Clark Atlanta's new boss a builder
Track record: Carlton Brown has succeeded under pressure at other historically black institutions.

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When Carlton Brown arrived at Clark Atlanta University last summer, the institution was clawing out of a $25 million deficit and its administration had a reputation for intimidating faculty and students.

On Friday, Brown took the helm of Clark Atlanta, a historically black college where he will grapple with the tangible problems of modernizing Clark Atlanta's infrastructure and raising money, and intangibles like restoring its reputation among its students, faculty and alumni.

He spent much of the past school year as executive vice president and provost, and became one of the administration's most visible faces around campus, meeting and talking with students — many of whom were frustrated over long lines at the financial aid office and a housing crisis after the school welcomed a record number of incoming freshmen. In February, Brown became Clark Atlanta's interim president when its second president, Walter Broadnax, stepped down after six years in office.

The end of Broadnax's tenure was marked by massive debt, which he addressed by making controversial cuts to several programs.

It was a climate ripe for Brown's style of leadership.

"I resigned myself a long time ago to the idea that this is what I do," Brown said in an interview last week with The Associated Press. "I grow stuff."

Such challenges have become a calling for Brown, who worked at Hampton University in Virginia and Savannah State University — both black colleges that faced similar challenges to Clark Atlanta.

And like those schools, Brown said Clark had a strong foundation to build on. The decision to merge Clark College and Atlanta University, both founded in the 1860s, to form Clark Atlanta in 1988 only strengthened that foundation.
"The idea of building a stronger, bigger, more comprehensive institution with this new set of capabilities was one of the best things that could happen," Brown said. "I even have more fond regard for that decision now than I did then."

Atlanta University was the nation's oldest graduate institution for blacks and counted W.E.B. DuBois among its most distinguished faculty. Today, Clark Atlanta is the largest of the United Negro College Fund institutions, with more than 4,200 students and more than 25,000 alumni. It is the only private HBCU classified as a doctoral or research-intensive institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Fund-raising is a top priority for Brown, who said he also plans to seek federal legislation to make college more affordable.

"Being the largest also means that an awful lot of people think we have what we need, which is far from the truth," Brown said.

Clark Atlanta's $40 million endowment is dwarfed by those of its fellow Atlanta University Center institutions. Spelman College boasts an endowment of more than $291 million, and Morehouse College's stands at more than $117 million.

"I would think private fund-raising is an important part of the work that he's going to be doing," said UNCF President Michael Lomax.

Noran Moffett, a professor of education at Clark Atlanta, said Brown's balance of humility and humanity should serve him well in his new role.

"I see Dr. Brown as being able to take on the challenge of being able to communicate with potential donors, and at the same time, communicate with the hip-hop generation of students that we have," Moffett said.

Student Government Association President La'Vonn Brown was impressed with the new president, who has participated in new student orientation sessions and eaten lunch with students in the cafeteria.

"New students coming in know who he is," La'Vonn Brown said.

Outgoing SGA President Janelle Jackson said under the previous administration, students could go their entire campus careers without recognizing their school's president. Brown's visibility is likely to go a long way, especially among alumni.

"When they ask us for money, it won't be the first time we're seeing their faces," she said.
Brown is also determined to upgrade Clark Atlanta’s infrastructure and is committed to restoring the school's reputation and boosting morale.

"We need to re-establish an ethos for the institution, from the level of the student, up through the faculty and the alumni," Brown said.

Lomax saw the challenge as an opportunity to tell Clark Atlanta's story.

"Some of the tough decisions and choices that had to be made ... meant that the local and national community heard a little disharmony in the Clark Atlanta University community," Lomax said. "I think that his opportunity is really to ensure that the entire Clark Atlanta University community is speaking with one very positive voice about [its] extraordinary resources and tradition and record."

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