

Sunday, January 5, 10:00–11:15 a.m., Cibolo Canyon 10 and 11

High Conflict Case Studies - Alumni and Donors

Following up on the morning plenary, this session will allow presidents to apply high conflict prevention lessons to a case study involving alumni and donors.

Facilitator: **Kathleen Harring**, President, Muhlenberg College (PA)

Alumni and Donors Case Study

Maroon University is a small, financially strapped HBCU in Mississippi. When enrollments began to decline sharply following the COVID pandemic, Maroon's president, Barbara Easton, launched a development campaign in the hopes of avoiding a full declaration of financial exigency. Alumni and community leaders responded, contributing to the largest fundraising effort in school history, but surprisingly ferocious summer storms damaged the roofs of several key buildings on campus, and repairs drained the already depleted reserves. With development funds nearly all restricted and committed to scholarships and the start of the fall semester, the university's administration scrambled for a solution.

At that moment, an unusual benefactor stepped in. The family of local former slave plantation owner declared its willingness to pay for the storm damage repairs and contribute several acres of nearby farmland to the university's agriculture school. When the president took the proposal to the board, one board member and alum of the university posted to social media that she was upset that President Easton had even considered the matter. A small group of active leaders of the extensive alumni organization who had long been critical of Easton for her handling of university finances, declared that the proposition was "ludicrous, an insult to the legacy of the institution, and an affront to the community." A lawyer for the family responded saying that the donation offer had been made in good faith, and it was time for the university to "get over the racial animus of the past." The alumni leaders declared that if Easton accepted the donation, she was "in the pocket of a system of systemic racism that long plagued the state," and they would call on their fellow alumni to take back their campaign donations and support a vote of no confidence.