Edison O. Jackson recalls viewing the riots in West Baltimore on CNN roughly a year ago. The president of Daytona Beach, Florida-based Bethune-Cookman University was struck by the comments of young demonstrators some 847 miles away who were responding to the death of Freddie Gray, allegedly at the hands of local police officers.

“They just felt that they were consigned to this life. As I was listening to them, they were articulate; they were not hoodlums,” asserts Jackson. “In the midst of all that they were living in, it seemed to me there was something there of value. I asked John Baldwin, our policy advisor, to call CNN to get their names so that we could offer them admission. We did that.”

Jackson initiated enrollment and financial aid for two West Baltimore high school graduates (the third will enroll in the fall)—neither of whom had been accepted by any university but met the standard to handle college-level work—so they could attend the institution founded by educator and civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune in 1904. “The school system in Baltimore did an injustice to these young men because the truth of the matter is they’re very bright but had not been challenged, or the circumstances in life were simply not the best.”

For Jackson, who became president of B-CU in 2013, such action exemplifies the institutional mission as well as communicates that such potential cannot be overlooked when building the nation’s 21st century workforce. Historically black colleges and universities hold a centuries-old mission of creating the pathway to opportunity and achievement for generations of African Americans, but over the past few decades these institutions continue to be confronted with challenges to their financial viability and collegiate competitiveness.

Jackson and his team, however, have rewritten B-CU’s mission “to develop global leaders committed to service, lifelong learning, and diversity by providing a faith-based
environment of academic excellence and transformative experiences.” They seek to achieve this bold objective through advanced instruction, aggressive fundraising, and diverse partnerships. Hakim Lucas, vice president of institutional advancement, frames the president’s holistic approach as “building a communiversity.”

B-CU’s outreach to urban hubs like West Baltimore coincides with the expansion of its criminal justice administration program that currently emphasizes reform and community policing, forging a partnership with local law enforcement officials. A former president of New York-based Medgar Evers College and participant in the Black Male Achievement Initiative, Jackson created a campus center for criminal and associate justice as a bridge to reclaiming talent, promoting community policing, and creating desperately needed jobs. Beyond undergrad instruction, it can also be found among the leading online criminal justice master’s degree programs. “If you look at all the statistics and the number of African American and Hispanic males who are incarcerated, they aren’t going down. When I look at the negative collateral effect in our communities, we’ve got to do something,” says Jackson. “We build partnerships, not only locally, but throughout the state in key areas that are going to help us tackle [this problem]. We hope that we’re producing graduates with a different orientation, that their whole purpose is not to just lock them up. Hopefully a few will get into the power structure to help change the thinking that is prevalent in many criminal justice systems in this country.”

B-CU has been focused on beefing up academic programs, creating teaching partnerships with other universities, and recruiting faculty with impeccable academic credentials and a passionate commitment to HBCUs. By doing so, officials assert, the school will be a talent magnet for growth industries. Over the past few years, B-CU has expanded programs in environmental sciences, health sciences, public health, and sports management—areas of significant job growth. Moreover, the administration has designed cross-discipline programs, such as bringing together sports management, education, and health sciences. To impact K-12 by bolstering teacher effectiveness, B-CU has joined the Volusia Center for Excellence in Education, or VCEE, with Stetson University, Volusia County Schools, and New Teacher Center. And similar to its collaboration with local law enforcement related to its criminal justice program, Jackson has created partnerships with companies such as NASCAR and Curb Creative Connections.

Lucas maintains that in order to spur growth, the university engages in creative ways to provide financing for students, academic programs, and infrastructure. He says B-CU has surpassed its fundraising goal by 117%, adding $57 million to the endowment. For one, B-CU has developed an aggressive naming rights program in which donors pay for institutional signage at various levels—$250,000 to $1 million. Board Chairman and decades-long B-CU supporter Joseph Petrock and his wife, Barbara, donated $1 million to the campus namesake program for the eponymous College of Health Sciences. As part of this arrangement, B-CU will partner with Halifax Health to develop integrated population health and wellness education, training, research, and outreach initiatives. It has also obtained financial and technical support from other high-profile board members, such as Michelle Carter Scott and Lucille O’Neal, mothers of basketball stars Vince Carter and Shaquille O’Neal, who have given gifts tied to its Legacy Society.

The institution’s acquisition of donors and sponsors was a byproduct, Lucas says, of “high-level metrics…the complete system for how to identify persons who are in your sweet spot. You can’t partner with everybody. You have to spend the time to find organizational people that share synergistically your core values.” As part of the follow-up, he employs “thank you drives” that don’t include robo-calls. “We don’t hire a company from outside to call people. Guess who calls? The students. We find people want to give more money.”

Jackson believes this multi-pronged approach will not only fortify the institution and serve as a model for other HBCUs but, most importantly, produce a similar impact B-CU had on two young men from West Baltimore: the transformation of lives. BE