CELEBRATING STUDENTS

AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AT

HBCUs

EDITED BY JAMIL D. JOHNSON
FOREWORD BY TASHA A. CARSON

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About the Publisher

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was born out of the success of the University of South Carolina's much-honored University 101 course and a series of annual conferences focused on the freshman year experience. The momentum created by the educators attending these early conferences paved the way for the development of the National Resource Center, which was established at the University of South Carolina in 1986. As the National Resource Center broadened its focus to include other significant student transitions in higher education, it underwent several name changes, adopting the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition in 1998.

Today, the Center collaborates with its institutional partner, University 101 Programs, in pursuit of its mission to advance and support efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education. We achieve this mission by providing opportunities for the exchange of practical and scholarly information as well as the discussion of trends and issues in our field through convening conferences and other professional development events such as institutes, workshops, and online learning opportunities; publishing scholarly practice books, research reports, a peer-reviewed journal, electronic newsletters, and guides; generating, supporting, and disseminating research and scholarship; hosting visiting scholars; and maintaining several online channels for resource sharing and communication, including a dynamic website and social media outlets.

The National Resource Center serves as the trusted expert, internationally recognized leader, and clearinghouse for scholarship, policy, and best practices for all postsecondary student transitions.

Institutional Home

The National Resource Center is located at the University of South Carolina's (USC) flagship campus in Columbia. Chartered in 1801, USC Columbia's mission is twofold: to establish and maintain excellence in its student population, faculty, academic programs, living and learning environment, technological infrastructure, library resources, research and scholarship, public and private support and endowment; and to enhance the industrial, economic, and cultural potential of the state. USC is among the top tier of universities receiving Research and Community Engagement designations from the Carnegie Foundation.

To learn more about the National Resource Center, visit www.sc.edu/fye. To learn more about the University of South Carolina, visit www.sc.edu.

About the Advising Success Network

The Advising Success Network (ASN) is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to engage institutions in holistic advising redesign to advance success for all students, including Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander students and poverty-affected students. The network develops services and resources to guide institutions in implementing evidence-based advising practices. The ASN is coordinated by NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and includes Achieving the Dream, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education, EDUCAUSE, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and Young Invincibles.

Our vision is a higher education landscape where institutions align to provide holistic support to students that is sustained, strategic, integrated, proactive, and personalized and takes the whole student – their goals, aspirations, and experiences – into account.

The network takes a learner-centered and coordinated approach to institutional transformation, sharing resources to advance academic, career, and financial advising practices and create seamless connections to student mental health services, basic needs, tutoring, and other student supports. We recognize the vast variance in organizational advising structures, models, pedagogies, and approaches and offer resources to support institutions in understanding their unique student population, defining their ideal student engagement vision, and working with faculty, staff, and students to meet institutional goals.

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"The stories and lived experiences of students at historically Black colleges and universities deserve a space to be voiced, honored, and celebrated. Faculty, staff, and student support professionals across HBCU campuses are doing innovative and impactful work to meet student needs and address longstanding gaps in our education system—work that fully merits recognition. This book provides both: an opportunity to elevate the HBCU student experience and to illuminate the dedicated efforts that contribute to HBCU student success."

- Tasha A. Carson.

Foreword

Tasha A. Carson
HBCU Advocate, North Carolina Central University & Jackson State University Alumna

Attending an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) fundamentally altered the trajectory of my life. I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, in a neighborhood deeply affected by the systemic challenges of drugs and gang violence, and I attended schools within one of Illinois's lowest-performing districts. Yet, I was fortunate to have a mother, the late Tami Andrews, who instilled in us an unwavering belief in the transformative power of faith and education. Within the walls of our home, she imparted lessons that extended far beyond the classroom, ensuring that her four children recognized the vital importance of spiritual grounding and academic achievement. Despite growing up in a low-income household, lacking social capital, and having no direct role models to emulate as a first-generation college student, I remained steadfast in my belief that I too could attain a college degree. Moreover, I was privileged to set an example that inspired my three siblings to enroll in HBCUs as well. Although neither of my parents had the opportunity to pursue higher education, my siblings and I now proudly hold nine degrees among us, representing four distinguished HBCUs.

While this narrative might appear to be a singular account of familial triumph, it is, in fact, emblematic of the enduring legacy and impact of HBCUs. Established between the late 1800s and early 1900s, these institutions were founded to provide African Americans with equitable access to higher education when segregation and discrimination rendered it otherwise unattainable. Rooted in faith, family, and community uplift, HBCUs have historically opened doors to opportunity, pride, purpose, and generational advancement. Today, these institutions continue to stand firmly on these pillars, preserving traditions and values that make the HBCU experience truly unparalleled. It is not uncommon to witness granddaughters walking the same hallowed halls of Florida A&M University where their grandparents once met or third-generation Morehouse men upholding the revered Candle in the Dark ceremony each fall. Eldest sisters, like myself, have the profound honor of pinning their younger siblings with eagle wings at North Carolina Central University's legacy pinning ceremony—a testament to the enduring bonds fostered within these institutions.

HBCUs are more than places of learning; they are sites of belonging, cultural affirmation, and intergenerational excellence. They have produced luminaries such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Spike Lee, Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, Thurgood Marshall, and the 49th Vice President of the United States, Kamala Harris—all of whom exemplify the far-reaching influence of these institutions in shaping social justice, advocacy, scholarship,

and the arts. Our students enter to learn and depart to serve, embodying a mission that is as relevant today as it was over a century ago. Many often ask why we, as alumni and supporters, possess such profound pride and devotion to our institutions. The answer lies in the formative nature of the HBCU experience: during these pivotal years, students cultivate a sense of self-worth and purpose while gaining a deep understanding of the sacrifices that paved the way for their opportunities. This powerful immersion in history, community, and legacy inspires graduates to remain committed stewards of the cultural treasure that is the Black college experience. For generations to come, we carry forward the torch lit by those who came before us, nurturing the sense of belonging, mentorship, and resilience that empowers us to thrive in every sphere we enter. The HBCU experience is not merely an education; it is a transformative legacy of empowerment, cultural pride, and collective advancement that continues to shape lives and communities each and every day.

In this book, *Celebrating Students and their Experiences at HBCUs,* readers will discover that the profound commitment that burned in the hearts of HBCU founders, leaders, and early faculty when these institutions were first established remains vibrant and unwavering today. Embedded in the very fabric of HBCUs is a mission rooted in educational advancement, student support, and the enduring aim to cultivate environments where all students are given a fair and fighting chance to succeed. Even when confronted with limited financial support, persistent questions about institutional relevance, and longstanding inequities in federal and state policy, HBCU leaders like these authors have continued to serve as beacons of resilience and hope for generations of Black scholars and professionals.

This volume brings together nearly 30 contributors who illuminate how contemporary HBCU educators are challenging conventional academic paradigms, designing culturally relevant curricula, and developing holistic student support frameworks to meet the diverse and evolving needs of today's learners. Uniquely studied student populations such as student athletes, first-generation students, and graduate students are benefitting from intentional advising, mentorship initiatives, leadership development programs, and community-building practices that honor the whole student. These narratives and research-driven insights not only illustrate the innovative strategies employed across campuses but also reaffirm the vital role HBCUs play in shaping agents of change, producing scholars committed to social justice, and sustaining legacies of excellence that extend far beyond graduation. This collection stands as a testament to the transformative power and enduring relevance of the HBCU experience in the 21st century and beyond.

As a proud HBCU alumna, administrator, and advocate, I remain deeply hopeful that our institutions will continue not only to survive but to flourish for years to come. The future of our HBCU community will be shaped, in large part, by the intentional work and collective vision we pursue today. While going above and beyond might be optional for majority institutions, it has always been a requirement for us. We are the change agents who keep HBCUs evolving, resilient, and positioned to meet the challenges of an ever-shifting higher education landscape. Our unwavering commitment to the transformative experiences of our students is rooted in our shared desire to pay it forward and uplift future generations. As professors, administrators, leaders, and scholars, we serve our HBCUs each day with the goal of extending to our students the same love, mentorship, and institutional support that once nurtured us. This is our commitment, our enduring mission, and our contribution to the legacy of educational excellence found at HBCUs.

Jamil D. Johnson

"This chapter centers Celebrating Students and their Experiences at HBCUs providing a historical analysis of HBCUs and their important role in civil rights, higher education, and community. The chapter also discusses how the special issues book evolved with the theme of centering students and their asset-based experiences at HBCUs. The chapter concludes with an overview of the primary authors and a summary of their original research."

- Jamil D. Johnson

Chapter 1

HBCU Proud: An Introduction

Jamil D. Johnson
University of South Carolina

HBCUs and Sense of Belonging (Community)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) provide students with a transformational experience, both in and outside of the campus community. HBCUs are also well-known for serving as a direct pipeline of educational opportunity for urban and rural youth, through community practices, partnerships, and as a public resource for members of surrounding urban and rural communities where HBCUs are located (Brown & Davis, 2001; Johnson & Jackson, 2024). HBCU faculty and staff members perform their work responsibilities under an ethos of "family" (Brooks & Allen, 2016; Johnson & Jackson, 2024; Williams & Taylor, 2022). These critical relationships students develop at HBCUs result in academic success in college, career opportunities as an alumnus, and a long-term commitment to service within the Black community (Johnson & Jackson, 2024).

Centering HBCUs and Civil Rights

HBCUs are not only creating positive experiences for students and community, but many HBCUs are unsung in their direct role in disrupting the plight of Black Americans throughout history. HBCUs served as critical centers of activism, intellectual discourse and disruption (for the United States) during the Civil Rights Movement. HBCUs birthed a new generation of Black leaders who went on to challenge racial inequality, advocate for equal rights, and ignite social change that would send shockwaves across the country (Gonzalez, 2023, para. 3). Furthermore, HBCUs became the center of organizing, protests, and intellectual debate that would foster a spirit of resistance and grit among students and faculty (Gonzalez, 2023, para. 3). As Bracey (2017) argues,

> *HBCUs are still necessary in our society today because they have been the mainstay of educating African Americans at the college and university levels. Black communities throughout our nation are still being devastated by economic polarization and by racial discrimination endemic to higher education at white institutions.* (p. 670)

To put this into further historical context, let us examine Orangeburg, South Carolina (about an hour south of the capital city, Columbia), a rural community that has two established HBCUs: Claflin University

and South Carolina State University. The population and political leadership of Orangeburg is overwhelmingly African American/Black and both institutions provide jobs and opportunities for the surrounding community (Fouriezos, 2022). Orangeburg was also the location of a significant but not well-known historical event that occurred during the Civil Rights and Black Freedom Movement. On the evening of February 8, 1968, after peaceful protests and demonstrations to integrate a local bowling alley, police opened fire on 200 unarmed Black students and killed two South Carolina State University students, Henry Smith and Samuel Hammond, and a 17-year-old student at Wilkinson High School in Orangeburg, Delano Middleton; another 28 protesters were wounded (Orangeburg Massacre Anniversary Commemoration, n.d.). South Carolina State University has commemorated Henry Smith, Samuel Hammond, and Delano Middleton with a campus monument enshrined with bronze likeness busts (Orangeburg Massacre, n.d.).

Benedict College and Allen University geographically are situated next to each other in Columbia, South Carolina. Both have also played pivotal roles in Civil Rights. Bobby J. Donaldson, Associate Professor of History and lead of the Center for Civil Rights History and Research at the University of South Carolina, notes of Benedict and Allen, "Not only were they involved in civil rights, but they produced the black middle classes … not only in Columbia, but those students left here and went all around the country" (Daprile, 2019, para. 1).

Historical Context

HBCUs were established to provide access to educational opportunities for African Americans that were not accessible at established colleges and universities due to national policy and systemic and institutional racism of the 19th century. The Morrill Land-Grant Acts, first in 1862, provided for the development of land-grant public colleges funded by the development or sale of associated federal land grants (Morrill Acts of 1862, n.d.). While purposeful, the first Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 resulted in segregated colleges throughout most of the United States (Lee, 1963). African American students were critically disadvantaged due to inferior resources and opportunities (Fincher et al., 2025). The second Morrill Act of 1890 established 19 land-grant universities as HBCUs and further required states to demonstrate that admission to existing land-grant universities was not restricted by race (Allen et al., 2020). While the second Morrill Act created an access point of additional HBCUs, many were established prior to 1890: The oldest HBCU is Cheyney State University (Pennsylvania, 1837), followed by Lincoln University (Pennsylvania, 1854), Wilberforce University (Ohio, 1856), Bowie State University (Maryland, 1865), Lincoln University (Missouri, 1866), and Howard University (Washington, DC, 1867; Bonner et al., 2024).

HBCUs have survived historical and legal challenges since their development, including "Jim Crow, inadequate funding, deferred maintenance, and accreditation issues" (Bonner et al., 2024, p. 46). Yet, HBCUs have maintained their identity as the leaders of Black culture and the education of Black professionals that strengthen the social and political experiences of the Black community in the United States. For example, HBCUs play a critical role in Black students' participation and access to advanced graduate study. According to findings from the American Institute for Boys and Men (AIBM, 2024), while HBCUs represent 13% of four-year degrees awarded to Black students, HBCU graduates account for close to half of Black doctoral recipients in agricultural science, 31% in mathematics, 23% in science and engineering, and 21% in psychology. Findings suggest that HBCUs are responsible for educating 40% of Black engineers and 50% of Black lawyers (Windsor & Reeves, 2024). Black HBCU graduates are more likely to experience better campus experiences, greater support, and have stronger gains in social capital (Bonner et al., 2024; Windsor & Reeves, 2024).

National Context

According to the Department of Labor, as of 2024, there were approximately 107 HBCUs that serve more than 228,000 students and produce nearly 20% of the country's Black college graduates (Cochran & Daniels, 2024, para. 5). A strength of HBCUs lies in its diversity of institutional types: among these 107 schools no one school is alike. Theology & professional (law, pharmacy, and medical) coexist with traditional four-year colleges - some as liberal arts colleges and other large universities (The One Hundred-Seven, n.d., para. 1). As

indicated in Figure 1.1, the overall majority of HBCUs are in the Southeastern United States, with Alabama hosting the most at 13, followed by North Carolina with 10. Georgia, Texas, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee each have at least six (Hatfield & Anderson, 2024), and Delaware, Illinois, New York, West Virginia and the U.S. Virgin Islands (University of Virgin Islands) have established HBCUs (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, n.d.).
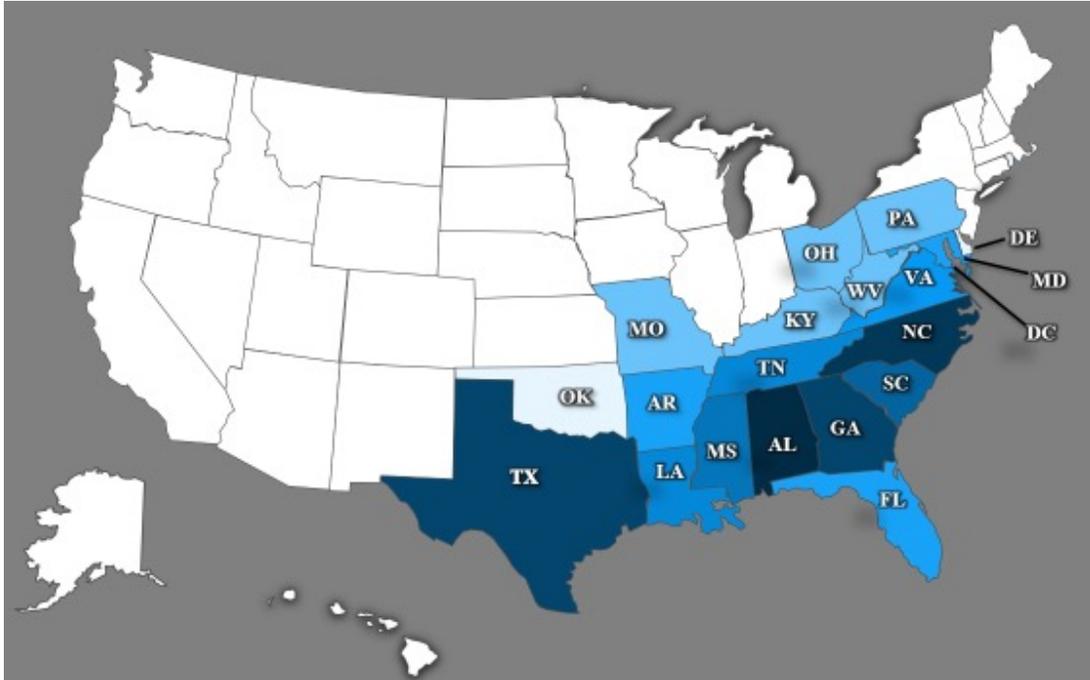
Figure 1.1 Number of HBCUs by state.
Note. HBCUs that do not participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs are excluded. (NCES, n.d.).

Rural HBCUs

Most HBCUs are in vast metropolitan cities that produce numerous economic benefits both for the institution and the surrounding community. HBCUs in rural communities often function as the heartbeat and soul to their own surrounding communities. Yet, rural HBCUs face challenges that metropolitan HBCUs may not. For example, a 2021 McKinsey & Company report revealed that 82% of HBCUs are in "internet deserts," where broadband and internet connectivity is limited, unstable, or not accessible (Bevins et al., (2021). The findings further indicate that these internet deserts are primarily in rural and low-income areas, specifically in the Black rural south, where approximately one third of HBCUs are located (Abdur-Rahman, 2025; Moody, 2022).

Two-Year HBCUs

For students that desire an HBCU experience but are not interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree, those who need a more affordable academic option, or those who need to develop stronger academic skills prior to transferring to a four-year college, there are two-year HBCUs that offer both associate degrees and certificate programs (The one hundred-seven, n.d., para. 1). Two-year HBCUs are located in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C., and there are also a few colleges that offer both bachelor's degrees and several associate degrees (Arkansas Baptist College, Lincoln University (Missouri), Selma University, Simmons College of Kentucky, and the University of the Virgin Islands) (The One Hundred-Seven, n.d., para. 1).

HBCU Student Enrollment

A common misconception of HBCUs is that they are a homogenous system. HBCUs are not just institutions diversified by classification, academic distinction, and socioeconomic status, but also by student demographics (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, n.d.). Data reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2022) demonstrates that HBCUs continue to serve an overwhelming majority of Black students (Figure 1.2). Hatfield and Anderson (2024) reported that more than 80% of the student body was Black at the majority of the HBCUs in 2022.

# of HBCUs by Percentage of Black Students
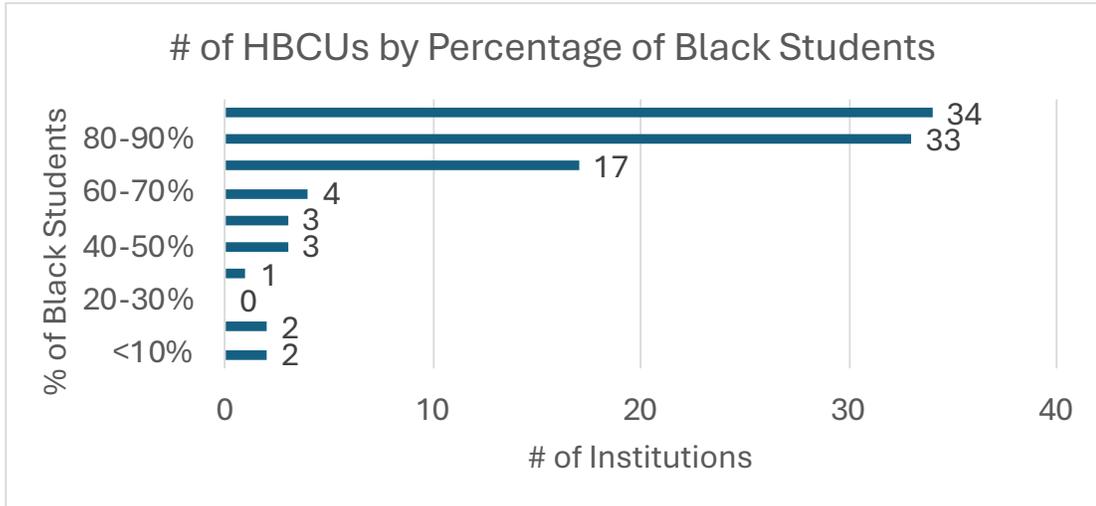
Figure 1.2 Number of HBCUs by percentage enrollment of Black students.
Note. Data represent the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It excludes HBCUs that are not participating in Title IV programs (NCES, n.d.-b).

However, The Thurgood Marshall College Fund also suggests that at eight HBCUs, more than half of the students were not Black. One institution (Saint Philip's College, Texas) also identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), and another (West Virginia State University) now primarily serves White students. This diversity also extends to academic faculty, public/private institutional distinctions, denominational, liberal arts, land-grant, independent university systems, single-gender serving, research-based, and student enrollment numbers ranging from less than 300 to over 11,000 (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, n.d.).

Nationally, HBCU enrollment significantly increased between 1976 and 2010. According to data from the NCES (n.d.-b), HBCU student enrollment in 1976 was approximately 220,000 students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. By 2010, cumulative HBCU enrollment increased to over 326,000 (Figure 1.3). However, by 2022, HBCU enrollment declined to 290,000 students. While there was a dip in enrollment, HBCUs still experienced a net enrollment increase of 30% from 1976 to 2022 (Hatfield & Anderson, 2024). Further, Black student enrollment at all colleges and universities in the United States increased by 125% between 1976 and 2022, significantly outpacing the 63% student enrollment increase of other races and ethnicities (Hatfield & Anderson, 2024). Hatfield and Anderson (2024) note that the share of all Black college students increased from 9% to 13% in this same time, which is in alignment with the Black share of the U.S. population in 2022.

Figure 1.3. Total fall enrollment in degree granting HBCUs
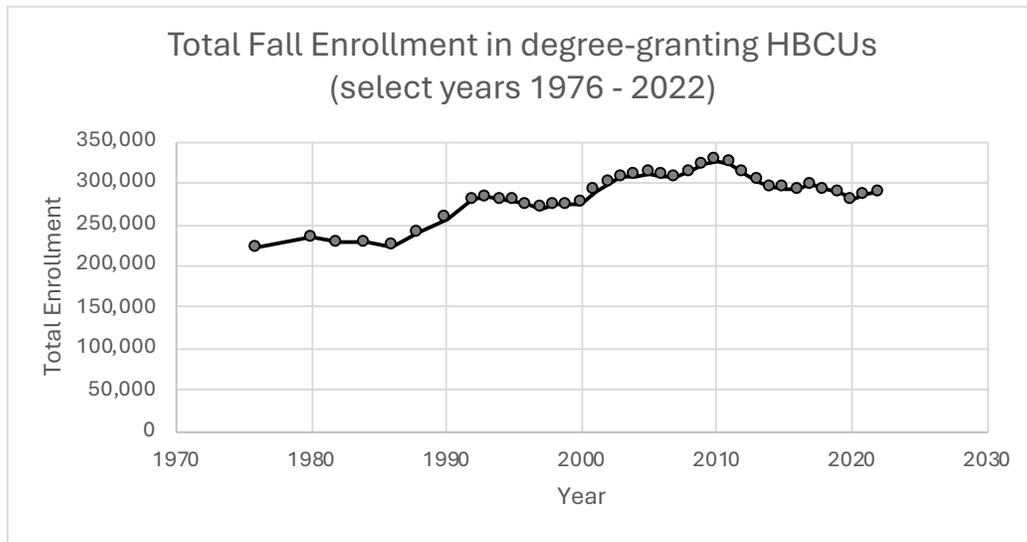*Note.* Data in this table represent the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Excluded are HBCUs not participating in Title IV programs. HBCUs are degree-granting institutions established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating Black Americans (NCES, 2022).

HBCU Student Success Outcomes

Nationally, among Black students enrolled in four-year public institutions, 45.9% complete their degrees within six-years (this is the lowest completion rate when compared to other races and ethnicities) and African American men have the lowest completion rate at 40% (The United Negro College Fund [UNCF], n.d., para. 1). One of the consistent challenges that Black students report nationally is related to financial implications. According to a study by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, when compared to their White peers, Black and Latine students were more likely to need food, housing, utility and medical assistance, in addition to reporting having more difficulty in covering a $500 emergency (Mowreader, 2024). Also, students who rely on financial aid inclusive of student loans, grants, or scholarships were more likely to be financially insecure compared to their peers who did not rely on outside aid (Mowreader, 2024). According to the UNCF (n.d.), 72% of Black students take on debt during their academic journey in contrast to 56% of their White peers. HBCUs actively work to address the financial limitations Black students face on campus: On average, the cost of attendance at an HBCU is 28% less than attending a comparable non-HBCU (UNCF, n.d.). A noteworthy point, 40% of HBCU students report feeling financially secure during college when compared to 29% of Black students at other schools (UNCF, n.d., para. 3).

HBCUs make up less than 3% of all postsecondary institutions in the United States, yet they account for 8% of Black undergraduate enrollment and 13% of all bachelor's degrees earned by Black students (The White House, 2024). HBCUs enroll a disproportionate number of first-generation, low-income students relative to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) with 83% of HBCUs receiving a Pell Grant compared to 34% nationwide (Alexander, 2024). Edwards et al. (2023) found that students that initially enroll in an HBCU are 14.6 percentage points more likely to earn a bachelor's degree and have 5% higher household income by the age of 30 in contrast to students that did not enroll in an HBCU.

HBCU Funding

A sentiment often heard within HBCUs and specifically amongst staff and administrators is "We do more with less" (Howard, 2025). When analyzing institution endowments, PWI land-grant universities boast $45 billion in assets compared to $1 billion for HBCUs; in perspective, for every $100 a PWI gets, an HBCU gets $1 in endowment (Alexander, 2024). This disparity is complicated even more when analyzing the federal funds

that HBCUs receive. In 2023, the U.S. federal government notified 16 states that they had underfunded HBCUs by $13 billion over the course of three decades (Knott, 2023). Land-grant HBCUs are to receive equitable funding compared to their predominantly white land-grant peers (Knott, 2023). However, for HBCUs these disparities impact student success, infrastructure, funding, and more. Glenda Glover, President of Tennessee State University, noted that over 33 years with an additional $2.1 billion, the university could have updated aging buildings, offered more scholarships, and had a more competitive program (Knott, 2023). The university's annual budget is about $250 million, but with this additional funding Glover remarked, "We've accomplished so much with so little. This funding would take us to the stratosphere" (Knott, 2023, para. 8).

HBCU Student Experiences

A contemporary examination of the scholarship demonstrates that Black students attending HBCUs have more positive campus experiences in contrast to Black students attending PWIs. Black students enrolled at HBCUs report higher integration into campus life, and develop long-term meaningful relationships with faculty, peers, staff, and leadership (Bonner et al., 2024; Williams & Taylor, 2022). While Black student engagement in High-Impact Practices (HIPs; e.g., first-year experience, undergraduate research, study abroad) at PWIs are mixed, the value of engagement in these is clear. For example, a 2013 report published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), found that historically underrepresented or underserved (e.g., racial minorities, first-generation) students who participated in more than one high impact practice reported significantly greater gains in "deeper learning" and learning outcomes than their peers who reported involvement in only one high impact practice (HIP) (Finley & McNair, 2013, p. 2).

Scholars conclude that many HBCU students may not initially be aware of these types of HIPs; however, faculty-mentoring and holistic student support are critical factors in supporting students' engagement (Covington, 2017; Erebholo & Ero-Johnson, 2024; Lyn et al., 2022).

Students at HBCUs also demonstrate more positive mental health outcomes. In a national study, Patterson et al. (2024) examined 2,504 students across 16 HBCUs and two Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) and found significant differences when compared to national averages. Findings show that 45% of HBCU/PBI students reported flourishing mentally when compared to 36% of college students nationally; and 83% reported a sense of belonging in their campus community, compared to 73% nationally (Cook, 2025). The report also found that HBCU/PBI students showed significantly lower rates of anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use compared to national averages (Cook, 2025).

Students who attend HBCUs also report strong feelings of inclusion, values, being believed in, and welcomed (Johnson, 2017; Shuler et al. 2022). These various layers of support contribute to students' well-being and are reinforced by the faculty and staff of HBCUs, who communicate their belief in their students' success (Johnson, 2017), which further increases their self-esteem, resilience, and levels of satisfaction (Shuler et al. 2022). Black students at HBCUs also find them to be culturally relevant and safe environments free from the racial hostility they perceive at PWIs (Johnson, 2017; Shuler et al. 2022). As Shuler et al. (2022) suggests, this is critical given that U.S. news and social media are consistently filled with reminders of the nation's systemic racism.

Students who graduate from HBCUs accumulate numerous life-long benefits. According to data from the UNCF (n.d., para. 4), an impressive 25% of African American graduates with STEM degrees come from HBCUs, and eight were among the top 20 institutions to award the most science and engineering degrees to Black students from 2008 to 2012. Even more remarkable, an HBCU graduate can expect to earn an additional $927,000 in their lifetime, which is 56% more than they could expect to earn without their HBCUs degrees or certificates (UNCF, n.d., para. 4). The quantitative data points are evident: enrolling and graduating from HBCUs at any point in the educational pipeline produces numerous benefits for student success.

Celebrating HBCU Success

To understand the purpose and rationale of this special issue publication, it is important to situate the context of students, staff, and faculty who live and work within the ecosystem of HBCUs. When this research project

commenced in fall 2023, I had the opportunity to engage with colleagues and students who demonstrate a deep passion and love for HBCUs. I am reminded of a question that I was often asked almost immediately: "Why us? Why HBCUs?" This question makes sense, particularly given my own positionality as a professor and scholar positioned within a PWI. From a research perspective, I understand the significance of going into an HBCU space representing a PWI, and the trust and rapport that is critical in this type of collaborative project. By the end of each phone call, Zoom meeting, or face-to-face interaction, I was aware of the joy and gratitude that was felt by colleagues and students. In some capacity, each conversation ended with, "Thank you for all that you are doing and for celebrating HBCU success!" To complement this sentiment, the rationale for this special issue book is to center HBCU student voices and celebrate their lived experiences, and further, to recognize the staff, faculty, and community that support HBCU students and their student success. This book exemplifies what makes HBCUs so special, what is often coined as that special sauce that places them in a category of their own in academic success, support, empathy, love, and belonging. In practice, I observed this special sauce with my colleague Amanda Williams, who serves as Coordinator of Academic Support Services in the Undergraduate Student Success Center at Florida A&M University (FAMU). Termed FAMULY, Amanda and her staff have developed and sustained a student-focused holistic approach to student success that goes well-beyond classes. FAMULY, enthusiastically shared by Amanda, "is creating spaces for students that provides love, belonging, security, motivation, and more importantly, a place to call home within the larger HBCU campus." Amanda further asserted, "I think motivation really captures not only the heart of what we do as Coaches, but also the spirit of the FAMULY, as a whole." As noted earlier, Johnson and Jackson (2024) describe this ethos of family and the importance of faculty and staff members on campus who function as mentors and role models to students. Johnson and Jackson (2024) extend, "These familial-like figures encourage students to reimagine their choices and potential life trajectories." This special sauce is prevalent across FAMU and all HBCUs; it is what makes HBCUs different than any other type of institution.

Envisioning HBCUs: A Multi-Tiered Exploration

With gratitude from the Advising Success Network (ASN) and NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education , in May 2023, I was competitively selected and awarded an extramural grant to explore the student experience at HBCUs. The purpose and goal of the award was to elevate HBCUs, specifically those in rural areas, as well as to engage students, staff, and faculty within HBCUs to provide a space for each to learn, collaborate, and produce their own scholarship. As part of the grant requirement in alignment with the ASN, all deliverables had to include one aspect of advising. To achieve this, each research deliverable has a specific and sometimes unique focus on advising and the intersection of student success within HBCUs. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this project, planning for this multi-tiered exploration of HBCUs commenced.

The HBCU Experience From a Student Affairs Perspective

A common theme shared amongst those within the HBCU ecosystem is that opportunities to participate in professional development opportunities are often limited, typically due to funding. In collaboration with Dr. Tasha A. Carson (formally the Interim Associate Vice President of Student Affairs at Tennessee State University), an asynchronous four-week course was developed titled, "The HBCU Experience from a Student Affairs Perspective." The course, hosted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (The Center) in summer 2024 and fall 2025, was designed specifically for staff and faculty within any institutional type who had an interest in learning about and supporting HBCUs. Krystal Reynolds (Assistant Director of Conferences and Continuing Education at The Center) noted early on, "We have so many HBCU partners, but many often cannot engage in our online courses due to cost." To address the funding question, my grant funds provided course registration fee waivers (valued at $425 each) for all staff and faculty enrolled in the course. The course also addressed another gap for The Center, as it is the first

to exclusively focus on HBCUs.

The learning outcomes for the course included: (a) Define and provide examples of HIPs currently being used at HBCUs to address advising, mentoring, and student success; (b) Develop the knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies necessary to provide effective mentoring and advising support to students within the unique context of HBCUs; and (c) Explore the various functional areas within HBCU student affairs divisions and their impact on cultural identity on student development in the HBCU setting. The course enrollment included 30 staff, faculty, and graduate students representing HBCUs and other institutional types, all with the common goal of celebrating HBCU success!

The course has received national attention from the ASN. Concurrently, we are collaborating on developing an asynchronous course that will be hosted on the ASN platform. Finally, feedback from those enrolled in the course demonstrates that this type of dialogue is desperately needed and wanted. As part of our feedback loop assessment six months later, in addition to the praise of Dr. Carson, the most consistent themes were addressing the gap between students, staff, and faculty feeling siloed within HBCUs and strengthening their sense of belonging and cross-collaboration.

Celebrating Student Experiences: Special Issue

What started as an update to The Center's prior resource collection, *Advising at HBCUs: A Resource Collection Advancing Educational Equity and Student Success* (Lyn et al., 2022), quickly transformed from an updated resource collection to a special issues book. In fall 2023, a national call was posted to professional organizations, The Center's communication list, and my own network seeking authors for this publication, requesting paper submissions that elevated the voices of students attending HBCUs and the intersection of how advising practices and student success initiatives impact student experiences. Papers were sought that examined the student experience through one or more of the following themes (this list is not exhaustive, other topics were encouraged): (a) COVID-19; (b) mental health and well-being; (c) specific student population and identities; (d) peer-to-peer mentoring, advising, coaching; (e) student-faculty engagement; (f) engagement in HIPs; (g) student life; (h) sense of belonging; (i) financial wellness; (j) transfer experience; (k) first-year seminars; (l) student athletes; (m) science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); (n) study abroad and education abroad programs; and (o) innovative services or initiatives. An additional requirement was that the focus had to highlight the asset-based experiences of HBCU students. This counternarrative critiques and dismisses the deficit-based scholarship that often plagues HBCUs (Williams et al., 2018). As part of my grant, each primary author of accepted paper submissions received an honorarium of $2,500.

Over the past year and a half, I have had the pleasure of working closely with each author of this book. Writing aside, words simply cannot describe the level of love of HBCUs that each author and co-authors have demonstrated throughout this research project. It further confirms the importance of engaging HBCU leaders, faculty, staff, and students in collaborative opportunities, thus creating and amplifying a space for them to self-reflect and explore the HBCU campus through research.

The initial call requested a paper that was written and formatted in an institutional style report (limited to 2,500 words) and grant funds initially supported four authors. However, during the process, I learned very quickly that interest in participating in this project exceeded four authors. The ASN and NASPA approved additional funding allowing me to support nine primary authors to conduct original HBCU research that is celebrated in this book. Given the immense support from the ASN and NASPA, the expectations of writing evolved; thus, some chapters will read and flow like an institutional report while others will read and flow like a journal article or book chapter. As editor, I have made conscious decisions throughout this project to protect the experiences and voices of students, staff, and faculty at HBCUs.

HBCU Holistic Advising and Holistic Student Support

As noted, advising, specifically holistic advising, is an integral part of this project and a focus of the critical work of the ASN. The practice of holistic advising extends beyond full-time advising staff and includes academic

coaches, peer mentors, campus offices, leaders, and community to support the holistic development of students (Johnson, 2025). A strategic partner with the ASN, Achieving the Dream (2018) extends upon this discussion with holistic student support (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Holistic Student Support

Holistic Student Support Approach	In-Practice
Building Meaningful Relationships	The success of holistic student support is rooted in consistent attention to the relationships with students and among staff and faculty.
Creating Connections	Connecting students to short- and long-term services such as orientations, financial education, courses, workshops, and public benefits referrals.
Providing Services	Understanding life factors of students, their strengths, responsibilities outside of the classroom, and creating relevant and aligned academic advising, career coaching and planning, Workforce training, financial coaching and planning, benefits access, and transportation and childcare assistance.
Monitoring Student Progress	Constantly checking on student progress to ensure support before they reach a crisis point and consistently assess quality and effectiveness of services.

Note. From Achieving the Dream, 2018.

According to Sheppard and Bryson (2022), holistic student support is a culture shift for colleges and universities where they "intentionally design and provide equitable services that are both proactive and responsive to student needs" (p. 12). Achieving the Dream (2021) further suggests, "To better serve students we must understand them as whole individuals—recognizing that addressing basic needs, academic supports, mental health, and advising among other student experiences must be holistic and equitable to provide valuable supports toward student success" (para. 2).

Referring to the FAMULY culture at FAMU and the special sauce introduced earlier, holistic student support is embedded into the fabric and DNA of the HBCU institution; it has always been part of the culture. As demonstrated by the scholarship on the role of HBCUs in student success (see for example, Allen et al., 2020; Bonner et al., 2024; Bracey, 2017; Covington, 2017; Erebholo, & Ero-Johnson, 2024; Hatfield & Anderson, 2024; Sheppard & Bryson, 2022; Williams & Taylor, 2022), HBCUs are supporting students, particularly Black students, in ways that their PWI counterparts are not. To this point, HBCUs should have national and international recognition for their holistic student support and models of student success!

Book Overview: The HBCU Collective

Representing what I call The HBCU Collective, the authors and co-authors of each chapter of this book include graduate students, scholar-practitioners, organizational leaders, and academic faculty who have a direct influence on HBCU students and their success. Each author has conducted an original student-centered research study for acceptance in this special issue. Additional authors are listed within each chapter. I am proud to present The HBCU Collective and a brief synopsis of each chapter that highlights powerful asset-based student-centered voices.

Sessi S. F. Aboh and Ashanti Chunn highlight the lived experiences of first-generation students attending an HBCU. Dalvin Dunn explores financial literacy knowledge among HBCU students and the influences it has on their decisions after enrollment. Ashley G. Gilchrist discusses the Black Teaching Tradition at HBCUs and intersects how this approach has strong student success outcomes. Travis Smith captures college athletes' voices highlighting their experiences through an asset-based lens and asks how HBCUs can better serve them.

Tryan L. McMickens provides a gap in the student experience at the graduate level: the advising and lived experiences of graduate students in a higher education and student affairs online HBCU program. Finally, Jamila S. Lyn and Elisa Jaden have collaborated with an organization to innovate an online course-sharing model to improve student success outcomes for HBCU students. Jamil D. Johnson concludes the book with a contemporary analysis of HBCUs and their resiliency since their establishment!

Each chapter organization is not standardized across the book. The authors have identified a structure for their chapter that is the most appropriate for their research. This variability across the book offers a unique perspective of knowledge production and dissemination. To that end, each chapter provides valuable knowledge to the field while also acknowledging the immense contributions of HBCUs to their respective campus and surrounding communities.

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Sessi S. F. Aboh   Ashanti Chunn

"College success for first-generation students is about growth and empowerment. It is about redefining what is possible, changing the trajectories of their families, building a legacy, and paving the way for future generations. It is thus meaningful to provide the most intentional support for these students and engage them holistically as they realize who they are, learn the best about themselves, discover their life purpose(s), actualize their goals, and identify how they want to serve the world."

- Sessi S. F. Aboh

Chapter 2

I Am the Beginning: An Exploration of First-Generation Student Experiences at an HBCU

Sessi S. F. Aboh
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Institutional Profile

Nestled on a hill approximately four miles from downtown Nashville, Tennessee State University (TSU), previously known as The Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes, welcomed its first students on June 19, 1912. TSU, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), remains Nashville's only urban public university, as well as a Carnegie Classification R2: Doctoral Institution-High Research Activity. TSU offers eight doctoral programs, 23 master's degrees, 42 bachelor's degrees, and one associate degree within eight academic colleges (Liberal Arts, Business, Education, Health Sciences, Agriculture, Life and Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Public Service) to fulfill its mission of transforming lives and preparing a reputable cadre of leaders.

In fall 2024, the Office of Institutional Research at TSU reported an enrollment of 6,310 students, encompassing 5,057 undergraduates and 1,253 graduates. The student population is predominantly Black (78.3%) and female (65.3%). Other groups include White (10%), Non-Resident (3.65%), Hispanic (2.5%), Asian (2%), Two or More Races (2.8%), and Race/Ethnicity Unknown (1.6%). Eighty-eight percent of the undergraduates are full-time students, 77% live on campus, and 78.8 % are Pell-eligible. First-generation students, students whose parents or legal guardians do not have a four-year college degree, represent 22% of the undergraduate population. They are primarily Black (85%), full-time (97%), and Pell-eligible (83%) individuals between the ages of 18 and 25.

Study Background

Books about first-generation students often address their lived experiences or offer recommendations and strategies to support their success (Davis, 2010; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2021; Miranda, 2024; Rodriguez, 2023; Troy et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2012). First-generation students' experiences are also expansively presented in the *Journal of First-Generation Student Success,* a NASPA publication. However, there are still ample opportunities for research contributions to the literature on first-generation students of color. In an annotated bibliography focused on first-generation students between 2008 and 2019, Baldwin et al. (2021) recorded three

articles with the primary focus of Black first-generation identity. An overview of literature specifically related to first-generation college students at an HBCU yielded studies focusing primarily on the social and academic characteristics of the sub-population. Hicks and Wood (2016) and Longmire-Avital and Miller-Dyce (2015) focused on social factors; Z. D. Johnson (2020) discussed first-generation students who were conditionally admitted; and Stewart (2017) focused on the completion rates of first-generation males and their help-seeking behaviors. The current paper adds to the knowledge base by exploring and reporting on Black first-generation students' experiences with a strength-based initiative created specifically for their academic support and the extent to which they might leverage this initiative to advance their college dreams.

It is important to assess how institutions serve first-generation students and the value the students attribute to such services. This understanding will help universities gauge the suitability of their student support efforts and develop distinctive initiatives to foster academic success. The research question that drove this study was, "What are the lived experiences of first-generation students at an HBCU?"

First-generation students graduate at a rate of 24% compared to 59% for continuing-generation students (FirstGen Forward, 2024). In 2020, TSU established the You First Project: Graduation Initiatives for First-Generation Student Success. The You First Project uses Yosso's (2005) concept of community cultural wealth (the accumulated resources and assets that members from marginalized groups bring to campuses) to guide various student success strategies and learning outcomes intended to spur college completion.

To achieve its goals, The You First Project connects with students in intentional ways, utilizing First-Generation Specialists (Specialists/Success Coaches). Specialists are certified Life Design Catalyst (LDC) facilitators who are also trained to use the six phases of the Appreciative Advising framework in their work with students. These phases include Disarm (recognizing the importance of first impressions), Discover (utilizing positive open-ended questions to draw out strengths and passions), Dream (helping formulate a vision of what one might become), Design (helping devise concrete, incremental and achievable goals), Deliver (assisting when students stumble and helping them refine their dreams), and Don't Settle (helping to raise internal bars of self-expectation). Appreciative work is an intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potential (Bloom et al., 2008).

The LDC philosophy emphasizes the elucidation of students' stories, purpose, aspirations, reflections, and connections to produce successful outcomes, clear direction, and mission-driven living (W. H. Johnson, 2024). The structured conversations, in turn, center around eight defined persistence themes, competencies, and student learning outcomes (Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 2019). In this paper, we seek to elevate TSU's first-generation students' voices, explore their engagement with campus support services, the perceived value of this engagement, their success habits, their college experiences, and the resources they find essential for academic and social well-being.

Methodology

The research team (the team) completed the educational and process requirements for research involving human subjects through the TSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). These requirements included the researchers obtaining a CITI Training Certificate, submitting the description of the study and methodology, as well as implementing various processes to safeguard participants' protection and confidentiality. The IRB approval letter was received before the study commenced.

Specialists identified and sent an email invitation containing a recruitment flyer and a letter of consent to first-generation students based on their previous engagement with The You First Project's coaching program. Students who desired to participate returned the consent form and completed the survey. Using Microsoft Forms, the team administered a 22-item online survey to collect participants' perspectives on academic support from various campus units, including The You First Project. Six questions gathered academic information, including classification, major, GPAs, and gender. Nine questions explored respondents' views on the role success coaching played in their academic lives. Four questions examined respondents' engagement with support services such

as tutoring and career services, and three questions prompted them to share their thoughts on their academic experiences. All respondents were ages 18 or older, and no identifiable information was collected.

Two respondents indicated they were not first-generation students and did not complete the survey. The remaining 23 individuals identified mostly as females (83%), and of primarily junior (56%) and sophomore (36%) classifications. Two respondents were first-time freshmen and did not have any grades at the time of the research, but 21 respondents had GPAs above 3.0.

In addition to the surveys, five students (one senior, two juniors, and two sophomores) participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, and quotes are published verbatim. The open-ended questions (Appendix A) encouraged students to think about their experiences as first-generation students walking and negotiating the TSU campus. The interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom Workplace Pro. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality process and their rights to withdraw from the study. Verbal consent was obtained before recording. The recordings were subsequently transcribed using Otter.ai, verified using the Zoom Workplace Pro transcripts, and through personal listening via headsets by a team member (especially the direct quotes), before being uploaded into a Microsoft Word document. After pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, a graduate assistant (Master's in Computer Science) and one researcher manually coded the transcripts for themes using the highlighter option in MS Word. The highlighted sections were then extracted by cutting and pasting the text onto 3" x 5" inch note cards before the lumping and sorting process. The team generated a list of themes and categories, along with identifying exemplary quotes and codes that backed up each theme. The consensus on the most represented and recurring themes is presented in this paper.

Findings

Survey Results

Tables 2.1 through 2.3 present quantitative findings. Table 2.1 presents the frequency at which students reported meeting with their Specialists. Over half of the students reported meeting with their coaches weekly. Table 2.2 indicates that Specialists helped students most often with college navigation skills. Ninety-five percent of students agreed that working with their Specialist helped them to overcome challenges, while 96% agreed that a support program specifically dedicated to first-generation students was essential and impactful.

Table 2.1

Frequency of Engagement with First-Generation Specialists

Engagement Frequency	%
1-2 times per year	9
3-4 times per year	22
Weekly	52
Monthly	17
Never	0

Table 2.2

Usefulness of First-Generation Specialists

Agreement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	%	%	%	%	%
Goal setting	5	0	0	27	68
Creation of an action plan	4	0	0	35	61
Self-discovery activities	4	0	4	26	65
Challenge navigation	4	0	0	17	78

Table 2.3

Participants' Assessment of Campus Support Services in Supporting College Success

Assessment of helpfulness	Not at all Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Somewhat helpful	Very helpful
	%	%	%	%
Tutoring services	4	0	22	74
Gender-based support	4	30	35	30
Career development offices	4	9	48	39

The questions in Table 2.3 allowed respondents to assess the helpfulness of other campus resources and provided insights to institutions seeking to identify possible support avenues for their first-generation students. Tutoring services were seen as the most helpful support, while many respondents were neutral about the usefulness of gender-based centers (Men's or Women's Centers) to their college success. The Career Development Office did not receive a high helpfulness score. This finding was surprising since over half of the participants were upperclassmen and close to graduating. Finally, regarding the number of hours spent engaging in student success initiatives weekly, 70% of respondents indicated they devoted between three and five hours to those activities, while 22% spent two hours or fewer per week.

Table 2.4

Necessary Elements for an Engaging First-Generation TSU Experience

• Getting involved in the available programs and clubs on campus	• The presence of First Year programs, advisement, tutoring sessions, cultural and social events, celebrations of success, counseling services/support groups, career development, and student leadership roles.
• Developing a relationship with their success coach	• (University employees) understanding their background
• Having events dedicated to First-Generation college students that allow them to build their network	• Continuing the work already begun by The You First Project
• Developing organization and time management skills	• Empathy
• Having access to someone who can answer questions promptly and help in real-time	

Table 2.4 shows students' sentiments regarding the initiatives that could positively affect an engaging and beneficial experience at TSU. More than five responses mentioned the importance of getting connected with their Specialists. Students appreciated the work The You First Project had accomplished and seemed to long for more engagement with the Offices of Academic and Student Affairs. Students' responses mirrored research stating that success is found at the intersection of both student and institutional action and readiness (FirstGen Forward, 2020). The open-text responses provided insights from a group of students who desired full integration into the culture of their institution and all its offerings. These students wanted to connect with people and organizations, be seen, understood, and supported.

Interview Results

The interviewees added context to the narrative when prompted to discuss their identity as first-generation students, what inspired them, and the type of environment they believed would improve their academic engagement and their connections to the campus.

Pride and Pressure: A Journey of Discovery and Empowerment. The interview participants shared their journeys of discovering their identity as first-generation students. They highlighted the absence of familial conversations about college and reflected upon their unique challenges and opportunities. Tracy admitted that she did not know she was a first-generation student until she came to TSU. Tracy submitted:

> *I did not discover that I was a first-generation student until I stepped on campus. I was caught off guard when I heard of it, and when I started to get into learning what it was and what that meant, I fell in love with it. So, it is just so cool to have that experience to make that label my own. That makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel motivated and gives me the strength, the power, to keep going.*

Through this quote, Tracy expressed pleasure and pride in recognizing that she was doing something that no one in her immediate family had accomplished. With the new identity, she felt powerful, motivated, and eager to meet her academic challenges. Often, awareness about the first-generation identity arises after enrollment at a college or university or when high school students seek professional advice before choosing a college (Molengraff, 2023). In this case, most of the participants learned about their first-generation identity

after they met with a First-Generation Specialist from The You First Project.

Rodney described being filled with a sense of "empowerment and pride" as he realized that he would be the first in his family to graduate from college. He offered, "I could say that it made me feel empowered. I am taking steps to break generational curses, and I hope that I continue to empower other first-generation students." Continuing with that theme, Selena submitted that she was "working to break the cycle of non-college degree holders" in her family, while Cynthia called herself a trailblazer. Four participants mentioned "beginning a new pathway" within their families, and Tracy referred to "breaking the cycle of poverty," clearly implying a relationship between college degrees and socioeconomic status.

The conversations also revealed that participants had to balance family expectations with personal aspirations. They described becoming de facto role models, the pressure that ensued, and how these challenges fueled their determination to succeed. In many cases, family support came at a price. According to Selena, "It is like everyone, they are encouraging you. They say, 'We got you,' but I know that they cannot help me here. I feel the pressure to succeed, but they cannot help." Rodney put this dichotomy in terms of emotional versus practical support when he offered, "My family often provides emotional support, encouraging me to persevere, but they do not have the resources or experiences to assist me in practical matters." This statement provides a glimpse into how institutions can enrich community cultural wealth by empowering parents with practical and easily transmittable information about college. Empowering parents with college information will yield dividends when they, in turn, share their new knowledge with their children during these "emotional support" moments.

Lack of financial resources was a recurrent theme as the interviewees shared their difficulties completing financial aid packages and securing scholarships. Participants who were on scholarships admitted to experiencing anxiety about sustaining the grades required to maintain their awards. According to Patricia, who revealed that she was the first daughter, niece, and granddaughter to attend college, easier access to information about financing college would decrease her anxiety about finishing college:

> My parents, they can't help with money. I don't know much about college. I don't know how many first-generation students are on this campus, but I feel like there should be more help and workshops in that office [Financial Aid Office]. Too many of us are missing out on resources and opportunities. It [knowledge from workshops] could help me feel I am okay.

The participants also wished that TSU would offer more work-study and scholarships to deserving first-generation students. They affirmed that scholarships and grants were probably the most important factors in increasing their persistence and graduation rates.

Grace and Empathy: Fostering Classroom Engagement and Academic Success. Two of the participants indicated that their faculty often seemed oblivious to the heterogeneity of people in their classes. Rodney talked about the need for the faculty to show students some grace, specifically to first-generation students. Rodney discussed what he perceived as the difference between a first-generation student and a legacy student when he offered, "Legacy students have generational knowledge from your parents, your grandparents, or potentially your great-grandparents attending the same institution. It is different for those who are first." The implication is that some students can tap into a broader support system for college success, while others don't have parents to rely upon for knowledge about attending a college or university.

Rodney illustrated the pulls and tugs at the heart of a first-generation student who suspects that legacy students had the knowledge and capital valuable for college success. Cognizant of this gap in college navigation skills, our participants wanted faculty to understand that classrooms are not made of a homogeneous group of students. They wished their faculty would teach and act accordingly.

Poignantly, the perceived existence of this chasm in knowledge and the understanding of Yosso's (2005) suggestion to consider students beyond the limiting beliefs ascribed to certain populations, were the impetus behind the creation of The You First Project. The Project helps its participants maintain hope for the future, based on the skills they formerly deployed to seize opportunities, overcome challenges, and navigate other social environments, to cultivate impactful habits in them and create new networks to achieve college success and positive life outcomes.

Defined Support Services: Personalized Guidance and the First-Generation Student. The interviewees praised The You First Project's staff for reducing and lessening their knowledge gaps. Patricia did not know how to calculate and forecast GPAs or use DegreeWorks (a web-based degree audit and academic planning tool) to chart multiple graduation options. She talked expansively about how she felt empowered when her Specialist helped her develop these skills. The Life Design Curriculum in use at The You First Project encourages students to meet certain learning outcomes, provides a promising pathway to a college degree, and offers a glimpse into life after college. The participants recognized this intent and valued the work their Specialists performed daily to help them work towards their dreams.

They admired the personalized assistance they received from The You First Project and offered further insights into the types of support they desired. Tracy felt "seen and recognized." Cynthia exulted in her Specialist's ability to help her meet and connect with other first-generation students and build her community. Cynthia said, "I was not participating [in any network activity]. I am rural, you know, and I needed the consistency my Specialist brings. I need her support. I need the tips and stuff like that." In this quote, Cynthia hinted at how first-generation students and others hailing from rural areas may feel disconnected from an urban campus. An initiative such as The You First Project provides these students with a connector, someone who is reliable and whom they trust to guide them in times of uncertainty.

Community and Connections: Finding Strength in Shared Experiences. Students expanded upon their familial capital (the knowledge, learning, and practices that nurture kinship and extended families) and discussed the role family played in their persistence and motivation to graduate college. However, they were less confident about their social capital (the social and community networks and the resources that can be assessed through them) and their navigational capital (the knowledge and resiliency to navigate oppressive and marginalizing systems). As such, the participants felt isolated and longed for a space within the broader university community where they would meet peers and develop a sense of belonging. Tracy offered, "I really do not go anywhere. I would be walking by an event, and I would be, 'I never heard about this!'" Through The You First Project, these students began to identify a community of peers. Tracy, an officer of the Zeta Omicron Chapter of the Alpha Alpha Alpha, First-Generation Honors Society, and Patricia, a member of the First-Gen Club, mentioned the importance of affinity groups. In Patricia's words, "I wish we could start [meeting] even before classes start, like during Freshman Orientation. I think that would be helpful for first-gen students to meet and learn experiences before they start class." These two organizations, initiated by the You First Project in 2022, seemed to fulfill students' desire for peers/companionship and an enhanced sense of belonging.

Key Takeaways and Implications for Practice

This paper succinctly explored first-generation students' experiences at an HBCU. It underscores the need for institutions to expand their understanding of the first-generation student experience to ensure the delivery of services that address their unique strengths, challenges, and needs. It also calls for an environment that combines faculty empathy, financial support, personal motivation, community engagement, targeted resources, and intentional academic coaching. The key takeaways include:

- First-generation students often do not run away from this identity. Institutions like TSU should design strategies to capture this population early. As a student suggested, purposeful programming should occur before classes start to allow for peer connections and collaborations.

- The participants use support services, but not as often as expected. When The You First Project was designed, the expectation was for students to use support centers at least 10 times each semester for a minimum of 30 minutes. This outcome was not met as per the survey results. Institutions must find ways to identify the types of support that work for their students and make participation in these services integrated into the campus culture and unavoidable if they aim to increase graduation rates.

- The ability to pay for college is a crucial factor for first-generation students' retention. Students need help navigating the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and scholarship databases. Insti-

tutions should strengthen their financial aid offices, raise funds, provide resources, special awards, and easier access to scholarship information for first-generation students.

- Participants recognized the obstacles they faced on campus, yet they demonstrated a remarkable determination to pursue higher education. Institutions should seek to identify factors that enhance perseverance in first-generation students and leverage these factors to increase persistence.

- Students showed inherent motivation to succeed, but they still needed intentional help. Institutions should build asset-based support systems around students' inspirational stories to encourage retention, persistence, and graduation.

- Students longed for faculty and staff support. They welcomed advocates who understood their unique experiences and provided individualized guidance and encouragement. Institutions should seek to identify faculty allies and incentivize early mentorship programs for first-generation students.

- Students wanted to feel part of a community. They welcomed socialization into the institution's culture and wished to learn about college expectations early in their matriculation. Institutions should organize departmental mixers for first-generation students and peers, faculty, and staff, before or during the first three weeks of each semester.

- Students praised the ongoing efforts to identify and meet their needs. They valued defined services centered on the amplification of the first-generation identity. They called for safe spaces where purposeful activities will occur to help them find a network of peers and join the engaged university. Institutions may provide first-generation students with a place to meet and socialize with one another and hold fireside chats with faculty and staff.

This paper shed light on the courage and tenacity of first-generation students at TSU, describing their desires and other factors that motivate them to succeed. First-generation students bring a wide range of strengths to campus that institutions should seek to amplify using specific services and empathetic staff and faculty.

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Appendix A: Chapter 2

Interview Questions

1. What do you want university faculty and staff to know about the First-Generation student experience? What do you want them to know about how you would like to be supported?

2. What do you believe is needed to survive as a First-Gen student? What do you believe is needed to thrive as a First-Gen student? (Definitions of both to survive and to thrive will be provided)

3. Do you believe you are lacking/missing anything on this campus specifically because you are a First-Generation student?

4. What do you/First-Gen students need to keep coming back to school/remain enrolled every semester?

5. What do you wish the institution offered for you because you are First-Generation that it currently does not and why?

6. What are your thoughts, if any, about the Life Design coaching offered by TSU for First-Gen students?
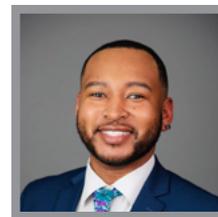
Dalvin T. Dunn

"Our research on financial literacy highlights the importance of empowering students with essential financial skills to support their growth and stability beyond graduation. These findings inspire us to seek even more impactful strategies that will nurture student success both within the classroom and throughout their lives."

- Dalvin T. Dunn

Chapter 3

Balancing the Books: Financial Decision–Making Among HBCU Students: Challenges and Strategies for Student Success

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Institutional Profile

Established through the 15th legislature on August 14, 1876, the institution known as the Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Benefit of Colored Youth (now Prairie View A&M University [PVAMU]) was created to provide an educational pathway for African Americans (Woolfolk, 1976). This was in accordance with the Texas Constitution of 1876, which mandated separate educational institutions for white and black students. The establishment was facilitated by State Representative William Holland of Wharton County and State Senator Matthew Gaines. Thus, it became the first state-supported institution for African American students and the second-oldest public higher education institution in the state of Texas (Mohr, 2020).

The college enrolled its first class in 1878, which consisted of eight African American men, and initially operated under the name Alta Vista Agricultural and Mechanical College for Colored Youth. The institution was focused on preparing students to become teachers. In 1887, it began expanding its curriculum to include agriculture, nursing, the arts, sciences, and mechanical arts (Mohr, 2020). In 1919, Alta Vista awarded its first baccalaureate degree in nursing and later introduced graduate programs in 1932. In 1973, to establish its distinction as a member institution in the Texas A&M University System, the official name was changed to Prairie University.

For the fall 2024 semester, PVAMU had a total headcount of 9,821 students, which includes 919 graduate students (both Master's and Doctoral) and 66 post-baccalaureate students. Among the student population, 24% identify as first-generation college students, meaning they come from households where they are the first to enroll in college. PVAMU is also notable for its diverse student body, with African/Black Americans comprising 82.79% of the population. Other demographics include Hispanics at 7.23%, multi-racial students at 3.6%, and international and unknown students at 2%. The percentages of White, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are all below 1%. The university continues to serve as a gateway for students seeking to enter the workforce with an academic credential at an affordable rate, supported by financial aid. Of the 8,566 undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2024, 73% were eligible for Pell Grants.

Introduction

Over the years, scholars have criticized the insufficient emphasis that higher education institutions place on providing financial education resources to their student populations (Crain, 2013; Geddes & Steen, 2016; Jacobsen & Correira, 2019; Kezar & Yang, 2010; Phillips & Kiracofe, 2023), given the growing reliance of college students on student loans to cover the rising cost of tuition (Federal Student Aid, n.d.), and the overall economic uncertainty (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014, Xiao, 2016). One of the prominent challenges facing many college students in their pursuit of higher education is financial support, as their persistence through their enrollment is often contingent on their financial aid package. Their socioeconomic stability and post-graduation upward mobility are outcomes of their ability to plan their economic future critically. The literature has highlighted a growing concern around mental exhaustion resulting from the negative impacts of student loan debt, which is affecting borrowers' daily lives and personal relationships (A. R. Baker & Montalto, 2019; Rodney & Mincy, 2020; Tran et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2025). The urgency of financial literacy is heightened for students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), institutions situated at the intersection of economic inequality and higher education opportunities.

Established as a countermeasure to the discriminatory admission practices that denied Black students access to many historically White Institutions (Allen et al., 1991), HBCUs serve as an educational sanctuary that alleviates the centering of whiteness, as black students aim to obtain academic credentials and enter the workforce. Throughout history, HBCUs have continuously addressed systemic structures that aim to maintain racial hierarchy by creating culturally affirming environments and supporting professional preparations for their students (Johnson & Winfield 2022; Williams et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). Despite their legacy of resilience and perseverance, HBCUs remain underfunded at the national and state levels in comparison to their neighboring HWI counterparts (Saunders et al., 2016; Sav, 1997; Tate & Arbuthnot, 2025; Williams & Davis, 2019). In addition, their primary student population disproportionately faces limited intergenerational wealth and financial insecurities. These structural disparities influence the financial experiences of HBCU students, making them more susceptible to financial insecurity, high loan dependence, and limited access to comprehensive financial literacy programming.

The purpose of this study was to examine how students at HBCUs experience financial literacy. Specifically, the study investigated how institutional contexts, systemic inequalities, and students' resourcefulness influence their perceptions and practices of financial education. Unlike prior research that often frames financial literacy in individualistic terms, such as personal responsibility or budgeting discipline, this study situated HBCU students' experiences within broader systems of racial injustice. Thus, the study highlights both the institutional and structural barriers that impact Black students' financial realities, as well as the agency and resilience these students demonstrate in overcoming financial challenges. The theoretical framework guiding this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which highlights how funding inequities affect the enrollment and retention of HBCU students. By amplifying student voices through qualitative research, this study sought to provide actionable recommendations for developing targeted financial education programs. These programs could enhance student retention, reduce debt burdens, and promote long-term financial well-being for marginalized populations. Our guiding research questions for this study were:

- What are HBCU students' perceptions of financial literacy?
- What are HBCU students' experiences with engaging in financial literacy programs on campus?

Significance of the Study

There is a limited scholarship explicitly examining financial literacy within the HBCU context (Dameron, 2021; McLemore, 2024; Walker, 2017). Many HBCUs are experiencing increased financial aid applications that restricts educational access and opportunities for marginalized populations. This research is positioned to contest the prevailing narrative that frames financial literacy solely as an individual responsibility. The study

offers practical implications for HBCU administrators, policymakers, and institutional stakeholders seeking to develop more equitable and culturally responsive financial literacy programs.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs CRT as a framework for analyzing the systemic inequities that affect the financial experiences of HBCU students. CRT emerged in the mid-1970s, fueled by dissatisfaction with the slow progress towards liberty and equality after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement led to the outlawing of workforce discrimination, the desegregation of educational and public facilities, and an expansion of civic engagement (Delgado et al., 2012). CRT originated in legal studies. Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado challenged the prevailing assumptions of legal neutrality, colorblindness, and formal equality. Since its debut, CRT has been applied across various disciplines. For example, Ladson–Billings and Tate (1995) are credited with using CRT to interrogate the disparities and inequalities that degrade access and accessibility for marginalized populations in the field of education. CRT is grounded in several interrelated tenets that inform its critical lens of power, race, and inequality:

- A core premise of CRT is that race is a social construct. Delagado and colleagues (2012) assert that "races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (p. 8). The propagation of Blackness in society perpetuated the idea that individuals with melanated skin were unworthy of an education. Thus, enforcing segregation that denied educational access and resources to Black people who sought out educational curriculum, hence the upstart of HBCUs, served as a vehicle for Black students to explore educational opportunities and social mobility.

- CRT holds that the permanence of racism is a normalized part of American society, as racism is embedded in the fabric of our society that plagues the lives of people of color (Bell, 1992). For example, the verdict in the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education of 1954 set precedent throughout the United States of America by desegregating educational institutions and outlawing racial admission practices. However, scholarship continues to account for Black students' experiences with racism enrolled at HWIs (Ford, 2024; Haynes et al., 2020; Robertson & Chaney, 2017), finding that integration didn't dissolve racism (Sanders, 2024). Rather, it continues to manifest into institutional policies and the campus environment.

- Interest convergence posits that substantive racial progress for Black communities occurs primarily when advancements serve the interests of white society (Bell, 1980). James-Gallaway and Baber (2021) assert that the Morrill Act of 1890 established the principle of interest convergence. Under this act, 19 Black institutions were designated as land-grant institutions and tasked with providing educational coursework around agriculture and mechanical arts. However, the intention behind the 1890 land grant initiative was not to extend educational access for Black students; instead, it was to reinforce the segregation of Black students from pursuing admissions to HWIs.

- Another central tenet of CRT is differential racialization, defined as the "process by which racial and ethnic groups are viewed and treated differently by mainstream society" (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 124). HBCUs have (and continue to) undergo changing perceptions of their existence as a sector of higher education, swinging back and forth between being seen as necessary and as obsolete. At first, HBCUs were necessary for the educational access of Black students due to the racism that aimed to uphold segregation. Post the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, HBCUs were viewed as obsolete, as they had served their purpose and should be dismantled. Even to date, HBCUs face semantics that erode their educational prestige to be "less than" despite their students succeeding in various industries in the workforce.

- Intersectionality describes how people experience multiple overlapping forms of oppression based on race, class, sexuality, and other identities (Crenshaw, 1991). The framework of intersectionality in the context of HBCUs has distorted the monolithic ideology that all black students are the same. Scholars have noted the challenges HBCUs are experiencing with the ever-expanding populations residing at their campuses, from gender (Covington & Njoku, 2021; Lee-Johnson et.al 2025; Lindquist et. al 2016), sexuality (Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Johnson & Dunn, 2025; Patton & Simmons, 2008), and social class

(Frederic et al., 2025; Mobley, 2015). As a sector of higher education that prides itself on being a site of resistance to systemic oppression, HBCUs continue to push forward to ensure a supportive community and academic success.

- CRT counternarratives serve as vital tools for challenging harmful rhetoric directed at marginalized populations, particularly within higher education (James-Gallaway & Baber, 2021). Counternarratives intend to "cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 159). Within this context, HBCUs have persistently fought for recognition and credibility regarding their societal contributions (Williams et al., 2018). Scholars have documented the historical disinvestment by both state and federal governments in HBCUs, with land-grant institutions facing even greater neglect (Palmer et al., 2022; Tate & Arbuthnot, 2025).

The application of CRT continues to gain interest as a powerful tool for examining the disenfranchised experiences of HBCUs (Hilton et al., 2024; C. Jones et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2019). As the study's researchers, we found it suitable to employ CRT to investigate the strides HBCUs are making to ensure the financial success of their student population, despite their historical struggles with structural underfunding.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methods to investigate the research questions. Scholars have utilized qualitative methods to address various financial experiences among HBCU students (McLemore, 2024; Rodney & Mincey, 2020; Walker, 2017). Building on this foundation, D. J. Baker (2019) argued that qualitative research should lead inquiries in this area, emphasizing the need to clarify the narratives behind numerical data, as it can be difficult to understand the complexities of quantitative studies. In line with these perspectives, qualitative methods allow researchers to comprehend "the meaning people have constructed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). By applying these methods, this study contributes to the broader discussion regarding the insufficient funding of HBCUs by states and how HBCU students are inadvertently bearing the consequences. Accordingly, the method used in the present study was thematic analysis guided by CRT, as described in the following sections.

Data Collection Instrument

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and obtaining permission from the site location, we began distributing our recruitment flyer across the site campus during the summer semester. The requirement to participate in the study was (a) to be enrolled at PVAMU, (b) classified as an undergraduate (or have graduated from PVAMU within the last 12 months), and (c) to agree to participate in one interview that would last between 60 and 90 minutes. Accordingly, during the first two weeks of distributing the flyers, we had little success in attracting students. Therefore, to address this challenge, we leveraged our relationship with student affairs professionals to get "buy-in," which led to our first participant. Upon completing the interview, we utilized snowball sampling to increase participation, as we simultaneously gained trust among the student participants.

Data Collection Procedure

The interview protocol used semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection and analysis. This approach provides a flexible format that allows participants to share their experiences while being guided by the researchers' structured questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Follow-up probes were used with all participants to deepen their responses and insights. This method was particularly effective for this study as it fostered trust and authenticity among HBCU students, who might have been hesitant to share their experiences. Therefore, establishing trust was a key focus during the interviews. Participants were given the choice of interview location, either on the campus of PVAMU or via Zoom. At the conclusion of each interview, participants received $15 in compensation for their involvement.

Data Analysis Procedure

We transcribed the interviews, and after data saturation was reached in the present study, data analysis was concluded. We employed a systematic process of listening to interview recordings multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' narratives before developing codes. The iterative process of transcription, repeated listening, and careful review of transcripts ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences. Initially, the first author played the audio recordings of the interviews while refraining from looking at the transcripts to follow the flow of the conversation. Next, he listened to the interviews again while reviewing the transcripts, ensuring they matched the audio without making any notes. Finally, he listened to the recorded interviews once more and began developing codes. The codes generated from the interviews included campus engagement, family influence, college costs, college expenses, and financial literacy. The development of these codes reflects the core steps of thematic analysis: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, and theme identification (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Subsequently, the first and second authors reviewed the manuscript through a CRT lens. The use of CRT as an analytical lens situated the present study within a critical qualitative research framework. CRT emphasizes the significance of race, systemic inequities, and the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Furthermore, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) assert that CRT provides a voice to those who are often silent, highlighting the direct implications of systemic oppression as demonstrated by the participants in the present study. By applying CRT, we foreground the voices of HBCU students, highlighting the implications of the underfunding of their institution and how systemic oppression resides in limited resources to accommodate vital needs to matriculate. The integration of CRT into thematic analysis not only facilitated the identification of key themes, but also helped us to critically examine how structural factors and racialized experiences shape participants' narratives. Thus, to honor the voices of our participants, we are using pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, we followed the four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): (a) credibility, (b) confirmability, (c) dependability, and (d) transferability.

Credibility was established through the development of a strong rapport with research participants during and after the interviews, which enabled them to feel comfortable and supported while sharing their experiences. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing. The lead researcher documented his positionality, assumptions, and reactions both before and after reviewing the original audio recordings and editing the transcripts. Moreover, the emerging themes identified by the lead researcher were discussed with the research team for validation and clarity. Dependability was ensured through the creation of an audit trail throughout the research process. The lead researcher documented methodological decisions, coding processes, and memos during data collection and analysis to guarantee that the study remained logical and traceable. Finally, transferability was supported by providing rich and detailed descriptions of both the research context and the participants' experiences, as presented in the findings.

Limitations

As the study is concluded, we would like to acknowledge the study's limitations. First, our recruitment method employed snowball sampling, where participants shared information within their community and invited other potential participants. This approach may have limited the diversity of perspectives among our participants. Second, the topic of financial literacy may have discouraged participation, as many students might have had reservations about discussing their family and personal financial knowledge. Finally, conducting this study during the summer may have decreased students' interest, especially if they were enrolled in classes, participating in summer employment, or unaware of the study's recruitment efforts.

Study Participants

A brief background of the study participants is presented in Table 3.1, as the study concluded with 13 participants. Each participant was enrolled at PVAMU as an undergraduate, except for one who was less than a year removed from the institution, having graduated. The student participants' backgrounds promote diversity in the study's purpose, as participants varied in classification, discipline of study, first–generation status, and Pell Grant eligibility

Table 3.1

Student Participants Background

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Classification	Major of Study	First - Generation Status	Pell Grant Eligibility
Jasmine	Female	Junior	Health	No	No
Jordan	Male	Graduate	Business Marketing	No	Yes
McKenzie	Female	Senior	Criminal Justice	Yes	Yes
Tiara	Female	Freshman	Business	No	No
Katrina	Female	Senior	Psychology	Yes	No
Adam	Male	Senior	Psychology	Maybe	Yes
Sean	Male	Junior	Marketing	No	No
Ariel	Female	Sophomore	Business Management	No	Yes
Mike	Male	Senior	Psychology	Yes	Yes
Roman	Male	Senior	History	Yes	Yes
Rogers	Male	Senior	Management	No	No
Lillian	Female	Junior	Communication	No	Yes
Derrick	Male	Junior	Mass Communication	Yes	Yes

Findings

The findings of this study revealed four interconnected themes that fully demonstrate the historic and ongoing underfunding of HBCUs, which impacts students' access to financial literacy and their economic opportunities. Through the application of CRT, these findings illustrate the depth of systemic disinvestment and the implications that become the responsibility of HBCU students.

Theme One: Unequal Access to College-Going Capital

The escalating cost of college is not just a neutral economic trend; in fact, it reflects a system that continues to restrict access to social mobility for marginalized students, particularly from racial and socioeconomic perspectives. The narratives shared by participants revealed how structural racism and class inequity shape who has access to college knowledge, support, and financial resources, emphasizing how educational opportunity

is stratified along racial lines and how Black students must constantly navigate systems never designed with them in mind.

For McKenzie, a high-achieving student who graduated in the top 10% of her high school class, familial support was the pathway to college, forged mainly through non-institutional guidance. Her story underscores the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling, revealing the ways Black families construct pathways to higher education even when schools fail to do so. McKenzie recalled, "Pretty much my mom ... I did not have a lot of other people around who knew much about [college]." Her mother's encouragement compensated for a school climate that treated college access as optional rather than expected. "My high school counselors did not give me much information," McKenzie noted, highlighting the minimal support her high school counselor was able to provide. Despite being awarded a presidential scholarship to PVAMU, experience reveals how racialized structures of schooling reproduce inequality. Her high school approach, "Get you out the door … whatever you want to do, it is up to you," signals an educational model focused on graduation. McKenzie's story challenges assumptions that success stems solely from individual effort, reminding us that Black excellence often emerges despite systemic neglect.

Similarly, Taylor's experience as a second-generation HBCU student underscores how Black cultural capital is passed down across generations (Sewell, 2023). Although her family has deep roots in HBCUs, Taylor made her college choice independently, prioritizing affordability over prestige. "A lot of schools were more expensive than Prairie View," she shared, reflecting a strategic effort to minimize student debt. Her $17,000 in scholarships illustrates both her agency and her acute awareness of financial pitfalls. Taylor's expectation that her parents would cover the remaining costs without loans, based on past conversations and trust, offers insight into how intergenerational financial knowledge is shared as a form of resistance to racialized economic structures. Her planning contrasts with deficit-based assumptions about Black families' lack of preparation, instead reflecting a community ethic of financial stewardship and survival.

Adam and Mike's interactions with the PVAMU financial aid office illustrates how vital financial aid employees are in curating a safe-haven for students looking to pursue higher education. Adam, who comes from a low-income background, shared, "No one ever sat down with me [about the] cost of college … I found out the day I applied." His story challenges institutional assumptions that all students arrive with basic financial knowledge, instead reflecting how knowledge is not always available for individual consumption, thus enforcing cycles of exclusion. In contrast, Mike's interaction, facilitated by his mother's involvement and multiple campus visits, shows how family engagement in the college-going process is vitally important to support and being present. "They [PVAMU] showed me every possible way to pay for school," Mike said, illustrating how the influence of financial support and guidance can curate early signs of belonging and building community.

Theme Two: Racialized Access to Economic Knowledge

The concept of financial literacy has undergone interpretations that suggest multiple ways financial literacy knowledge is disbursed (Fox et al., 2005; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Vitt et al., 2000). For HBCU students, the lesson of financial literacy emerges from untraditional, community driven networks. The second theme explores the ways in which the participants acquired this profound knowledge and the strategies that accompany them. For Black students, financial literacy is often acquired through informal networks, mentorship, or personal struggle, as Yosso (2005) refers to it, rather than through formal education or mainstream financial systems.

Derrick's story illustrates this divide. As an out-of-state student and campus leader, Derrick described budgeting as the most familiar concept of financial literacy, a skill with which he admitted he struggled:

> When I hear the term "financial literacy," what comes to mind ... I say the first thing that comes to mind is probably the word "budgeting." I think it's because I hear that a lot ... when it comes to finances, and it's something I don't do well.

His experience is not a reflection of personal failure, but a consequence of systemic educational neglect. His access to financial knowledge was facilitated through community mentors rather than formal schooling.

In this way, Derrick's narrative functions as a counter-story that challenges dominant discourses that assume financial literacy is universally taught and absorbed. In contrast, Rogers's early exposure to financial systems through "business-savvy" parents introduced him to credit:

> When I got my first car, so I was about 16, so I was in high school when I first started really learning about it and ... both my parents both being business majors, my mom being a corporate executive and my dad being an entrepreneur real estate [agent] ... kind of like ... big because they [gave me] my first credit card at 16 to allow me to start building credit and of course you know because if I'm anywhere and my car breaks down, or need a tire ... I just paid with the credit card.

Rogers's ability to build credit and navigate financial institutions from an early age was rooted in a household fluent in the language of capitalism. Rogers's access to financial literacy knowledge demonstrates how class privileges intersect with race, benefiting a small segment of the Black population.

Sean's narrative invites another critical dimension: the importance of counter-institutions and community-based mentorship. His first job was to sweep the hair off the floor at a local barbershop; now he is a designer for his own clothing brand. Sean's pathway to financial literacy lies outside the educational institutions of school, but rather within the community, where he was equipped with economic knowledge by community elders:

> It all started out when I was in the first or second grade. That same mentor, AD, I was at the barbershop sweeping up hair, and he was teaching me how to save my money ... So, I used to go hustle my little money, you know, sweep up here in the barbershop, and he kind of helped me, like, OK, this is what you can spend. This is what you can put in the savings, and that money was the same money I used to invest in that clothing brand.

This mentorship embodies the CRT concept of resistance capital, as Black youth cultivate financial understanding through culturally grounded experiences often overlooked by traditional financial literacy frameworks.

In today's digital age, social media has become an alternate learning site for individuals eager to expand their knowledge (Kumar & Nanda, 2022). This became apparent with Lillian, a Mass Communication major, who transferred to PVAMU. She expressed her acquired knowledge of financial literacy through YouTube. Lillian stated, "I didn't go out when I was in high school a lot. So, I would just watch little videos and learn how to save [money]. 30-20-10 things... I practically learned how to do nails from YouTube." She referred to the strategy known as the "40–30–20–10" rule, which provides a strategy for dividing one's income to support their various expenses, such as rent and utilities. For many students, the journey toward financial literacy often begins with a steep learning curve, catalyzed by personal financial setbacks.

Roman's narrative as a former foster youth offers a stark critique of the illusion of equal opportunity:

> Honestly, I learned by trial and error, so I think one of the things I kind of hate I really wish certain things were taught in high school. Like car notes, interest rates … I mean, granted, now they teach you about interest rates like compound interest rates, but they don't really teach you the concept of it … and how it's actually applied in the real world.

Roman's narrative reveals how educational systems often fail to adequately prepare marginalized populations for the economic world. Roman's lived experience reveals that financial literacy is not just a personal responsibility; it is an educational institution's responsibility as well.

Theme Three: Campus Climate and Institutional Commitment

Higher education institutions' commitment to student success is often evaluated through students' participation in campus climate surveys. Rankin and Reason (2008) described campus climate as "attitudes, behaviors, and standards/practices that concern the access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential" (p. 264). Scholars continue to investigate the campus experiences

of HBCU students and their perceptions of institutional support (Davis-Williams, 2023; Palmer & Young, 2011). Our third finding extends this research by examining the experiences of HBCU students involved in financial literacy programs on campus.

Both Jasmine and Jordan expressed their gratitude towards on-campus student organizations for taking charge of providing critical knowledge about finances. Reflecting on her experience, Jasmine shared, "I have attended maybe one or two seminars. I know my class of 2025 hosted a financial literacy event. The Delta Sigma Theta [Sorority Incorporated] has also organized similar events." At PVAMU, first-year student-run organizations frequently partner with other student organizations or host various events to engage with the campus and foster fellowship among themselves. Jasmine emphasized the moderators' significant impact on her learning experience, noting, "I liked it ... it felt like being surrounded by people who help you understand it better." Although she acknowledged that grasping new information can take time, she found the experience rewarding. Jordan echoed the same sentiments concerning student organizations leading the challenge toward financial freedom. Jordan shared, "Many different clubs host seminars like that. I believe B.L.A.C.K. [Brothers Leading and Cultivating Knowledge] and NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] have both held seminars that I attended."

Roman's narrative as a commuter student who resides off-campus illustrates how structural barriers are embedded in institutional scheduling: "Prairie View [A&M University] rarely offers seminars at convenient times for someone like me ... They started virtual sessions, but they still don't fit my schedule." The assumption that students are always physically present on campus ignores the reality of students who juggle work, family, and long commutes, many of whom are Black and low-income. Roman's difficulty attending virtual sessions highlights how even supposed "solutions" continue to privilege proximity and flexibility, which are often unavailable to marginalized students. Compared to Derrick's observation, "I think it's one thing that's not spoken about a lot, and at least especially being at an HBCU, it's not something that I hear every day," it doubles down on the influences and behavior of the Black community, and silences critical topics of financial education (Collins, 2012). Roman critiques, "They [Prairie View A&M University] should have more events about it. They should care more to talk more about it, but I feel like that's not spoken about enough on campus." This conveys a need that is often not either heard or left unaddressed.

Katrina's narrative highlights the delivery of financial literacy content and its effectiveness in reaching diverse students. A rising junior who transferred from a community college in Florida, she critiqued the barriers that many educational programs face when designing a "one size-fits-all" approach. "It's like the game telephone ... like just hearing from other people word to word what it's like from their experience . . . But everybody has a different experience; everybody will receive something different." Considering that a significant portion of HBCU student populations come from disenfranchised communities, it would be vitally important to be more inclusive in the various experiences that students have.

Theme Four: The Hidden Cost of Higher Education

Participants' narratives illustrate how the hidden cost of higher education is largely ignored, when in fact, it is a byproduct of the underfunding that HBCUs endure, which disproportionally burdens their students to financially fill the gap. The fourth theme highlights the financial consequences of systemic inequality and how students consider pursuing their education despite limited resources.

Participants' lived experiences revealed how the hidden costs of college beyond tuition function as mechanisms of exclusion, disproportionately burdening students already navigating racialized economic disadvantages. Jasmine, a health major, illustrated this clearly when she described the steep costs associated with required coursework software: "... we rely heavily on Connect Software ... usually, it costs between $100 to $150. So, when I'm enrolled in six or seven classes, I end up paying about $600 to $700 each semester." She was surprised at the thought of having to pay for access to complete her graded assignments. Furthermore, this purchase depleted her reimbursement check, having her rely temporarily on family support or personal

savings from her summer employment, from which she would set aside money.

The unequal distribution of campus-based student employment further illustrates how HBCUs' underfunding limits income opportunities for financially needy students. On-campus jobs are appealing because they offer mentorship, job training, and networking. At HBCUs, student jobs are often determined by FAFSA data, with most positions being work-study due to government funding, as opposed to fewer department-funded hourly roles. The primary challenge is that there are fewer work-study jobs, but more work-study applicants. This became frustrating for Katrina as she expressed her desire to find work, which has come with obstacles: "Financial Aid [office] is being stingy with the work-study … Certain positions around the school don't allow work-study, making it a bit more challenging." Katrina has consistently maintained employment throughout her collegiate career to ensure a level of comfort and security. This limitation of available jobs on campus reduces her ability to achieve financial success independently, at the cost of academic perseverance. This encourages students to seek employment opportunities off-campus in exchange for academic support, as seen with Mike, who secured a job in a nearby city, in addition to multiple side gigs, to sustain his enrollment.

Budgeting is a key component of exercising financial literacy knowledge, which has become racialized when the burden to "make it work" unjustly fails to acknowledge the financial neglect that HBCU students endure in response to funding inequalities. Roman calculated a strategy to manage his transportation budget to the PVAMU campus from the nearby metropolitan city, which could be viewed as an act of perseverance. "For a while, I was using Uber [ridesharing service] back and forth ... I discovered that leaving at 6 a.m. would only set me back $37, but if I wait to 6:15 a.m. it goes to $48.51." This insight into how Roman calculated his travel displayed his commitment to academics. However, this also acted as a barrier due to his limited ability to enroll in classes on alternative days of his preferred schedule, potentially extending his graduation expectancy.

Socialization is the linchpin of collegiate identity, network expansion, and overall belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1988; Weidman, 1989), demonstrated through the participation of student organizations that promote professional development, team building, and resume enhancement. McKenzie conveyed her observation of the social climate on campus, as many students aspire to engage on campus through student organizations and campus activities. The dilemma often reflects the financial obligation to be apart. McKenzie discussed the ultimatum students face when asked if they feel a burden to increase their socialization at the expense of decreasing their finances: "Essentially, yes … it's almost like the fear of like what I am going to miss if I'm not there … Like, can I spare a few dollars for this, or can I go ask my parents for a few dollars?" This reflection highlights the impact that socialization has on students, despite the financial challenges they may face. This inquiry was further explored during an interview with Jordan, a recent PVAMU graduate who shared his financial strategies for pursuing a Black Letter Greek Organization (BLGO). BLGO, also known as the National Pan-Hellenic Council, comprises nine Black Greek organizations founded on the principles of Black racial uplift, with the goal of promoting unity, fellowship, and liberation. The selection process of joining a BLGO is rigorous and expensive. Jordan discussed how he made sacrifices by earmarking his savings account, employment check, and reimbursement check to satisfy the financial obligation needed to join the fraternity.

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of financial literacy among HBCU students and their experiences with financial literacy programming on campus. Drawing from participants' narratives guided through the lens of CRT, we found how race, class, and institutional barriers intersect to shape students' financial understanding and access to resources in an underfunded higher education institution. Four major themes emerged: (a) Unequal Access to College-Going Capital, (b) Racialized Access to Economic Knowledge, (c) Campus Climate and Institutional Commitment, and (d) Racism as Normalized and the Hidden Cost of Higher Education.

The first research question sought to understand how HBCU students conceptualize and define financial literacy. Participants described financial literacy not merely as a theoretical concept, but as a lived, practice-based understanding shaped by family, mentors, and socioeconomic conditions. Rogers and Sean developed their knowledge of financial literacy through early parental guidance and mentorship, where they were introduced

to tools for financial budgeting, credit use, and saving as means of achieving financial security (Fox et al., 2005; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011). However, students like Roman often must navigate the trial-and-error process due to the absence of parental guidance. This narrative supports existing critiques that financial literacy is often racialized and unequally distributed, with marginalized students more likely to be left without structured or accessible knowledge pathways (Harris, 2021; McLemore, 2024).

The second research question examined how students experience and engage with financial literacy programming at their HBCU. Jasmine and Jordan found student-led workshops to be helpful and encouraging, but most described these opportunities as inconsistent, inaccessible, or lacking cultural relevance. No participants mentioned financial literacy programs curated by the institution; thus, student-led financial programming was institutionally driven, as access conflicted with commuting barriers, scheduling conflicts, and possible lack of promotion. For example, Roman's status as a commuter student severely hindered his ability to participate in on-campus seminars, even when they were conducted virtually. Derrick's observation that financial literacy is "not spoken about a lot" at his HBCU highlights a broader institutional silence surrounding economic preparedness and postgraduation financial sustainability. These findings suggest that institutional commitments to financial education remain superficial, with student organizations filling gaps that universities should address more systematically. Furthermore, Katrina's critique of the "one-dimensional" approach underscores the need for financial literacy to reflect the diversity of students' experiences. CRT counter storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) is relevant, as students' stories challenge dominant financial literacy models that perform a uniform approach to knowledge and resources.

Beyond their initial understanding of financial literacy, students reported continued economic challenges after enrollment. Many participants described budgeting strategies that were born out of survival. For instance, Jasmine's expensive reliance on e-learning software, Roman's strategic ride-sharing schedule, and Mike's multiple off-campus employment all highlight the economic burden higher education extends beyond tuition. This strain extends to students' socialization through engaging with student organizations, as McKenzie and Jordan highlight the sacrifice and exclusion, particularly in selective spaces, like BLGO's.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, practice, and future research regarding financial literacy and economic access among HBCU students. Under the leadership of PVAMU, President Tomikia LeGrande, Ph.D. has developed a new initiative called PV Cares, which provides comprehensive support services to promote the success of undergraduate and graduate students beyond the classroom. PV Cares serves as a student success model, offering each student a dedicated support team that includes academic advisors, career coaches, and financial counselors. This team is committed to helping students throughout their time at PVAMU, equipping them with essential skills and knowledge that will be valuable in their postgraduate careers. As the institution embarks on this promising venture, we encourage further recommendations that align with our study findings to help enhance the university's vision.

The recurring theme of unequal access to college-going capital suggests that institutions must actively address the disparities in college preparatory resources available to students from low-income and racially marginalized communities. Perna and Titus (2005) assert that marginalized students often receive less college-going information compared to their white counterparts. HBCUs should consider expanding partnerships with their local high schools in underserved areas to increase access. Students' perception of financial literacy was not shaped by formal education, but rather by family members, mentorship, and lived experiences. Rogers and Sean's narratives revealed that financial literacy knowledge is acquired informally and unevenly. HBCUs must consider providing equitable access to culturally responsive and comprehensive financial literacy programming.

The study highlights the fragmented nature of financial literacy programming on campus. While student organizations play a vital role in filling these gaps, institutional support remains inconsistent. As noted by Derrick and Katrina, seminars often lack depth and diversity of experience, limiting their effectiveness. Institutions should embed financial literacy into the general education curriculum and collaborate with academic departments,

financial aid offices, and student life programs to ensure continuous, structured engagement. Participants' accounts of financial strain, such as textbook and software costs, transportation fees, and the costs of social belonging, underscore the need for institutions to recognize and address the hidden costs of college attendance. Jasmine's burden of e-learning software and Roman's meticulous budgeting of Uber fares reflect how economic precarity impacts educational engagement and retention. Institutions must offer more robust emergency grants, subsidized transportation options, and flexible employment opportunities to reduce these burdens.

Participants found the most value in financial lessons imparted by family members, mentors, and community leaders. These findings resonate with the CRT tenet of Centrality of Experiential Knowledge, which validates the lived experiences of marginalized groups as legitimate sources of insight (Yosso, 2005). Institutions can leverage this by creating peer mentoring programs and inviting community leaders to co-facilitate workshops, enhancing relatability and relevance.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the crucial role of financial literacy in supporting HBCU students as they navigate the financial challenges inherent in higher education. Through qualitative inquiry and the application of a CRT lens, the present study amplifies the voices of students who navigate systemic financial barriers while pursuing higher education. Findings revealed that students acquire financial knowledge through diverse sources, including family, institutional resources, personal experiences, and community initiatives, yet gaps in comprehensive financial literacy education remain evident. Despite facing limited resources, these students demonstrated resilience in managing college expenses. However, there is an urgent need for institutional support to establish comprehensive financial literacy programs. HBCUs and policymakers must collaborate to develop and implement targeted financial literacy initiatives that empower students to make informed financial decisions. Such efforts can contribute to the reduction of student debt, enhancement of retention and graduation rates, and promotion of long-term financial wellbeing for historically marginalized students. The time for action is now!

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Ashley G. Gilchrist

"Black HBCU students describe Black faculty as embodying deep traditions of care, high expectations, and community-building—yet point to a quiet absence in explicit conversations about racial identity and sociopolitical consciousness. Students' insights reveal the enduring power of Black teaching traditions and the urgent opportunity for HBCUs to more intentionally cultivate critical consciousness in the classroom."

- Ashley G. Gilchrist

Chapter 4

Cultural Continuity in Education: A Student-Centric Analysis of the Black Teaching Tradition at HBCUs

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Research shows that Black teachers have historically demonstrated a unique set of pedagogical principles and instructional strategies that are undervalued and ignored by our education system (Delpit 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). These Black teaching pedagogies, or underlying education philosophies, have been studied qualitatively across decades of scholarly research (Foster, 1997; Givens, 2021; Howard, 2001). This research highlights that teaching characteristics often counter traditional White-normed school practices and definitions (Milner, 2006; F. Ware, 2006). These practices and characteristics add value to Black students' lives by incorporating cultural attributes into the classroom. A growing body of evidence reveals that Black students demonstrate increased learning outcomes when they have a same-race teacher (Achinstein et al., 2010; Clewell et al., 2005; Hart & Lindsay, 2024; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Black teaching traditions typically emphasize love, community connection, culturally responsive care, and developing a strong racial identity (Howard, 2001; King, 1994; Rickford, 2016; Siddle Walker, 2019). Overall, Black teachers connect their teaching to a commitment to developing Black children who love themselves, exemplify a duty to their community, and have a sense that they are developing the minds of those who will change the circumstances of Black people. It is the Black teacher's responsibility to demand excellence because the lives of Black people depend on it (Gay, 2010; Irvine & Fraser, 1998). These components of Black education directly oppose White-normed school practices because Black people have historically been exposed to racist systems that pushed them away from traditional schooling or provided them with limited opportunities compared to their White counterparts. While research shows that Black teachers have a unique set of underlying principles influencing their interactions with students (Blazar, 2022; Redding, 2019; K. Ware, 2021), the literature lacks

evidence demonstrating the translation of these principles to concrete instructional practices at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Further, it is unclear if any aspects of this unique set of skills derived from the Black teaching tradition align with current teaching practices at HBCUs.

Purpose

This project sought to extend the research examining K–12 Black teachers to Black professors at HBCUs. We aimed to determine if the Black teaching tradition shows up in the pedagogy of Black HBCU faculty. Additionally, we intend to challenge dominant ideologies through an appeal to the unique, educational principles, stated above, that are exhibited historically by Black teachers. We believe that Critical Race Theory (CRT) will help validate the experiential knowledge that Black teachers bring to the profession and legitimize the practice of Black teachers as critical for teaching all children, specifically Black students in HBCUs. To explore the pedagogy and practices of Black professors at Historically Black Colleges, we sought to answer one primary research question: To what extent do HBCU students perceive that Black professors ascribe to historically Black teaching pedagogical practices? Hence, this project explored Black students' experiences of the Black teaching traditions exhibited by HBCU professors.

Theoretical Framework

This study used CRT as the conceptual framework to guide our exploration of Black teaching practices at HBCUs. According to Solórzano et al. (2000), there are five tenets of CRT, including: "(1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (2) challenge to the dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the importance of experiential knowledge; and (5) the use of interdisciplinary perspectives" (p. 63). For this study, CRT challenges the dominant ideology and posited that American ideals of colorblindness, meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality can never be fully actualized because racism is a part of this country (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In the field of education, CRT scholars seek to dismantle the components of education that marginalize students of color both in and outside of the classroom (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Researchers have used CRT to shed light on numerous areas, including curriculum and pedagogy, teaching and learning, schooling, school finance policy and community engagement, and higher education (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

With this in mind, Black faculty navigate a systemically racist educational system. To counter this, their underlying education philosophies embed storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, and parables (Solórzano et al., 2000). However, the dominant ideologies of the U.S. education system often suffocate successful Black teacher pedagogies by excluding them from the prevailing narrative of effective teaching. Of all places, this should not be the case at HBCUs, given their role as places where Black faculty have historically experienced the freedom to teach in an inclusive environment that values their cultural perspectives and pedagogical practices.

Methodology

This study sought to interrogate Black student perceptions of their Black faculty at several HBCUs across the country. We selected a qualitative methodology given our interest in exploring the lived experiences of Black HBCU students and employed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as we defined the meanings HBCU students derive from their experiences with Black faculty.

Institutional Profiles

This study garnered data across four Historically Black Colleges.

Bowie State University. One participant in this study attended Bowie State University. Bowie State University, in Bowie, Maryland, was founded in 1865. It is a four-year public university that serves over 6,100 undergraduate and graduate students. Approximately 25% of the student body lives on campus, while the rest are commuters. Bowie State's undergraduate population is predominantly African American, making up about

77.8% of the student body, with smaller representations of White, Hispanic, and other minority students. The gender balance leans towards female students, with 62% female and 38% male.

Southern University. There were six participants from Southern University in our study. Southern University and A&M College, located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was founded in 1880. According to the university's Fall 2023 Quick Facts report, the institution enrolled a total of 8,249 students across undergraduate and graduate programs (Southern University Office of Institutional Research, 2024). The undergraduate population is predominantly African American, comprising 86.9% of students, with small percentages of White, Hispanic/Latino, and multiracial students. The gender distribution is 66% female and 34% male. While institution-level publicly reported data do not provide an official percentage of first-generation students, approximately 67% of undergraduates receive Pell Grants, indicating substantial socioeconomic diversity within the student body (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Clark Atlanta University. Two students from Clark Atlanta University participated in this study. Clark Atlanta University is a private, four-year institution in Atlanta, Georgia. It was founded in 1988 following the merger of Clark College and Atlanta University, both institutions with long histories dating back to the 19th century. As of 2023, the university enrolled approximately 4,000 students across undergraduate and graduate programs. According to the most recent IPEDS data, Clark Atlanta University's undergraduate population is overwhelmingly African American, representing 87% of enrolled students, with Hispanic/Latino, White, and multiracial students each comprising 1–3% of the student body. The university has a notable gender imbalance, with approximately 72% of undergraduates identifying as female and 28% as male. Additionally, 67% of students receive Pell Grants, underscoring Clark Atlanta's role in expanding access to higher education for low-income students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024).

Winston-Salem State University. There were two students from Winston-Salem State who participated in the study. Winston-Salem State University, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was founded in 1892. This public four-year university serves approximately 5,200 undergraduate and graduate students. Approximately 36% of the student body lives on campus, creating a balanced mix of residential and commuter students. The undergraduate population is composed of 71% African American students, with other racial groups including White (11%), Hispanic (10%), and other minorities. The student body is 65% female and 35% male. Approximately 40% of the students are first-generation college students, and 60% of the student population receives Pell Grants, showcasing the university's focus on providing access to education for underserved populations.

Participants

Our study employed a dual recruitment strategy that integrated snowball sampling with social media outreach to engage student populations. The snowball sampling method enabled us to reach participants through established networks, thereby facilitating the inclusion of individuals who might otherwise have been difficult to contact (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Simultaneously, using social media platforms allowed for the rapid and widespread dissemination of our study invitation, significantly broadening our recruitment reach.

In total, 11 students participated in this study. All of the participants were Black students who currently attend an HBCU. Six participants attended Southern University, two attended Clark Atlanta University, two attended Winston-Salem State University, and one participant attended Bowie State University. Seven of the participants were female and four were male. Two of the participants were seniors, seven were juniors, one was a sophomore, and one's classification was unspecified.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Participants were interviewed individually and each interview was video recorded using the Zoom platform. The interviews themselves lasted from 25 to 47 minutes. Interviews were uploaded into and transcribed by the MAXQDA Analytics Pro (24.5.1.) data analysis software package for analysis. Primary analysis of the interview transcripts for this study relied on the use of inductive coding, that is, generating codes organically and directly from the interview data.

Specifically, we used Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). RTA is a "method for developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic data coding processes to develop themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4). Following this approach, our RTA analysis was conducted using the six suggested steps.

First, we familiarized ourselves with the dataset. This involved reading and rereading interview transcripts for both transcription accuracy and familiarity with content. In step two, the work of coding began. We meticulously combed through the first transcript, assigning codes to data segments to highlight meanings and insights within the data. This step was repeated for each of the other 10 transcripts. In analyzing each subsequent transcript, codes developed in the previous transcripts were assigned as appropriate, and new codes were created when needed. In the third step, we compiled and cleaned the list of codes from all 11 transcripts, creating our final code list. We then scoured this list of codes to identify similarities between them. Next, we clustered like codes that shared a core idea and that could potentially provide insights into students' experiences with Black HBCU faculty. We then began our next step, the process of theme generation, by synthesizing the codes in each clustered group. From there, we further developed and refined these initial themes which involved reviewing the themes in light of the full dataset to ensure their viability and fit. In step five, we ensured that our constructed themes were clearly demarcated and were built upon a solid, data-informed foundation. This fine-tuning included the eventual naming of the clusters which became our themes. In the sixth and final step, we wrote up our findings in this report.

Findings

A total of 115 individual codes made up the final code list used in this analysis. From those 115 codes, 929 were assigned across all transcripts. Out of the analysis of these codes, four themes were constructed detailing students' perceptions of Black faculty at HBCUs. The four themes were Empowerment and Expectations of Success, Lack of Identity and Advocacy, Ambivalent Faculty Perceptions, and Sense of Community Beyond the Classroom.

Theme 1: Empowerment and Expectations of Success

The theme Empowerment and Expectations of Success encompasses the various ways students described how Black HBCU faculty uplift and encourage Black students to succeed. Comprised of codes such as "They're Very Encouraging," "Trying to Uplift Us," "Challenging Students," and "Emphasizing Literacy," this theme speaks to Black faculty's ability to foster a sense of achievement and potential in their students. From the transcripts, examples of this theme surfaced in comments, including:

> *I do feel like they have high expectations, especially like, you know, if they take the time to be to be more, more in tune with their students and wanting them to be the best versions of ourselves, I do feel that they are. They want us to strive to be our very best. I definitely feel that way, especially more so the minority students that they have.*
> and,
> *He pushes you to dig deep and basically, like, he wants you to see your potential. Like he wants to make sure that that you see it.*

This theme captured students' perception that Black faculty at HBCUs actively work to instill confidence and motivate students to reach their academic and personal goals.

Theme 2: Lack of Identity and Advocacy

The theme Lack of Identity and Advocacy describes how racial identity and social activism are missing from most faculty discussions and course content. Aside from courses centered around such topics (African American History, Psychology of the Black Experience), students reported that they did not tend to encounter faculty who emphasize racial identity or promote social awareness. Comprised of codes such as "Lack of Race,"

"Certain Professors," and "Lack of Faculty Activism," this theme illuminates the lack of faculty engagement with and promotion of issues of race and social activism. Examples of this theme appeared in student comments, for example:

> Yeah, so it's like mostly like STEM classes so we really, we really don't have no business talking about like, socially … Why you should think about being a Black person critically in chemistry you know? So I can't really say that most of my classes caused me to think critically about being Black.

and,

> Pretty much seemed to me like, you know, they just come to class, they teach the class and they go on, they have their office hours if you need them, they're in there. But I don't see, you know, where they … wanting to make sure that you, you know, you're more woke on situations or you're more, hands on, or you want to be a part of a movement or something like that on campus. I don't see anything like that.

Theme 3: Ambivalent Faculty Perceptions

Made up of codes like "Not Just There for a Paycheck," "High Faculty Standard," and "More Support for Serious Students," the theme Ambivalent Faculty Perceptions is indicative of students' mixed impressions about Black HBCU faculty. On one hand, students viewed faculty as being highly qualified and accomplished. On the other hand, students made reference to a tiered level of support where faculty tended to give extra attention and support to students whom they felt were more engaged, proactive students. Exemplars of this from the data include:

> The typical one is the one that they like the field that they're in, they like the subject that they teach, they're very knowledgeable of it and they want to make sure that you understand what they're teaching and get your grades and get you on out of there. I haven't really seen any of the above and beyond where they, like, really just, you know, do extra stuff.

and,

> One of my professors, he … was actually part of a project to release a wrongfully convicted Black man from out of jail not too long ago…And that honestly, is kind of like a model to me… So I do think, those professors are heavily in their community. I know one of them do conferences around different colleges talking about different issues and everything. So yes, my professors…are actively engaged in community.

and similarly,

> But there are there are some downsides, I would say. I feel like sometimes they get a little too comfortable in the position, if that makes sense, where they don't feel like they need to do too much or overextend or do what they're really supposed to do.

This theme indicates that while students appreciate faculty who are genuinely invested in their success, there's also the perception of faculty being selective in their efforts toward students.

Theme 4: Sense of Community Beyond the Classroom

The theme Sense of Community Beyond the Classroom highlights the supportive and nurturing environment that Black faculty create for their students. Codes such as "Felt Like Home," "Creating A Safe Space," "Extra Level of Care," and "Supporting Outside of Class," indicate that students perceive Black faculty as central figures in fostering a sense of community inside and outside of the classroom. This theme was derived from student comments, for example:

> There are events on campus that students throw you know, organizations throw and it's not your normal events where only the students come you know, we'll have something like in the cafeteria of our school and you will see your professor or your advisor, you know, and you'll get to talk to them outside of the classroom setting. So it kind of builds that repertoire of, I know who you are, like we have a connection outside of the professional setting.

and,

> *Coming from a White schooling all my life and jumping into an HBCU, I can definitely tell the difference. It's definitely a knit, a tight knit community, like a home feeling for sure.*
> in addition to,
> *Instantly their mom and pop, auntie, uncle is just the feeling of it. You know, the way that they treat you, the way they look out for you, it definitely gives family instantly.*

In creating a family environment and by going the extra mile in their support, students perceived that Black faculty at HBCUs enhance their educational experience by making them feel accepted and valued.

Black Teaching Tradition

The four main themes were inductive in nature, meaning they were derived and constructed from the data (participants' comments) collected during the interviews. This study also employed a secondary deductive analytic approach in which predetermined codes from a pre-existing theoretical framework were introduced into the analysis. In this approach, codes derived from aspects of the Black Teaching Tradition model were imposed upon the interview data. For this secondary analysis, interview data was coded using the codes, "Critical Care/Love," "High Expectations," "Racial Identity," and Socio-political Consciousness," all of which are deemed critical components of traditional Black educational practices. Analysis of the data in light of the Black teaching tradition also revealed mixed findings with regard to Black faculty at HBCUs. While Black faculty clearly exemplified critical care and love coupled with high expectations for their students, emphasis by Black faculty on racial awareness and social consciousness was noticeably absent to students.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer important insights into the practices of Black faculty at HBCUs and their alignment with historically Black educational philosophies. A key implication is the need for professional development initiatives that foster racial identity and social activism within HBCU classrooms, as this study revealed a gap in faculty engagement with these aspects. While students felt empowered and supported by their faculty, the lack of emphasis on critical racial consciousness and socio-political awareness suggests areas for growth in HBCU pedagogical practices. This dearth in racial-political consciousness in HBCU classrooms represents a departure from what historian Jelani M. Favors (2019) described as the communitas and second curriculums that permeated HBCUs throughout their history. Through their social and pedagogical manifestations of communitas and the second curriculum, HBCUs fostered generations of activism and activists from among their students and their campuses. Given the latest escalating tide of anti-Black policy, legislation, and sentiment in American society, HBCUs more than ever before need to be the seedbeds of activism that they once were.

Additionally, the findings can inform broader educational practices by highlighting the impact of culturally responsive teaching on student success. The strong sense of community and care observed at HBCUs can serve as a model for other institutions seeking to improve the educational experiences of marginalized students. By emphasizing care and high expectations, Black faculty at HBCUs demonstrate the potential of culturally aligned pedagogies in supporting student achievement.

For student affairs and higher education, this research underscores the importance of nurturing environments where faculty members actively engage with students' cultural identities, not just academically, but holistically, helping to shape well-rounded, socially conscious graduates. In line with the work of Arroyo and Gasman (2014), the implications can also inform the development of actionable, viable curriculums and frameworks for HBCU classrooms. Hearing from students about what is working as well as what is lacking, can only strengthen the pedagogical approaches taken by HBCU faculty in educating Black students. Further research may explore the implementation and replication of such models across HBCUs.

Conclusion

The findings from this research are significant because they offer an illuminating window into the "magic" of HBCUs as seen through the eyes of their students—individuals who daily experience the care, commitment, and excellence of their faculty. Students overwhelmingly recognized their professors as deeply invested, highly qualified, and attentive to their personal and academic well-being. Yet, their reflections also surfaced a critical gap: the lack of explicit engagement with issues of racial identity, socio-political consciousness, and the broader cultural realities that shape their lives as Black students in America. These insights challenge HBCUs to not only celebrate the strengths of their faculty, but also to consider how professional development can support more intentional, liberatory pedagogies that reflect the full richness of the Black experience. This study also underscores the importance of listening to student voices to guide institutional growth and points to the need for future research that explores how HBCU faculty can be supported in deepening their racial and socio-political engagement in the classroom. In doing so, HBCUs can further realize their transformative potential—not only as havens of care, but as engines of critical consciousness, cultural affirmation, and collective empowerment for Black students.

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Travis Smith

"When discussing sense of belonging on college campuses, we rarely include the voices of our student-athletes. This chapter provided us with the opportunity to amplify the voices of HBCU student athletes to better understand their sense of belonging on an HBCU campus."

- Travis Smith

Chapter 5

More Than an Athlete: The Experience of Black Athletes at an HBCU

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Institutional Profile

The Alabama State University, known as the "Ol Mother Dear," was the site of this study. Alabama State University is in the civil rights capital city of Montgomery, Alabama. This four-year Historically Black College and University (HBCU) was founded on July 17, 1867, in Marion, Alabama, by nine formerly enslaved Black people. In the Fall of 2025, Alabama State University reported a total student enrollment of 4,565 students, with 3,296 of those students being classified as undergraduates and 532 being classified as graduate students. Of the total student population, 93% identified as Black, 2% White, and 1% Hispanic. Moreover, 96% of the total student population received financial aid (in the form of a grant or scholarship), with 72% of the total student population receiving a federal Pell Grant and 78% receiving loans (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2022). The campus is considered majority residential with 55% of the student population living on campus and 45% of the student population labeled as commuter students. With respect to age demographics, Alabama State University reported that 93% of its total student population was 24 years old or younger, while 7% was reported as 25 years or older. Moreover, Alabama State University's Office of Institutional Research reported that 1,172 students self-identified as first-generation college students as of spring 2024.

Literature Review

As a high-impact practice (HIP), athletics help college students develop their identities, navigate multiple roles within the campus community, and transition through degree completion (Ishaq & Bass, 2019; Navarro & Malvaso, 2015). Despite being central members on many college campuses, college athletes tend to be siloed primarily within athletic spaces, which limits their social development and sense of belonging (Gayles

& Crandall, 2019). The term "belonging" is described as a student's perceived connection to campus, with particular attention to feeling valued and respected within campus communities (Strayhorn, 2019). It is critical for student success, but there have been limited investigations into the sense of belonging among college students at HBCUs (Strayhorn, 2019). Even fewer studies have explored HBCU athletes' sense of belonging, although this research area has been growing (Cooper & Newton, 2021).

Research highlighting HBCUs as a space for cultivating Blackness and belonging is central to countering deficit-framed narratives about HBCU campus experiences (Williams et al., 2019). Qualitative narratives describe how students' experiences with campus administrators, advisors, mentors, and faculty at HBCUs can help enhance belonging (Burmicky et al., 2022; Nguyen & Gasman, 2024; Smith et al., 2021). However, HBCU athletes' voices are rarely included in these narratives about belonging. Athletes' narratives draw attention to the types of experiences institutions provide and have been used to inform the development of better policies at other institutions (Navarro et al., 2019). Therefore, by highlighting athletes' narratives, we hope to create more sustainable programming in a rapidly changing athletic world.

College athletics inherently support institutions by creating spaces for community members to unite over common traditions, such as games and other rituals (Thelin, 2022). HBCUs have rich athletic traditions that celebrate and cultivate Blackness and a sense of belonging (Foster, 2022); however, HBCU athletes are often excluded from student development research (Foster et al., 2022). Bringing attention to how HBCU athletes create a sense of belonging and navigate their campus experience is critical to creating policies and interventions that holistically support college athletes (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Foster et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2019). As such, this study aimed to capture the voices of college athletes to highlight their experiences and understand how HBCUs can serve them.

Theoretical Framework

A sporting congregation is a community that emerges through the athletes, coaches, media, communities, and reformers that influence a sporting culture (White, 2019). Structurally, a sporting congregation is the culture that athletes, administrators, coaches, sports writers, and fans create. Sporting congregations played a significant role in transforming HBCUs and sports in the United States by creating traditions, rituals, and sporting symbols rooted in community, faith, and academics. Although HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have sports congregations, White (2019) explored how HBCU athletic history revealed a congregation that was distinct from Black culture and celebration. White's (2019) historical analysis of Jake Gaither's pioneering career as a football coach created a sporting congregation at Florida A&M University and raised interest in Black college football nationally. This history was connected to HBCUs' social, cultural, and political position within the United States, specifically demonstrating how community advocacy in athletics can lead to social change.

Viewing HBCUs as sporting congregations is a way to analyze values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape the broader environment and culture. Foster (2022) demonstrates this by using social media to analyze how HBCUs' fans use Black Twitter to create an online community unique to HBCUs' sports. Leveraging White's (2019) framework allows us to understand athletic environments that shape experiences

Methodology

For this study, we found it fitting to use photovoice as the guiding methodology. Photovoice, also known as photo novella, is a participatory action research (PAR) approach that uses photographs and narratives to capture individual and community experiences (Latz, 2017). Initially coined by Wang and Burris (1997), photovoice aims to improve communities by helping community members articulate and represent their lived experiences. There are three main goals of this methodology: (a) to enable people to record and reflect on their community's strengths and concerns, (b) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussions of photographs, and (c) to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 370). Individuals and community groups using the methodology work together first to identify significant

issues within the group (for example, improving campus life), take images to represent said experiences, and debrief about what was captured, typically to various stakeholders to evoke change.

For this study, we began employing photovoice by meeting with the Athletic Department at Alabama State University. These meetings consisted of relationship building and project design. From there, we were assigned a project liaison to assist us with student recruitment and event planning. Currently, we are planning the findings exhibition, where we will invite athletic coaches, staff, and administrators to review the findings and collaborate on practice and policy changes.

Methods

Data Collection

To answer the research questions, we conducted a photo-elicitation focus group with six participants. Photo-elicitation is the process of inserting photos into the interview process to elicit responses from participants (Smith, 2020). Students were asked to submit up to five images representing their perceived sense of belonging at Alabama State using an online submission form. After all submissions were received, students participated in a two-hour focus group where they made meaning of their images and engaged in community discussions regarding their student experiences. Students presented their images to the larger group, and from there, researchers engaged in meaning-making by asking probing questions about their images and experiences.

Study Setting

This study took place at Alabama State University (Bama State), a Division 1 HBCU located in Montgomery, Alabama. Founded in 1867, Bama State, known as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement," has a rich history of supporting key activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Ralph David Abernathy, and Fred Shuttlesworth. Moreover, the campus sits in the heart of Montgomery and plays a pivotal role within the community. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bama State became a centralized hub for free testing, vaccines, and other health and nutritional support. As of Fall 2025, the current student population is roughly 4,560, with 91% identifying as Black, 73% receiving Pell grants, and 92% receiving financial aid. Lastly, Bama State was selected for this study due to the authors' ongoing relationship with the leadership within the Department of Athletics and the continuation of an academic program for student athletes entitled Four for Forty. This program is a professional development initiative for student athletes, aimed at supporting their transition into various career fields.

Participant Selection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent for this study, students were recruited through direct email and the snowball method (Patton, 2014). The Athletics Department assisted us in identifying college athletes across various sports to participate in the study. Our goal was to get representation across a diverse number of sports. As a result of recruitment, we were able to secure six Black participants (one sophomore, three juniors, one senior, and one graduate student). Two of the students were identified as transfer athletes, five as women, and one as a man. Students were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

The focus group was recorded via Zoom and transcribed, resulting in 29 data pages. Next, the research team conducted three rounds of thematic analysis on the data transcripts. (Saladaña, 2021). We decided not to analyze the submitted photos, given their sensitive nature and our inability to protect the identities of our participants. The photographs submitted contained images of students and other bystanders, for which we did not gain indirect consent to share publicly. Therefore, we analyzed the data transcripts from the focus groups.

The first round consisted of a line-by-line review of the data transcripts, in which we identified data chunks and assigned codes to each excerpt. Then we conducted a second coding round, organizing the codes and

grouping them into larger categories. Lastly, we engaged in a final round of coding, where we identified prominent themes representative of the data from the categories. We concluded the analysis with two emergent themes.

Findings

Highlighting the voices of HBCU student athletes, we identified two emergent themes for this study: Connection to Blackness and being More than an Athlete. These themes represent how the students expressed their perceived sense of belonging on campus. The first theme, Connection to Blackness, emerged as the students discussed understanding and articulation of what it meant to identify as Black. The second theme, Being More than an Athlete, emerged as students articulated the challenges they faced on campus as student athletes. In this section, we present examples of each theme as voices by the partners of the study.

Connection to Blackness

The college athletes discussed their connection to their Black identity using myriad examples. This theme speaks to how they came to understand Blackness as a salient identity and how it manifests in their lived experiences on campus as college athletes. First, Jessica spoke about her experience on campus in connection with her past. Jessica presented a photograph of the outside of the cafeteria that highlighted the name of the building, stating:

Well, I know for me, with me growing up, how I sit in predominantly White places, at first I didn't expect to see myself at Alabama State, but when I got the chance and I got to be around the community and environment, and I've seen how, okay, this is the space for me. Everybody has each other's back. It's really not a lot of places these days where you can go and be around your people and nobody's going to care how you act, what you do. So just being able to be me with not having that experience before I came to college, it was just something that I couldn't take for granted. And I'm just so proud of who I am, and who this school is, and what we exemplify.

This example illustrates Jessica's sense of belonging on campus and how the institution's culture supported her Black identity. She was able to be authentically herself on campus because that is ingrained in the school culture.

Similar to Jessica, Taylor also discussed her connection to the cafeteria, voicing:

It makes me feel more at home if that makes sense. Being in a predominantly White space, I feel like I was being ostracized because of my color, because of where I came from, and what I was standing for. And because of those different things that I went through, it helped me to appreciate being around people who actually care about you.

Taylor was able to speak to an ethos of care at the HBCUs. She compared her previous experiences in White spaces to her current experiences at the HBCU. She discussed the community spirit of the campus and how a spirit of care flowed throughout the campus from faculty, staff, and students.

Similar to Taylor, Blackberry spoke about her connection to Blackness while comparing it to her previous academic experiences. She presented a photograph of a large crowd gathered on a street wearing mime masks, and voiced:

Just coming from Auburn [High School], not seeing a whole bunch of people who grew up like me or especially during high school and growing up, wanting to fit in with the crowd that I went to high school with. Just coming to State [Alabama State University] and realizing that there are people who I was in high school with or there are people from all different walks of life, and that I can truly be myself. And at the end of the day there will be somebody who's like me, similar in different ways, whether it's sports, background, majors, all that type of stuff, whatever music we like, there'll just always be similar people to me at State. And at the end of the day, we all have Alabama State in common, so that's one thing that we share.

Being able to share culture and space with other Black people showed up numerous times throughout the

conversation with the college athletes. For them, this commonality manifested itself as a safe space for their well-being as Black students. Adding to those sentiments, Liberty spoke to the essence of a collective Black experience, stating:

> There's people around you who have the same experiences as you do and who know where you're coming from instead of just knowing of it. And I feel like that makes you feel together … Like I said, I don't feel alone. I feel like there's people around me who look like me, care about me, who care about the same things I care about.

This example offers a deeper understanding of the collective Black experience as a vital component of campus culture. Liberty was able to articulate her perception of an ethos of care related to Blackness as a collective identity. In sum, the college athletes articulated a strong connection to Blackness as an example of having a sense of belonging on campus.

More Than an Athlete

The final theme that emerged from the data analysis was "More Than an Athlete." With this theme, the college athletes spoke to the benefits of their experiences outside of athletics and some of the challenges they faced. To begin, Kate talked about opportunities with student involvement, stating:

> I just feel like Bama State provides a lot of organizations for you to join so you can really have that balance and go out and venture off and do different things. Explore your other talents that you make because some people are coming into their sport just because they have a scholarship, and there's other things that they actually love to do.

These sentiments from Kate spoke to the opportunities for college athletes to be involved in campus life outside of their sport. In turn, these opportunities provided Kate and others a connection to campus life.

Similar to Kate, Jessica spoke about her experience joining a Black Greek Lettered Organization. Jessica presented a photograph of herself alongside her sorority sisters executing a service event, stating:

> So, when it did happen, I was in season. So, one of the things that I struggled with was, Am I going to be able to do it? What if I'm going to miss? And luckily, I had a coach that he was very understanding. All I had to do was tell him (coach) what was happening, he allowed to happen. And just being able to feel my collegiate dream of playing and then also continue the family legacy [of pledging], that's one of the things that I really liked about my experience at State.

For Jessica, this quote represented an experience that provided her a connection to the campus and fulfilled a dream of following her mother's legacy by joining the same sorority. This added to her sense of belonging on campus as she was now directly connected to over 75 new sisters in a sorority.

Although Kate and Jessica spoke about positive experiences outside of their sports, some incidents could not be overlooked. Participating in college athletics uncovered issues relating to gender disparities that negatively impacted their sense of belonging. For example, Blackberry spoke about the summer housing situation, stating:

> Another thing that my team has been talking about over the summer is housing situations. So, for us, whether it's football, they can live off campus and get their housing paid for. Compared to me who has housing in my scholarship, I can't get the university to pay for off-campus housing for me … But men's basketball can also live off campus. So, it's really Title IX raising questions and just figuring out, at the end of the day, you'll start losing valuable student athletes because you're not making them a priority who want the HBCU experience.

For Blackberry, sexism was problematic and illustrated a larger issue within the sports realm of gender inequities between men's and women's sports. She alluded to sexism as being a reason some athletes decide

to leave the institution.

In addition to Blackberry's issues, Kate discussed her experience of dealing with an injury and how a lack of resources compounded her hardship, stating:

I had to go into surgery. And my coaches, they wasn't checking on me, especially my actual [position] coach. My head coach, he did check on me even every now and then, but as the head coach you're very busy, so that's different. But my actual jumps coach did not check on me at all. He had seen me about a couple weeks after surgery, barely even spoke to me. It was crazy. I just feel like it should be better. I feel like if more money was poured into our sport and other sports as well, we can get the right coaches instead of just getting just anybody off the street out here coaching us.

For Kate, this was a traumatic experience. She expressed her feelings of discontent, disownment, and isolation once she was no longer seen as valuable to the team. She also attributed a lack of resources for her sport to the absence of quality coaches. Unfortunately, this experience is not an isolated incident in women's sports and can be observed across multiple sports, regardless of gender.

All in all, the college athletes discussed a portion of their sense of belonging as being rooted in a strong connection to Blackness. They also articulated sexism as a factor that negatively impacted their sense of belonging. In the next section, we discuss the implications of these findings and ways we can use these findings to improve policy.

Future Implications

This study aimed to understand how HBCUs can better serve college athletes. Through their photos and stories, college athletes in this study painted vivid pictures of their experiences at Bama State. Consistent with previous literature, college athletes reported that Bama State empowered their Blackness and created opportunities for them to be more than just athletes (Cooper & Newton, 2021; Foster, 2022). Besides the extensive time demands of college athletes (Gayles & Crandall, 2019), participants in this study engaged with the campus community in ways that also that helped shape their Black identity, such as through involvement in Greek Lettered Organizations.

In addition to feeling a sense of belonging, participants shared insights into the disparities that affected their community. Women athletes have spoken about differential treatment in housing situations, resource allocations, and an overall lack of care for women's athletics, which is indicative of broader social issues in sports (Bruening, 2005; Cooky et al., 2015; Ofoegbu, 2024). Consistent with previous research, these athletes did not explicitly identify as activists (Kluch, 2023); however, their participation in and willingness to draw attention to these disparities, coupled with the intended research design, highlighted the need for more activist-focused work in athletics (Cooper et al., 2017).

Athletic departments seeking to incorporate this work may consider implementing operational strategies that enable athletes to share their experiences (Navarro et al., 2019). For example, open forums and town halls with athletic directors are tools where college athletes can voice their experiences. Having spaces where athletes can anonymously report their experiences is something else athletic directors may want to consider. Most specifically, it is imperative that institutions support women's sports. Providing equitable funding is a first step, but beyond that, institutions should consider intentional strategies for promoting women's sports through multiple media channels (Coakely, 2021). Additionally, grant agencies that support HBCUs may consider developing funding opportunities that encourage future research examining women's experiences at HBCUs. This could help enhance interventions, such as Sista Circles, that create intentional space to support Black women, while also creating opportunities to close gender gaps and disparities (Ferguson, 2023). It is crucial that college athletes' voices are amplified to understand and improve their student experience. This work must continue, and we must listen to college athletes' voices on and off the field.

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Tryan L. McMickens

"The purpose of Student Perspectives on HBCU Graduate Student Advising is to fill a gap in the higher education advising literature by centering and elevating the voices of eight Black and Latinx graduate students in a fully online asynchronous Historically Black University master's program using autoethnography as a method."
- Tryan L. McMickens

Chapter 6

Student Perspectives on HBCU Graduate Student Advising

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Institutional Profile

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is a coeducational Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Durham, North Carolina. NCCU was founded in 1910 by Dr. James Edward Shepard and is a four-year public constituent institution of the University of North Carolina (UNC). As of September 2024, 8,579 students were enrolled (Lawton, 2024b); 3,346 students live on-campus (39%), and 5,233 students live off-campus (61%; NCCUa, 2024). According to NCCU, 6,851 students (80%) are full-time, and 1,728 students (20%) are part-time; 6,082 students (69%) are enrolled in bachelor's degree programs, and 1,953 students (31%) are enrolled in graduate and professional degree programs (NCCUa, 2024). Regarding gender, 6,085 students

(71%) are women and 2,494 students (29%) are men, and 27% of students are over age 25 (NCCUa, 2024).

Black students make up 76% of the student population; 8% are White; 7% are Hispanic/Latinx; 5% are multiracial; 1% are Asian; less than 1% are American Indian or Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; and 28% are first generation (Lawton, 2024a). NCCU defines first-generation status as students whose parents, biological or adoptive, did not earn a degree from a four-year university (NCCUb, 2024). Furthermore, 67% of students were awarded Pell Grants in fall 2022 (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2024).

Introduction

HBCUs provide a rich learning environment on the undergraduate level that is nurturing, supportive, family oriented, and prepares students to succeed in graduate school and the workplace (McMickens, 2012; McMickens et al., 2025). Scholars maintain that one in six Black persons received a bachelor's degree from an HBCU (Shuler et al., 2022); this statistic is noteworthy because HBCUs represent only 3% of all degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States (Copridge et al., 2023). In addition to the vital contribution of these studies, HBCUs have a history of graduate education that is purposeful, mission-aligned, and designed to fill critical gaps in increasing the number of professionals of color across academic disciplines (Alexander et al., 2025; Allen-Milton et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2012, 2016). In this introduction, we will discuss the extant literature on graduate education at HBCUs and provide context regarding advising approaches in online graduate programs, which is the focus of this study.

Graduate Education at HBCUs

A growing body of literature examines graduate education at HBCUs from historical, economic, graduate school choice, labor market outcome, and work–life balance perspectives (Allen-Milton et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2012, 2016). For example, Palmer et al. (2016) introduced one of the first collections that examined HBCU graduate education from students' personal narratives. Palmer et al. (2016) found that HBCUs created conditions for graduate student success by enrolling racially diverse cohorts, hiring and retaining faculty of color, & decreasing the chance of isolation for students of color in their academic programs. Another noteworthy finding from the Palmer et al. (2016) book came from the personal narrative of a master's student at a public HBCU. Lawrence (2016) argued that he had to work on improving his writing to align with his program's expectations, his program's emphasis on serving the community, the high demands of his program faculty, and his relationship with an encouraging and supportive student affairs professional, which aided in his holistic development. These conditions resulted in his yearning to perform exceptionally and to have a greater sense of purpose in his work.

Fast-forwarding six years later post-COVID-19, research findings are comparable to earlier studies. For example, Allen-Milton et al. (2022) argued that Black students at HBCU graduate programs experienced loss, grief, and major life events while navigating remote instruction, and they relied on support systems to help them persist and complete their degree programs. Milton also found that graduate students prioritized physical and mental wellness while navigating their graduate programs; this helped students manage their studies and work–life commitments.

Moreover, it is important to flush out the unique conditions for graduate programs employing online modalities. Results of empirical research show that a successful online learning environment emphasizes three principles: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Fuller et al., 2014). Social presence affords students opportunities to connect with their classmates emotionally and socially; it provides cohesiveness and a sense of belonging, which contributes to a positive online learning environment (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Cognitive presence entails students' progression from understanding concepts, exploring ideas, and integrating theory-to-practice (Fuller et al., 2014). Teaching presence is "the instructional design that enhances both the social and the cognitive presences" (Fuller et al., 2014, p. 75).

Advising Approaches

With the increased number of graduate programs at HBCUs employing online modalities, the role of advising is important to address persistence and completion, and to provide a supportive and challenging environment for graduate students. For example, McMickens (2023) documented that faculty who serve as program coordinators have a unique lens for developing good advising practices for HBCU asynchronous online graduate students. His student advising goal was to "ensure student success in collaboration with faculty" (McMickens, 2023, p. 88), and to relay program information and program policies, maintain advising records, and track, assess, and evaluate student performance. These efforts resulted in measurable outcomes for student persistence and student completion. Scholars argue that advising online graduate students can be categorized into four themes (Meyer et al., 2022): (a) communication and feedback, (b) building relationships and community, (c) investment in student's personal and academic growth, and (d) program requirements and policies.

Communication and Feedback. Scholars maintain that communication and feedback are among some of the most important conditions for graduate student success when advising online graduate students. Specifically, it is important that advisors practice timely and proactive communication, have an ethic of care, hold online office hours, have availability, offer flexibility, and set clear expectations for time management to aid students in meeting deadlines (Cross, 2018; Kara & Can, 2019; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Kumar & Johnson, 2017; Schroeder et al., 2016).

Building Relationships and Community. Intentionality is important in building genuine relationships and community in online graduate programs. For example, scholars found that graduate students desired the greatest connectivity with their faculty advisors. It was not as important to foster high connectivity among peers in the online learning environment (Schroeder et al., 2016).

Investment in Student's Personal and Academic Growth. Researchers suggest that advisors should know their academic fields, be subject matter experts, and personalize and tailor their knowledge to their advisees in the online learning environment (Kara & Can, 2019). For example, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is an advising model that emphasizes social presence from advisors. Advisors that practice RCT stated that "human beings are a sociable species that desire and need connections to flourish" (Ka'aiakamanu-Quibilan & Abanto, 2025, para. 2). To facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship in advising, students who benefit from RCT refer to the "Five Good Things": (a) energy, (b) knowledge, (c) sense of worth, (d) action, and (e) desire for more connections (Ka'aiakamanu-Quibilan & Abanto, 2025, p. 1). When combined, these advising tenets promote a positive emotional experience through intellectual dialogue, mutual validation, moving towards next steps in the advisee's personal goals, and building rapport which may facilitate further engagement (Ka'aiakamanu-Quibilan & Abanto, 2025; Kara & Can, 2019).

Program Requirements and Policies. Scholars maintain that advisors should provide resources for students. For example, advisors should create academic plans early on and map out the courses students will need to successfully complete their degree programs (Schroeder et al., 2016). It is also important for advisors to draw from their own personal knowledge and provide relevant information on educational policies and their implications for advisees (Cross, 2018).

In this study, we examined perspectives of Black and Latinx graduate students in a Historically Black Higher Education master's program that employs a fully online and asynchronous learning modality by analyzing an autoethnographic account of eight participants. This account presents the narratives of these students' advising and mentoring experiences as they navigate work and graduate school as adult learners. We used autoethnography as a method and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to advance knowledge on Black and Latinx graduate students' advising experiences in higher education academic programs. McMickens also incorporates data from extended conversations in peer-reviewed conference presentations with the other participants to further contextualize the autoethnographic account.

Purpose of the Study

In this research, we fill a gap in the higher education advising literature by centering and elevating the voices of eight Black and Latinx graduate students in a fully online asynchronous HBCU master's program by analyzing an autoethnographic account. The research question is: What are the advising/mentoring perspectives of Black and Latinx graduate students in an HBCU Higher Education and Student Affairs fully online and asynchronous graduate program?

Theoretical Framework

We approached this study from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. CRT is fundamentally concerned with understanding, deconstructing, critiquing, and questioning how race and White supremacy shape and limit access and success for students of color, in this case, Black and Latinx students in higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Teranishi et al., 2009). Critical race theorists contend that racism is omnipresent, widespread, invisible, and impossible to eradicate (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998).

No single definition exists for CRT, but scholars describe it as comprising five tenets (Bergerson, 2003; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harper et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000; Solórzano, 1998):

1. Places race at the center of discussion and incorporates intersectionality (recognizes that identities are interlocking and inform each other), working with off-shoots (e.g., Critical Race Feminism, LatCrit, QueerCrit, etc.), and the permanence of racism.

2. Challenges dominant ideology, including claims of meritocracy and interest convergence.

3. Recognizes the unique perspectives and experiences of people of color by giving voice to their experiences.

4. Commits to social justice and praxis.

5. Accounts for transdisciplinary approaches (e.g., CRT draws from law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, education, and other academic disciplines).

Voice is a key assumption of the third tenet, and it is the most influential element guiding this study. It is discussed in detail below.

Voice

CRT recognizes that students of color have knowledge, experience, and a voice to tell their stories. It is committed to social justice, challenges dominant ideology, and exposes racial inequality. This is typically illustrated by using voice as a storytelling method to "analyze the myths, presuppositions, and perceived wisdoms that make up the common culture about race that invariably render Blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).

Voice also involves the ways people of color "integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as 'other,' with their ongoing struggles to transform a world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony" (Barnes, 1990, p. 1864). Barnes (1990) further notes that experiential knowledge is important because it exposes the differing viewpoints and social interactions among people of color and White people.

The voice tenet of CRT legitimizes the perspectives and interconnected ways that students of color experience oppression when navigating higher education. This tenet provides a theoretical framework for examining the lived experiences of eight graduate students and is a useful theory for framing autoethnography as a research method.

Method

It is important to provide context on how advising works in the NCCU Higher Education Administration (HEA) Program because the framework is instrumental in understanding the method for this study. Advising

is approached as a process where the advisors challenge and support their advisees to help them navigate their graduate school journey and make and achieve their academic and career goals (McMickens, 2023). There are five volunteer faculty affiliate advisors (scholar-practitioners who serve full-time in mid and senior-level administrative positions) and three full-time professors (e.g., these are teacher-scholar-mentors) who serve as advisors for the 60-student population of the HEA program. Each volunteer faculty affiliate advisor is assigned an average of three advisees per year, and the full-time faculty advisors are assigned five advisees on average per year. Advisors are assigned based on the interests of advisees. For example, there is a student-centered approach to advising; students are matched to advisors based on the students' personal statements and the notes that faculty capture from students' admission interviews. For those students interested in obtaining student affairs administrative positions, they are matched with scholar-practitioners who practice student affairs; for those students interested in being scholars, they are matched with full-time faculty members who conduct research, teach, and advise students. In this study, the participants worked with a diverse assemblage of advisors (Appendix A). We used an autoethnographic approach because it relies heavily on personal experiences as data to create rich narratives. Chang (2008) suggested collecting personal memory data and organizing it in various ways, including autobiographical timeline, kinship diagrams, and free drawing. For the current study, the lead author created an autobiographical timeline that focused mainly on limited time periods of advising and mentoring relationships between students and faculty in the HBCU-based 100% online graduate program.

In addition, the lead author, with the assistance of the student co-authors, collected self-reflective data (Chang, 2008). The lead author, McMickens, knew the co-authors, Martin, Lloyd, Hunter, Keller, Walls, Walker, Martin, and Coleman, for two to three years at the time of the study. It was particularly useful to have a chronological list of significant events and experiences focused on advising and mentoring. The lead author and student co-authors met via Zoom to discuss the scope of the project, learn more about the research method, and to discuss their knowledge and perceptions on advising and mentoring. The lead author then organized an online collaborative document (a Google Doc), and the co-authors responded to self-reflective questions (Appendix B).

Throughout this time, McMickens continued to have conversations with the student co-authors about their advising experiences from his lens of program coordinator, professor, advisor, and research mentor. During these discussions, he also analyzed these experiences. In addition to the autoethnographic account presented here, these extended conversations culminated in peer-reviewed conference presentations. Student authors co-presented with the lead author at three conferences: ACPA-College Student Educators International conventions in 2022 and 2023, respectively, and at the North Carolina Association for Research in Education meeting in 2024. McMickens added an author, a higher education executive with experience in advising at HBCUs (Wooden), to make contributions and offer feedback on the overall study.

In this research, we interweave the autoethnographic narrative with supporting data from the other conversations. We followed the procedures for analyzing autoethnographic data as outlined by Chang (2008), including:

> [To] search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; look for cultural themes; connect the present with the past; analyze relationships between self and others; compare yourself with other people's cases; contextualize with social science constructs and ideas; and frame with theories. (p. 131)

In sharing the data, we present narratives from the student co-authors using pseudonyms (e.g., Roy, etc.) and themes that emerged from across the data, which are all supported by our own analyses as well as past research.

Findings

Roy's First-Person Narrative

Becoming a higher education practitioner was something that mostly fell into my lap. In undergrad, I held

several different roles that were related but never thought much about making it a career until I made a drastic major change during my senior year. That decision landed me in North Carolina, torn between an in-person HEA program at another institution and NCCU's asynchronous program. The decision was tough, considering my learning style and needs compared to the needs of my personal life.

However, I recognize that choosing NCCU, an HBCU, was the best thing I could have done for my career. My experience as a Black advisee in an HEA program with other Black faculty and cohort members informed my practice as a student and continues to inform my practice. There was a mutual understanding of intersectionality, a concept that in my experience at White institutions, was often ignored. Learning to approach theory from an intercultural lens specific to my identity made the content more accessible. I was able to connect to the history of higher education and discuss the diversity of higher education without the feeling of having to educate my peers on my existence. In many ways, my peers and instructors simply already understood, and that in itself presented the opportunity to delve deeper into the content, beyond the surface of race, to discuss the greater implications that identity has on student development and institutional type. And when we were asked to look through other cultural lenses, I was more open rather than the desperate feeling of needing to be seen.

The Authors' Ethnographic Analysis

Braun (2008) documents similar experiences in his college choice study of online and face-to-face students. Furthermore, McMickens's (2012) research on HBCUs affirms Roy's narrative; he developed a "racism readiness model" that describes how Black colleges socialize and prepare their students to respond productively to the social context of society.

Serenity's First-Person Narrative

As a full-time employee, entrepreneur, wife, mother, and daughter to elderly immigrant non-English speaking parents, I was reluctant to enroll in a graduate program because I have many responsibilities. I believe that my unique perspective as an immigrant Latina enriches our discussions and provides valuable learning opportunities for all of us. One of the best things about being an advisee/mentee is the unconditional support from my mentor and advisor. I have been lucky to encounter accomplished professionals at NCCU who are willing to share their knowledge and resources with me. When I learned about their beginnings and the challenges they faced, I saw myself in them and thought that it was not easy for them, it is not easy for me, and yet we get to accomplish our goals, and I feel inspired.

I feared I could not network or create relationships with students or professors when I enrolled in this online program. In that sense, NCCU and our program director, Dr. McMickens, have done an excellent job facilitating interaction with other students and professionals in the field. For instance, we have a group chat where we can support each other. Also, Dr. McMickens coordinates a monthly series called Tuesdays Together, where he invites recognized professionals, such as college presidents, to talk to us about their experiences and answer our questions. I do not feel isolated but rather a part of a group. I have experienced the nurturing environment that HBCUs are well known for, even in a virtual setting.

The Authors' Ethnographic Analysis

Johnson and Griffin (2024) have consistently advocated for the conditions needed to effectively advise and mentor students; Serenity's perspectives are consistent with their findings. Four decades of research capture the gains, benefits, and outcomes conferred to students who attend HBCUs; the nurturing environment that Roy and Serenity describe is aligned with the researchers' findings (Allen, 1987, 1992; Allen et al., 1991; Fleming, 1984; McMickens et al., 2025).

Chance's First-Person Narrative

As an advisee in the HEA program at NCCU, I have been given the opportunity to connect with mentors in many areas and expand my student experiences by utilizing the knowledge, wisdom and experience provided by

their leadership. I felt seen, not only as a student, but as a person juggling life, which made my work–life balance much easier to navigate and manage. Advising sessions created an opportunity to mold my career in HEA by being exposed to all avenues through advisor led opportunities (conferences, research, mock interviews, meeting other mentors). I felt that each advising opportunity was cultivated to holistically develop my experience in all spectrums of online learning and empower me to find the area of higher education that would best suit me going forward. I was able to create the recipe for success with my advisor based upon my wants and needs and remain confident that my choices would yield success due to the constant guidance and support.

The Authors' Ethnographic Analysis

Cross's (2018) research, published in National Academic Advising Association (NACADA): The Global Community for Academic Advising, describes the advising perceptions of online students. They expect "proactive, timely, and knowledgeable advising" in addition to opportunities that will enhance their career pathways; their findings are like Chance's perspectives (Cross, 2018, p. 72).

Madison's First-Person Narrative

I received my undergraduate degree at a small-sized Primarily White Institution. In those three and a half years, I had two Black professors in total. One was the chair of the department and one was an adjunct. They were both Black women. I never had a professor who identified as a Black man. In fact, I don't think there were any Black male faculty at all.

My experience within my graduate program is starkly different. The director of my program is the first Black male faculty that I had ever met, and he is one of many. There is distinct comfort in seeing examples of Black people in higher education, thriving and joyful and bringing their full selves to the work that they do. The sense of psychological safety that I feel to simply be a student (rather than tokenized Black student) is absolutely unique to the HBCU environment. Some people assume that being at a Minority Serving Institution creates a racialized experience, but in my journey, it has been the opposite. It is the first time in my life that I am able to be an excellent student without it being racialized. I can just focus on excelling.

The Authors' Ethnographic Analysis

Black faculty are grossly underrepresented in higher education; McMickens (2023) found that Black faculty comprise 7% of full-time faculty members in the United States [in 2022]; when disaggregated by gender, Black men comprise 3%, and Black women make up 4%. Yet HBCUs constitute the largest share of Black faculty in the United States. Put another way, there is a one in two chance that students at HBCUs will be taught by Black faculty (Yan et al., 2025).

Authors' Analysis Across the Ethnographic Accounts

A Shift from Advising to Mentoring to Holistic Investment in Student Success

Advisees emphasized a sense of connection and attentiveness within their advising experience, which is consistent with the extant literature (Schroeder et al., 2016). The online and asynchronous landscape of the program was not a notable hindrance to accessing academic and professional support. In fact, advisees stated that their advisors were attentive, helpful, and accessible to a greater extent than their undergraduate advisors, which is a noteworthy finding. The advising sessions were holistic and were spaces where graduate students could feel "seen." The concept of being seen goes beyond being acknowledged as a student. The advisees felt that they were valued and appreciated as people with full lives and passions beyond their academics, consistent with the literature on investment in students' personal and academic growth (e.g., Ka'aiakamanu-Quibilan & Abanto, 2025; Kara & Can, 2019). Being seen in this way enhanced feelings of support and empowered them to balance their work and life more effectively. They felt that their meaningful interactions with their advisors were beyond a traditional advising experience and were more heavily focused on mentorship and investment into

their future professional goals. Advisees appreciated having easy access to their advisor and faculty members, and they benefited because the program is small and tight knit. The ability to receive individualized attention was especially meaningful.

The Importance of Representation and the Distinct HBCU Environment

Furthermore, advisees highlighted the importance of Black faculty representation within higher education, and the ways in which this has been lacking in their past experiences at other institutions. This finding is aligned with the HBCU scholarship on diversity among faculty (McMickens, 2023; McMickens et al., 2025). For many, the sight of Black professors is a rarity, and the opportunity to work with accomplished Black scholars increases morale and feelings of inspiration. Many advisees mentioned only having seen one or two Black faculty prior to their HBCU advising experience. The HBCU experience offered meaningful opportunities to discuss and reflect on race, identity, and diversity. Advisees were also comfortable sharing their dreams and goals, seeking help, and interrogating diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion topics without feeling the burden of racial stigma.

Implications for Research and Practice

While this autoethnography is by nature self-reflective, we hope that this narrative has successfully communicated several ideas to readers. Consistent with the voice tenet of CRT, we hope this study contributes to the growing chorus of student voices, raising up those who feel ignored or are often rendered invisible or marginalized in society. We have been afforded the privilege of publishing this study while many HBCU constituents like us may not have had the same publishing opportunity.

First, the research results correspond strongly to several critical issues within the field of higher education and student affairs. At its core, the study is about understanding the experiences of students in a graduate preparation at an HBCU that is fully online and asynchronous and is the only such program in its state. This chapter adds to the body of literature on Black and Latinx students and their advising experiences in an HBCU online graduate program. Furthermore, the study focused on the strategies students employed to navigate to and through their respective degree program. Given the preponderance of inequities between racially minoritized students and their White counterparts, more needs to be understood about how Black and Latinx students in the HBCU graduate online environment are being prepared to become effective higher education administrators via the lens of advising and mentoring.

Second, there are implications to the wider HBCU community because this research project is based at one of roughly 10 HBCUs with distinct higher education and student affairs preparation programs in the United States. This research could be replicated at the other HBCU-based academic programs and may have implications to other institutional types.

Third, faculty, program coordinators, and administrators have the power to enact institutional change, and they should use their sphere of influence to effectively advise students and rely on the experiential knowledge from students to enrich student success.

In conclusion, this research study adds to the growing body of literature on Black and Latinx graduate students and their advising experiences in HBCU-based asynchronous online programs (Allen-Milton et al., 2022; Palmer et al., 2012, 2016). We contend that professors and administrators who work with graduate students should adopt innovative advising frameworks that meet adult learners where they are on their graduate school journey. For instance, it may be useful to combine existing advising frameworks based on the mission and student population of the academic program. However, periodic assessments and adjustments from program coordinators will aid in helping adult learners succeed personally and academically because this student population evolves and so do their needs. These considerations will assist faculty and administrators to develop comprehensive strategies that meet Black and Latinx graduate students at HBCUs' social, emotional and academic needs, while encouraging them to persist in their studies and complete their programs.

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Appendix A - Listing of Advisees and Advisors

Brown – Coleman
Chance – McMickens
Elizabeth – Gavin Williams
Joy – McMickens
Laser – McMickens
Madison – McMickens
Roy – Wicker-McCree
Serenity – McMickens

Appendix B - HBCU Voices from the Field: The Student Experience at HBCUs Research Project

Research Question

- What are the advising/mentoring perspectives of Black and Latinx graduate students in an HBCU Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) fully online and asynchronous graduate program?

Reflective Questions

- Describe your experiences as an advisee and/or mentee in the HEA program, what would that be and why?

- What have been the best things about being an advisee? What about the worst?

- If you could change one thing about your situation (relative to being an advisee), what would that be?

Jamila S. Lyn   Elisa Jaden

"The chapter explores the insights of HBCU students who completed an online consortial course. Through their reflections, the chapter investigates how these students perceived their academic performance, the degree to which they engaged with course materials and activities, and their overall satisfaction with the online learning format."

- Jamila S. Lyn

"Student voices are essential to developing effective support programs as they provide invaluable insights into the barriers and opportunities that shape their educational journeys. By centering student perspectives in the design and continuous improvement of support services, institutions can strategically create responsive, relevant interventions that specifically address students' diverse needs to create optimal education experiences that shape their futures."

- Elisa Jaden

Chapter 7

Adopting Online Course Sharing to Impact Student Success Metrics for Underrepresented Students

Jamila S. Lyn
Bottom Up Thinking Consulting

Elisa Jaden
Southern Regional Education Board

Online Course Sharing is the Strategy, Student Success is the Goal

Collaborative online course sharing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is a relatively new retention and persistence model designed to support students through cross-institutional online enrollments. According to Jaden and Lyn (2024):

The Course Sharing Consortium provides students of member institutions with access to many courses and schedule possibilities with heightened flexibility. Students are retained by pairing them with the courses needed, [and] the institutions also benefit by keeping the students' tuition in-house. (para. 17)

Since student enrollment stays with the home institution, the student uses their financial aid to cover the cost of the consortium course, and the course and letter grade are listed on the student's home transcript. Further, all courses are cross-walked and agreed upon by consortium institutions.

While HBCUs have not historically been at the forefront of online learning, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift from face-to-face to hybrid and or online course offerings, and institutions that once had the option of delaying or completely ignoring distance learning for their students quickly found themselves immersed in the virtual learning space with little preparation and training (Jaden & Lyn, 2024). As schools doubled down on instructional design and technological support for faculty, online learning emerged as a viable delivery mode for teaching and learning across the postsecondary landscape. From this emergence, HBCUs

and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) have adopted initiatives like online course sharing to expand how they envision degree completion pathways ("Empowering student futures," 2024).

In this paper, we highlight how students at Benedict College, a private, coed Historically Black College in Columbia, South Carolina, used course sharing to support students' goals of staying on track to graduate. As the direct beneficiaries of course sharing, students are best positioned to offer insight to their institutions on (a) student preparedness, (b) preferred pedagogical styles, and (c) satisfaction with the online learning experience. As such, student voices have the potential to shape how institutions develop these unique virtual opportunities to promote retention, persistence, and degree completion.

The outcomes of online course sharing are clearly evidenced by HBCU student testimonials that capture the immediate impact of academic leaders securing consortium courses for students when they needed them, which alleviated a burden for students who would have been forced to find alternative curricular options (possibly at other institutions, incurring out-of-pocket expenses). Specifically, we highlight students who participated in this innovative learning experience to discover their perspective on their academic performance, course engagement, and overall satisfaction with the online learning experience.

Institutional Profile: Benedict College

Benedict College, a private, co-ed HBCU, was founded in 1870 in Columbia, South Carolina. Benedict is home to 1,487 undergraduate students and 64 graduate students. Largely a residential campus, 68% of Benedict students live on campus, and 32% identify as commuters. It is interesting to note that Benedict's student population is almost evenly split between males and females, which is atypical across colleges and universities: 48% male and 52% female. Nationally, female students significantly outnumber and outpace their male counterparts (Reeves & Secker, 2024). In this respect, Benedict stands as an anomaly. However, in terms of the age demographic, most students are classified as traditionally aged; only 7% of students are aged 25 or older. As an HBCU, Benedict's racial makeup consists of 75% Black, 1% White, less than 1% Asian, less than 1% American Indian/Native Alaskan, 3% Hispanic, less than 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 8% unknown, and 12% U.S. Non-Resident. Additionally, 22% of Benedict students are first-generation (neither parent attended college), and 74% are Pell- dependent as determined by FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) documents; the first-generation and Pell recipient data points validate Benedict students' need for greater access to technology and robust support.

Background

HBCU students report feeling inadequate or targeted at non-HBCUs for a myriad of reasons, namely the perception that they may not be adequately prepared to manage the academic load outside the comfort of their home institution. "Racialized imposter phenomenon," a term defined by Kevin Cokley (2024) in "Let's Reconceptualize 'Imposter Syndrome' for People of Color," is the "persistent beliefs or actions of intellectual and professional self-doubt among racially minoritized people due to experiences, systems, or principles of racial oppression and inequity" (para. 12). Among Black students, this phenomenon may be significantly prevalent given factors such as racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and questions about the legitimacy and academic rigor of HBCUs. Combined, these factors may cause students to fall into the trap of believing they're not enough and are not likely to succeed intellectually beyond the comfort of their safe space. Dr. Alan Turley (2024), a sociology professor at Huston-Tillotson University (an HBCU in Texas), poses a provocative question: "'Are [HBCUs] taken seriously in the academic world?' Specifically, is the scholarly work being produced by HBCU faculty and students being noticed or published? The answer appears to be no" (para. 1). While the crux of Turley's piece focuses on the marginal HBCU faculty publication record in major, peer-reviewed academic journals, the underlying theme of institutional selectivity, fueled by White elitist politics, impacts all sectors of HBCU campus life, especially students who choose HBCUs for a top-notch, affordable education, nurturing community, and diversity.

Coupled with feelings of diminished self-esteem and confidence, data shows that Black students fail to perform well in the online academic space for a myriad of reasons. In Cameron Sublett's 2020 American Council on Education article, "Distant Equity: The Promise and Pitfalls of Online Learning for Students of Color in Higher Education," Sublett shares that Black (and Latinx) learners do "markedly worse in online courses" (Johnson & Mejia, 2014, as cited in Sublett, 2020) largely because of the "sizeable bias" (Baker et al., 2018, as cited in Sublett, 2020) skewed toward White males who receive faculty feedback at nearly double the rate compared to non-White student groups (para. 12). Although technology is intended to provide Black learners with access to resources, thereby improving their chances of success, online courses can potentially compound gaps in higher education for them. This context is critical as it underscores the high stakes of online course sharing at HBCUs.

Methodology

For this study, we used a qualitative research approach to collect and analyze student voice data. We received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Benedict College. In accordance with the institution's human subjects' guidelines (to mitigate potential risks), the study was designed as a voluntary project: participants had the option to withdraw their participation at any time. Also, participants did not receive payment for their time or insights. Lastly, the students' personal identifiable information will not be disclosed.

To capture student voice data, we identified Benedict College students who enrolled in at least one online consortium course between spring 2022 and fall 2023. Eligible students received an invitation to participate in the study, which included the intent of the study, the value of student perspectives, and the project's parameters. The invitation letter instructed interested students to submit the study participation consent form. Each student who submitted the study participation consent form then completed an end-of-course survey specific to online course sharing. Once all surveys were submitted, virtual focus groups were scheduled. To analyze the student voice data, thematic analysis enabled us to code and group all responses to identify recurring themes. Pseudonyms were used when writing about students' experiences to ensure participant anonymity.

Benedict College was selected as the focal institution because on the Acadeum platform, it led the HBCU cohort with 1,049 course enrollments and a successful pass rate of 82%. As one of the pioneering institutions in the SREB HBCU-MSI Course Sharing Consortium (2022), Benedict's consortium enrollment trends and its approach to assessment and quality improvement positioned the institution to lead the way for other member schools to develop unique iterations of course sharing that best aligned with their institutional priorities.

Research Questions

This study was centered on student voices and their experiences with online course sharing. The feedback ties directly to the need for online support for students and the critical role of instructional design. We sought to answer the following research questions: (a) What were students' experiences in consortium courses, and how did those experiences shape students' progression through their educational journeys? and (b) How can students' experiences be used to inform teaching and learning (i.e., course design and online student support programs and services)?

In Their Own Words: The Power of Student Storytelling

The transformative power of the student participants' experiences in consortium courses centers on their authenticity, candor, and introspection. Although the learners enrolled in course sharing at various points of their undergraduate or graduate careers, there was significant overlap in their responses related not only to the value of the course sharing opportunity as a path forward, but also in their initial concerns about how to succeed in a virtual environment.

Institutional Investment in Student Progression

The importance of a high-flex course option resonated as a recurring theme across learner interviews. In every scenario, the consortium enrollment was required because the courses needed were not available in a specific academic term. Students immediately recognized the consortium opportunity as a student-centric solution designed to help them stay on track to graduation. Kourtney, a member of Benedict's inaugural MBA cohort, shared:

> The consortium provides an opportunity to aid students because we have a lot of students with unique circumstances, and the consortium is an added layer that can help them finish without having to take any extra money out or any extra time. You know, they can punch it, finish it, and go!

Another recent graduate and new workforce member, Elizabeth, echoed a similar sentiment, stating, "The option of consortium courses made me feel like my school had my back." Both students shared that their institution's responsiveness affirmed their investment in students, resulting in them feeling seen and heard and fostering trust between academic leadership and students. Not only were the students committed to persisting in their respective programs, but institutional leadership also demonstrated that course availability, or the lack thereof, is no longer an acceptable reason to delay student progress.

The institutional investment extended beyond identifying a viable consortia course option. Students noted that Benedict went the extra mile by providing easy access to technology tools and learning materials, such as laptops, internet hot spots, ebooks, and lab access codes. We found it interesting that most students did not expect Benedict staff to communicate with the teaching institutions because the schools were not affiliated. Students were pleasantly surprised to learn that the staff was intentional about forging a relationship between Benedict (the home institution) and the teaching institution to ensure open lines of communication and proactive support services. Students asserted that these partnerships between the home and teaching institutions were helpful as they learned to virtually navigate a new campus with different cultures, policies, and technology systems. This key relationship anchors the institution's wraparound support model, ensuring that students experience the impact of a connected network, which contributes to the HBCU "familial experience" emphasized by student interviews.

Adjusting to a New Learning Environment

Shifting from the familiarity of a face-to-face classroom at one's home institution to a virtual learning space led by a new professor at a different institution caused some angst for learners who were concerned about the learning curve (related to both campus culture and course content). Initially, the logistical aspect of the consortium enrollment sparked the most worry, especially for students who had to quickly figure out navigating a learning management system (LMS) vastly different from Canvas, Benedict's home LMS. Additionally, students anticipated running into technical challenges, primarily password issues, and questioned who would be available to lend support. Despite receiving detailed information about log-in access in their onboarding email communication, there was strong uncertainty that came with operating a new platform.

Aside from the technical concerns, students shared that they held preconceived notions about how the non-HBCU faculty members and students would view their academic ability, given the false, yet pervasive, portrayal of HBCUs as mediocre institutions. Interestingly, the students not only wrestled with others' perceptions of their academic prowess, but nearly 20% of student participants voiced feelings of self-doubt or imposter syndrome. We considered how or why an HBCU student might feel subpar or targeted at a non-HBCU. However, when the larger public questions the legitimacy of HBCUs and the academic rigor of their programs, we and others can understand how some students may fall into the trap of believing they're not enough and are therefore unlikely to succeed intellectually beyond the comfort of their safe space. It is, therefore, no surprise that some students struggled to find their footing in consortium courses offered at non-HBCUs. However, what was most notable was the resilience demonstrated by their ability to focus and work hard despite what the larger

discourse suggests about their perceived academic ability and their beloved institutions. One learner shared what she repeated to herself while enrolled in her consortium course, "I am here because I deserve to be, and I can handle the rigor." Another learner asserted:

> *Don't be fearful of how you may be perceived coming from Benedict College to a PWI [Predominantly White Institution] . . . think of it as Benedict College set you up to be successful in whatever room you're in and it's up to you to determine if you're going to be afraid or show up confident and ready to learn.*

Exposure to Diverse Learning Styles

The value proposition of online course sharing is clear for institutions that are challenged by limited course inventory, curricular gaps, and faculty availability. Students enrolled in consortium courses are generally focused on earning credits and checking off a requirement on their degree audit. However, through participating in this research study, students had the opportunity to reflect on their consortium experience more deeply. First-year law student Kaniesha expressed:

> *Taking consortium courses opened my eyes to different kinds of institutions and forms of teaching and learning. They taught me to hear perspectives across ages and backgrounds. They also taught me research and writing skills that help me now in law school.*

Several learners articulated an appreciation for the teaching institutions' diverse pedagogical approaches as well as their student-centered course design. Student learner, Robert, completed his consortium courses early in his graduate program, preferring the online, asynchronous format over face-to-face, synchronous classes, and shared:

> *Everything in person was in real-time and so fast-paced but taking these consortium classes allowed me to go at my own pace, which I realize I take for granted because of my in-person class load. The consortium classes provided the time that allowed the content to marinate.*

Robert's focus on pace reinforced the importance of equitable course design co-created with learner input. A simple course roster examination fails to provide the kind of detailed context needed to understand and honor multiple learning styles of students. While listening to students reflect on nuanced course design, the importance of flexibility emerged once again. To meet the needs of our students, faculty and instructional designers must be intentional about valuing student perspectives, despite the obvious power dynamic between faculty and students that can prove more harmful than helpful in the classroom. Student perspectives matter as they relate to quality course development and the actualization of student learning outcomes. Student engagement is central to effective teaching and learning. The student voices represented in this study shed light on subconscious decisions determined in a faculty vacuum that ultimately impact student motivation, performance, and outlook.

Agency and Self-Efficacy Realized

More than an academic exercise, the online course sharing consortium experience stretched student participants in unexpected ways that contributed to their academic and personal growth and maturity. Students were not delusional about the real possibility of feeling isolated in an online course delivered by an institution other than Benedict College. Christina, an international student, approached her consortium course with clarity and seriousness sharing, "Everybody has their own responsibilities, and we have to know and learn how to manage ourselves in different spaces and situations." Christina spoke with a degree of unquestionable determination. Not passing her course was simply not an option as a graduating senior funded by a prestigious scholarship. When asked about specific strategies she employed to remain successful in the course, Christina talked about creating a group chat with other Benedict students to stay connected and hold each other accountable. The

group chat sparked what quickly evolved into a learning community where students coordinated tutoring sessions, shared class resources, and offered encouragement. Christina's only regret is that she hadn't extended group chat membership to the non-HBCU students enrolled in the course because, in retrospect, she believed others would have benefited like the Benedict cohort.

The online course sharing experience was positive for most participants. However, two students struggled with external circumstances that affected their performance in their courses. For instance, Dominique's first consortium course was in her first year of graduate school, during which she had a near-death car accident that resulted in her falling behind on assignments. Dominique admitted that she did not communicate her personal situation to the instructor in real-time. The stress of the accident caused her to withdraw emotionally and check out from the course. By the time she sought support from her advisor, it was too late to appeal the grade. The following semester, Dominique enrolled in the same course at the same institution. She completed the course and earned credit. Despite not passing the course initially, Dominique learned hard lessons about active communication, grit, and utilizing resources. Her inspiring story provides an example of how the online consortium experience helped students develop life skills that will sustain them beyond their educational careers.

Despite a few challenges experienced by some students enrolled in consortium courses related to health issues, faculty changes, and a lack of self-discipline, the student participants still recommend course sharing as an efficient solution for students with limited course options in any given semester. When asked to offer tips to prospective consortium students on how to be successful in this digital space, the learners shared:

- Don't be afraid to initiate early contact with your professors. Communication is critical to building rapport with your instructor to avoid "disappearing" on the roster.

- Force yourself to make a new connection with a student you may not know to build a sense of camaraderie and accountability.

- Exercise time management skills from the start of the course. Keep in mind that important deadlines will vary between your home institution and teaching institution.

- Don't underestimate the importance of emotional support check-ins. Stay connected to your advisor and classmates throughout the course. Online courses don't have to be an isolating learning experience.

- Go into this new learning opportunity being intentional about prioritizing a positive mindset, discipline, and strong communication.

Implications for the Field

The concept of consortia is not new to higher education as online course sharing powered by corporate platforms like Acadeum and RIZE first emerged in 2015 (Gardiner, 2023). The global pandemic sparked exponential growth in institutional participation on these platforms as the need to register students in prerequisite, high-flex, quality courses became apparent to maintain enrollment and completion rates. To date, a paucity of research has been published in this field. Extant assets primarily center around how to operationalize course-sharing models on college campuses; the merit of students' experiences in shared online courses has been largely overlooked.

While online course sharing has proven to be an effective solution when implemented with structure and support, the impact of online course sharing on students' learning trajectory presents an equally important research opportunity to identify the best student-centric practices. As recent players in this digital space, HBCUs are faced with how to mirror their hallmark, high-touch engagement approach in the online world and still drive student connection and performance. In the 2024 WCET Frontiers blog, Nurturing Digital Learning: Unveiling the HBCU Advantage, Barry Briggs (2024) aptly noted:

At HBCUs, [the rhetoric of care] approach is not just a strategy, it's a fundamental aspect of their educational ethos. In the digital realm, a rhetoric of care manifests in various ways, each contributing to a more holistic and supportive learning environment . . . actively listening to students, understanding

their individual needs, and adapting teaching practices to foster a sense of belonging. (Philosophy section, para. 2)

HBCU students come to the virtual learning environment expecting a high-touch approach to support. They need it to succeed in a space that can easily promote learner detachment. Benedict College embraces the "rhetoric of care" because its faculty and staff regard this value as central to its college-wide retention model (Lyn & Winfield, 2021).

The insight shared by Benedict College students in this research project undergirds the importance of incorporating student voices in institutions' decision-making processes for utilizing course seats at other schools. Learning students' needs ahead of the course start date should activate campus support staff to tap resources and remove barriers, which results in fewer instructional interruptions. Additionally, learner demand for asynchronous courses continues to increase; therefore, it is prudent for HBCUs to evolve to meet the challenges of designing strong online courses and supporting online students.

Student feedback is instructive to institutions committed to strengthening this teaching modality. Being cognizant of student apprehension related to online courses can guide faculty, advisors, and instructional designers to develop specific onboarding activities, such as a virtual orientation session, to familiarize students with LMS access, attendance policies, learning materials, and grading rubrics. Across the board, the student participants emphasized why level-setting around course expectations was critical to their success. The students shared that "not knowing what to expect caused unnecessary anxiety that could have been avoided."

This project sparked multiple spinoff possibilities to deepen the discourse around online course sharing in the HBCU community. As an example of educational resource sharing, the online course sharing model could significantly bolster the capacity and impact of HBCUs, an area of continuous improvement. Regional Education Compacts, like the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), have a decades-long history of sharing educational resources among states and institutions, which was the impetus for SREB's HBCU-MSI Course Sharing Consortium. Within SREB's HBCU-MSI Collaborative—a strategic partnership with HBCUs and MSIs to increase equity and access in higher education throughout SREB's 16-state region, "members felt that online course sharing, specifically among like-minded HBCUs and MSIs, would better support the institutional missions and goals as well as optimize each student's academic experience" (Jaden & Lyn, 2024). This collaboration among peer HBCUs serves as a prime example of how to garner collective resources to strengthen an entire sector of institutions that produce diverse, high-skilled graduates across industry who generate economic impact, innovation, and equitable leadership. The demonstrated success of the HBCU-MSI Course Sharing Consortium is well-positioned to catalyze innovative partnerships within the HBCU landscape to propel student success using non-conventional approaches.

The collective student voice amplified in this work is the cornerstone of best practices in the space. This powerful voice transcends student demographics, imploring us to reimagine how we guide students to degree completion. The student perspectives on institutional support, proactive advising, course readiness, effective communication, and activating resources speak to the effectiveness of online course sharing at their institution. Campus champions committed to student success should strongly consider students' perspectives and recommendations, regardless of institution type.

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Jamil D. Johnson

"The concluding chapter addresses the critical need of HBCU advocacy at the federal, state, and local level through sustainable public investment and policy strategies. HBCUs are vital to the nation's civil and intellectual development. Notably, the economic impact of HBCUs on communities across the United States cannot be overlooked. The chapter situates the call for sustainable public investment and policy strategies through a contemporary legal and policy examination."

- Jamil D. Johnson

Chapter 8

HBCU Resiliency: The Call for Sustainable Public Investment and Policy Strategies

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Supporting Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is a testimonial to protecting their legacy and continued impact in the community and across the United States. HBCUs are transformational institutions, and as they have survived periods of political unrest and the fight for civil rights, they will continue to endure and adapt. Yet their futures cannot rest on resilience alone. HBCUs are worthy of sustained public investment because they are vital to our economy and to the nation's civic and intellectual development. The economic impact of HBCUs in the United States is significant and cannot be overlooked: they generate $16.5 billion annually in economic impact on communities across the United States and, when we disaggregate further, public HBCUs generate $10.8 billion (or 65%) of the output (McClendon et al. 2024, p. 6). HBCUs produce close to 20% of all bachelor's degrees earned by Black students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, produce graduates into projected lifetime earnings of $146 billion, and support over 134,000 jobs across the United States (UNCF, 2025, p. 9). Additionally, students' interest in HBCUs continues to grow. According to data from an article published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, during the 2022-2023 admission cycle, HBCUs experienced a 30% jump in first-year applications (Bradley, 2024, para. 6). HBCU enrollment continues to see an uptick in applications and are experiencing record enrollment numbers. During the 2023-2024 admissions cycle, Bethune-Cookman University in Florida saw first-year enrollment increase by 41%; Hampton University, a private HBCU in Virginia increased applications by 30%, and Morehouse College, an all-male institution in Atlanta, increased applications by 34% (Knox, 2024, para. 3). This synopsis underscores the critical role of HBCUs not only for students and our communities but also as a vital core of the United States.

Advocating for HBCUs is needed not only at the federal level but also the state and local levels: Representation and voice matters! Equitable and increased funding is critical to sustain HBCUs to improve campus infrastructure, increase scholarships, and provide high-impact and professional development opportunities for students, staff, and faculty. Yet, what we see and experience in higher education today counters this. Institutional governance and autonomy are challenged (Caldwell, 2025), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) related policies are questioned (Hinton et al. 2024), and students are voicing their concerns about the future of HBCUs and higher education (Belizaire, 2025). Federal and state leaders must move beyond recognition and toward targeted, sustainable policy strategies that strengthen infrastructure, research capacity, and student support.

Strengthening the Need for HBCU Sustainability

Legal and policy shifts are continuing to strengthen the need for HBCU sustainability. Through a systematic review of the literature, this section will synthesize contemporary scholarship examining how HBCUs are navigating the various legal and policy shifts and continue to elevate their role and need to support students and community, and their important role in the United States.

Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (2023)

On June 29, 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race-based Affirmative Action programs in college admissions violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment in the Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (2023) case (Pham & Thai, 2024). Alexander (2024, para. 1) noted that this ruling increases the exclusion of Black students from premier educational institutions. As a result, an increased burden rests on HBCUs to provide access to higher education to those who may be affected by the decision.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) legislation and policy shifts

At the same time, legislation and policy shifts around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs have changed funding and support for HBCU programs. On his first day back in office on January 20, 2025, President Trump signed two Executive Orders "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs" (The White House, 2025b) and "Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity" (The White House, 2025a).

Thereafter, there were swift reductions or restructuring of federal agencies and campus departments that once played key roles in supporting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and students with other intersecting identities. On February 14, 2025, a Dear Colleague Letter sent from the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights clarified that the use of racial preference in college admissions is unlawful because of the Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (2023) ruling. Thus, institutions were put on immediate notice that federal law prohibits any institution receiving federal funds from using race in decisions pertaining to "admissions, hiring, promotion, compensation, financial aid, scholarships, prizes, administrative support, discipline, housing, graduation ceremonies, and all other aspects of student, academic, and campus life" (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). As a result, cultural centers, ceremonies, and student unions - which for BIPOC and students with other intersecting identities serve as a multi-generational safe space of celebration and safety for all institutional types across the country - could be in jeopardy (Weissman, 2025c, para. 8).

Like all institutions across the United States, HBCUs are examining their own campus programs, offices, and staff regarding DEI policies and potential loss of federal funding. Further threats are compounded at the state level. For example, West Virginia State University is assessing their institution in alignment with Executive Orders issued by Governor Morrisey. Without dedicated DEI offices, West Virginia State University could face scrutiny over its commitment to diversity in education (Brown, 2025). Further, Florida and Texas upheld and passed anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) bills impacting courses, faculty, staff, and students (Alonso, 2024).

In an interview with InsideHigherEd, Dr. Harry Williams, president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, which represents public HBCUs, noted that HBCUs could barely survive the kinds of funding blows that Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard University have experienced under the Trump Administration. These institutions have lost hundreds of millions to billions of dollars in federal contracts and grants after challenging these new policies (Weissman, 2025a). Dr. Williams further noted in the interview that federal funding losses and the possible demise of the Department of Education could have "existential threats" to some of the smaller, less resourced HBCUs (Weissman, 2025a). Harvard, for example, has resisted the policy changes but also has a massive endowment fund to rely on – approximately $53 billion (Patel & Yoon, 2025).

Funding Structures

Other policy shifts and changes to funding structures also contribute to uncertainty at HBCUs around programs such as federal work-study (NASFAA, 2025), federal Pell-grants (Zampini, 2025), and federal student loans and repayment (Turner, 2025). More recently, Nursing was excluded under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, from its federal definition of "professional degree" programs (Hess, 2025). In a study by Banks et al. (2022), HBCUs graduated 6.7% of all new Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSNs) in 2017. This demonstrates the critical role of HBCUs in the nursing pipeline for students.

Federal TRIO Programs & McNair Scholars Program

Federal TRIO Programs, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, have also faced recent challenges (Alonso, 2025). TRIO programs are a critical support system that serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to persist through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (Federal TRIO Programs, n.d., para. 1). There have also been recent legal challenges to the McNair Scholars Program (Blake, 2025), founded in 1986, in honor of Ronald E. McNair, who died in the Challenger space shuttle disaster. Several HBCUs including Morehouse College, Jackson State University, and North Carolina Central University, have received federal McNair Program grants ("Fourteen HBCUs," 2022). The McNair Scholars Program is a federal TRIO program funded at over 200 institutions across the United States and Puerto Rico designed to prepare undergraduate students for doctoral studies through advanced research and other scholarly activities (McNair Scholars Program, n.d., para. 2). The McNair Scholars Program is another critical support system designed to prepare first-generation college students with financial need, or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate education (McNair Scholars Program, n.d., para. 2).

Federal Grant Funding

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF), both premier extramural federally-funded agencies, have also shifted funding priorities in response to President Trump's Executive Orders (Weissman, 2025b). These policy changes impact student programming at HBCUs. For instance, Florida A&M University (FAMU) has received an annual grant from NIH for the past 40 years to support the university's pharmacy and Research Centers in Minority Institutions to increase its research infrastructure. The NIH terminated the $16.3 million grant on March 21, 2025, on grounds that the "award no longer effectuates agency priorities" (Weissman, 2025a). FAMU is appealing the termination decision (Jean, 2025, para. 8).

Research and Development Funding

The disparity in federal research and development funding for HBCUs is alarming; the share to HBCUs averages under 1% (0.91%; Stamps, 2025, para.1). In 2023, 17 of the 43 federal agencies that supply research funding did not award HBCUs any R&D funds at all (Weissman, 2025b, para. 3). R&D funds are critical, as they strengthen HBCUs research, infrastructure, support of faculty, students, academic programs, operations, and advance their Carnegie R1 research status. Howard University is the only HBCU to achieve Carnegie R1 research status, earned in February 2025, an institution's honor meaning highest level of research production (Mobley, 2025).

Title III funds are the most essential federal grants for HBCUs as they increase faculty support, student services, laboratory equipment, acquiring property, construction, campus maintenance, and other resources as authorized by the Higher Education Act. (UNCF, 2025, para. 4). Combined with existing funding approved by Congress for HBCUs, the total award stands at $1.38 billion for fiscal year 2025, a 48% increase over the

prior amount (UNCF, 2025, para. 2).

Yet, to address the disparities of funding at the federal level, it would take a concerted effort for those in leadership positions to level the playing field and be much more vocal in support of HBCUs.

UNCF Gift

More recently, there have been some substantial philanthropic gifts to HBCUs. Billionaire Mackenzie Scott donated $70 million to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) in September 2025. Each UNCF member school will receive $10 million from the financial lump sum paid out at approximately 4% annually (Fields, 2025, para. 6). Not every HBCU institution is a UNCF member and will benefit from this influx of financial resources.

State Representation and Visibility

While HBCUs have been navigating challenging policy and funding environments, there have also been steps to increase HBCU visibility through lawmakers to increase support for HBCU policy and funding. In 2018, Tennessee became the first state to appoint a full-time statewide higher education official specifically dedicated to HBCU institutions (Sequeira, 2025, para. 30). In 2023, North Carolina created a bipartisan, bicameral HBCU caucus to support its ten HBCUs, known as the NC10, to bring greater visibility to their $1.7 billion annual economic impact (Sequeira, 2025, para. 26). Tennessee and North Carolina have taken notable steps by establishing a state-level HBCU position and caucus, signaling increased structural consideration of HBCU perspectives in state policy (Sequeira, 2025; Archie, 2023). While these actions represent meaningful progress, the long-term outcomes of these decisions have yet to be fully realized. As a result, further evaluation is needed to determine the effectiveness of these state actions.

HBCUs Shape and Cultivate Policy and Civic Leaders

HBCUs have a long legacy of producing leaders in public service and government. Their graduates have broken barriers in the federal government and held cabinet positions in U.S. presidential administrations and state executive cabinets. Some of these HBCU graduates include Stacey Abrams, Mike Epsy, Alexis Herman, Ron Brown, Patricia Roberts-Harris, Raphael Warnock, Kendrick Meek, James Clyburn, Letitia James, and Douglas Wilder, who is the only HBCU graduate elected as governor (Virginia). This list is not exhaustive, there are numerous other prominent HBCU graduates that have broken barriers in public service, government, civil rights, and law (Gibson, 2024).

"The First HBCU President" of the United States

Former Vice President Kamala Harris, a Howard University alumna, announced her candidacy for United States President on July 21, 2024. Harris proclaimed she would be "the first HBCU president" in a historic run that would elevate HBCUs further into the spotlight given her platform (Nittle, 2024, para. 3). As the first Black American, first woman to be Vice President of the United States, and first presidential nominee from a major political party to have also graduated from an HBCU, her candidacy placed an even greater spotlight on HBCUs during a critical time (Cochran & Daniels, 2024, para. 1).

Conclusion

HBCUs are essential cornerstones in the broader higher education landscape. They represent approximately 3% of colleges and universities, and more than 70% of HBCU students are federal Pell Grant eligible according to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF, n.d.a., para. 7). HBCUs have produced 40% of all Black engineers, 50% of all Black teachers, 70% of all Black doctors and dentists, and 80% of all Black judges across the United States, and they foster more upward mobility when compared to most U.S. colleges (UNCF, n.d.b, para. 1). Approximately 30% of HBCU students move up at least two income quintiles compared to 18% for non-HBCU

students (The White House, 2024, para. 4).

As noted earlier, federal and state leaders must move beyond simply recognizing HBCUs and move toward targeted, sustainable policy strategies that will strengthen infrastructure, research capacity, and student support. While policies reshape higher education in ways we are still learning to fully grasp, HBCUs continue to move forward, navigating these pressures on top of long-standing resource constraints. As demonstrated in this special issue, HBCUs play a key role in student success and community building and have a significant economic impact in the United States.

Peace and Love,
J. Diovanni
(Jamil)

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Acknowledgements

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Jamil holds a BA in history from the University of Illinois, an M.A. in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Illinois, and a PhD in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Illinois. Prior to joining the faculty at USC, he was on the faculty in the Higher Education Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and previously served in administrative roles in student affairs leading the first-year experience and first-year seminars at the University of Central Florida (UCF).