an environment where people are talking about finishing in four years, they're also going to help each other finish in four years. Your peers often become your shadow advising system. I know when I was in school, there were days when I thought about not finishing or packing up and going back to Kansas City. It was my friends who pulled me in and kept me on course.

The last lever is financing. We do have students who reach a point, usually around their junior year, where finances become an issue. Their parents may not have the credit to get a certain loan. The students have exhausted their loan limits. Most of our scholarships are merit-based. If a student drops below a 3.0, they lose their scholarship and oftentimes don't have the parental or family financial capacity to make up the gap.

So we're looking at some of those issues as well. Our alumni are becoming very active in

mobilizing funds, in particular for our seniors who are meeting financial difficulty but are on track to graduate, and sometimes have to reduce the number of credit hours they take so they can afford school.

**Q. Did you learn anything during your stay that you'll keep with you during your presidency?**

**A.** A few things. One, I promised the students that I would get them a new TV for the common room. Two, our residential system has great potential for us to develop some cocurricular programming that will reinforce what we're trying to do on the academic side with regard to themes like leadership and social justice. We have initiated a program to renovate many of our dormitories. I saw the necessity of us doing that. Graves is a very solid building, but there are things we can do to make it an enhanced learning environment for our young men.

The other thing I saw was they really are a great group of gentlemen. I was impressed by the way they interacted with each other, the thoughtfulness.

**Q. Would you recommend this experiment to other college presidents?**

**A.** I would, but I would tell them to have their mothers come and make their beds.

*Emma Pettit is a staff reporter at The Chronicle. Follow her on Twitter [@EmmaJanePettit](#), or email her at [emma.pettit@chronicle.com](mailto:emma.pettit@chronicle.com).*

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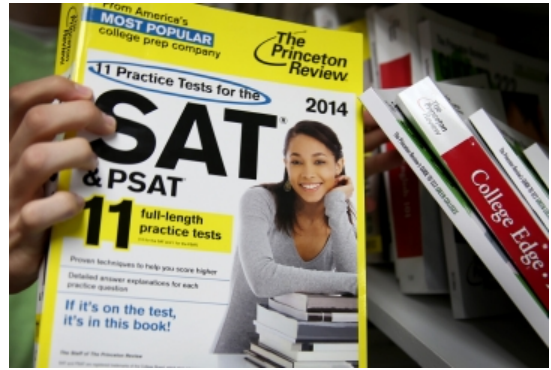
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