

# Look Beneath the Surface: An Interview with Mike Smith of *The Times-Picayune*

Michael Walsh, HBCU-ACC Advisor | February 2023



*Mike Smith is a mentor in the [HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps](#). Prior to joining [The Times-Picayune](#), he served as a foreign correspondent with the [AFP](#). This included postings in Africa and the Middle East.*

**What is unique about student newspapers? Why do you think that they matter?**

Student newspapers serve as both an important training ground for young journalists as well as an essential watchdog on campus affairs. Beyond the experience gained in reporting and editing, students run the papers themselves, requiring them to learn all aspects of the profession, from ethics to production. I served as editor of my college newspaper, and it was an immensely rewarding experience that I'll never forget.

**What is unique about HBCU student newspapers? Why do you think that they matter?**

Beyond all the above, HBCU student newspapers serve the additional role of helping diversify the journalism profession at large. Despite progress in recent years, this remains a vital goal in order to better reflect the communities we cover and end the marginalization of voices who have been excluded for far too long.

**What is the first piece of advice that you would give a HBCU student reporter who aspires to become a foreign correspondent? Why?**

Understand that you should pursue it out of a desire to deeply explore other cultures and explain them to the rest of the world. Despite what films and TV shows often portray, the vast majority of the job is unglamorous and often difficult work. It is nonetheless an incredible privilege and responsibility to work as a foreign correspondent – among the most amazing

career paths in any profession, in my opinion. The hard work and commitment required pay off in terms of knowledge and fascinating experiences that will change your perspective on the world forever.

**If you were asked to share one story from your time as a foreign correspondent with HBCU student reporters, what would it be? Why?**

It is difficult to come up with one story from a couple decades of experience, but I would say in general to approach each assignment with an open mind. To provide one example: During my time in Nigeria, those unfamiliar with the country would often seek to boil down much of what was happening in that vast country to a simple religious narrative: the 'Christian south' vs. the 'Muslim north.' I would sometimes challenge that then by explaining that Lagos state in the south – where the country's biggest city is located – had a Muslim governor (at the time). If you look below the surface, you often find a more complicated – and far more interesting – story than you first imagined.

**Which foreign policy issues do you think most merit the attention of HBCU student reporters? Why?**

I hope this doesn't sound like I'm dodging the question, but this is an honest answer: all of them. Every region of the world is confronted with issues worth exploring, both on their own terms and in relation to how they affect other countries, including the United States. The world benefits through greater understanding, and it is up to us as journalists to help provide that knowledge while upholding the principles of our profession.