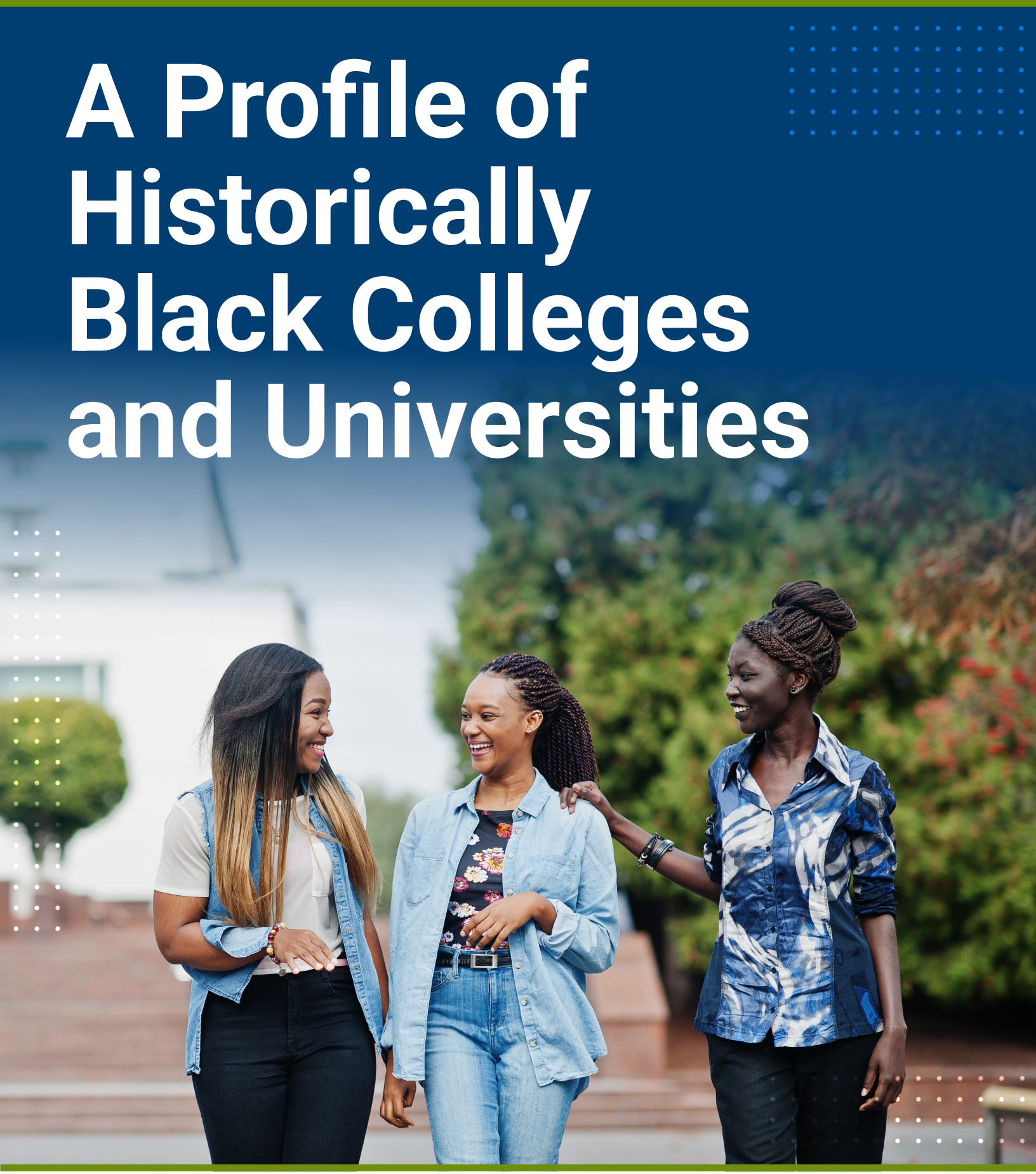
A Profile of Historically Black Colleges and Universities



everylearner everywhere

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A thank you to our reviewers: **Jessica Rowland Williams**, Ph.D., Senior Director of Client Service Delivery of the National Institute for Student Success (NISS) at Georgia State University; **Jana Walser-Smith**, J.D., Director, Interstate Compliance and SAN Member Outreach, State Authorization Network; **Kathy H. Thompson**, Ph.D., Director, Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE) at the University of South Alabama; and **Emma Sullivan**, Every Learner Research Assistant and Graduate of Georgia State University

Recommended Citation:

Fleming, A., and O'Sullivan, P. (2025). *A Profile of Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. Every Learner Everywhere. https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/a-profile-of-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/

Every Learner Everywhere is a network of partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students; poverty-affected students; and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centered on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. WCET (the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) and WICHE (the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) serve as the intermediary organizations for the Every Learner Everywhere Network. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

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Introduction

Every Learner Everywhere was awarded a grant to collaborate with other higher education service providers to offer professional development for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and other minority serving institutions (MSIs). In order to help providers of services better understand the needs of these institutions, Every Learner has been tasked with providing profiles of each type of institution based on current literature, government and advocacy organization publications, and conversations with faculty, staff, and students. A special emphasis of this series of profiles is on the opportunities and challenges of digital learning at each institutional type.

OF SPECIAL NOTE

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's identities might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.[1] It is important to acknowledge that many students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities hold intersectional racial identities.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Care and Support, Culture and Environment, and Community and Pride

This profile examines the student experience at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Historians, educational researchers, and journalists have noted differences between the Black student experiences at HBCUs and other types of higher education institutions. These differentiations center on services of *care and support* for the whole person; a *culture and environment* that recognizes, centers, and celebrates the many ways people experience Blackness; and building *community and pride* between students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Black students are thriving at HBCUs. Compared to their peers attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and predominantly Black institutions (PBIs), they are graduating at higher rates,[2] they report greater satisfaction with their educational experience, they have greater opportunities to develop professional networks and gain professional skills while still in college,[3] and they are more economically mobile after graduation.[4, 5]

It may seem obvious to observe that Black students tend to succeed in schools that center Blackness, but the fact is that HBCUs have historically been unvalued and thus underfunded, making them less resourced in terms of campus facilities and their ability to offer financial aid to their students. In addition, HBCUs accept more students who are eligible for Pell grants—about 70 percent as opposed to the national average of 34 percent. HBCUs also accept more first-generation students, about 52 percent as opposed to 33 percent of the national average.[6] In other words, HBCU students have far fewer institutional and family resources to help them address the cost of college and navigate the culture of college. Despite these financial challenges, HBCUs have a strong track record of guiding students through the postsecondary process to ensure their academic and professional success.

In 2021, although they represented just 3 percent of higher education institutions in the country, HBCUs granted undergraduate degrees to 13 percent of all Black students in college. A remarkable 25 percent of those graduates have STEM degrees.[8]

BY THE NUMBERS

102
INSTITUTIONS

289,000[7]
STUDENTS

80% of **Black Judges**

70% of **Black Doctors**

50% of **Black Lawyers**

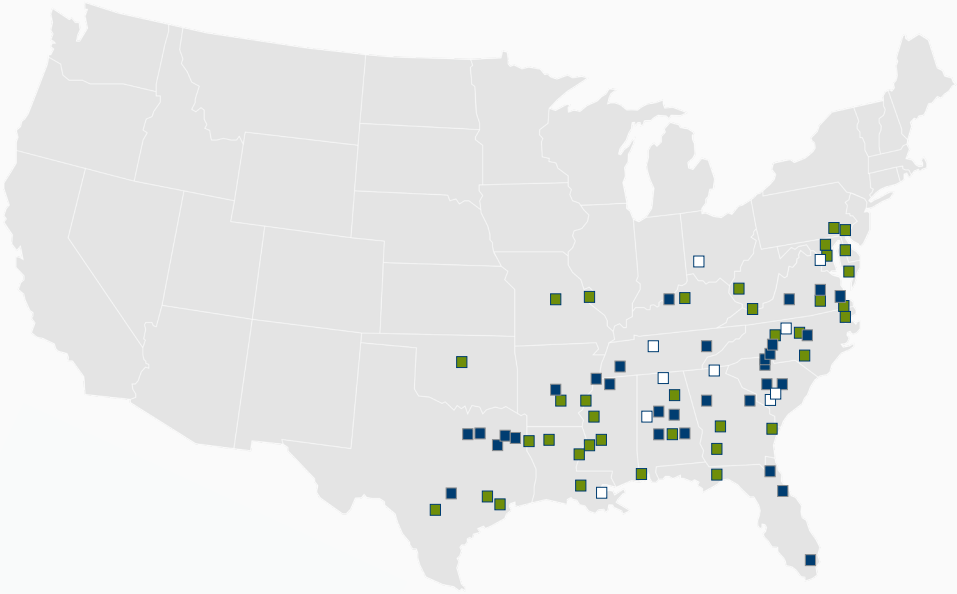
40% of **Black Engineers**

40% of **Black Congress Members**

...attended an HBCU.[9, 10]

HBCU LOCATIONS

- *indicates a city with one or more public institutions*
- *indicates a city with one or more private institutions*
- *indicates a city with both public and private institutions*



Uwe Dedering, 2022

Definition of HBCUs

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), "Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are institutions that were established prior to 1964 with the principal mission of educating Black Americans. These institutions were founded and developed in an environment of legal segregation and, by providing access to higher education, they contributed substantially to the progress Black Americans made in improving their status."[11, 12] Most HBCUs are located in the Southeastern United States, because that is where the majority of Black Americans lived during the 100-year period of their founding. The Black population was larger in this region of the country (and still is today) because of the legality of chattel slavery in those states between 1619 and 1865.[13]

Because HBCUs are historical institutions, their numbers have not increased since 1964, even as nearly 20 of these schools have closed for various reasons. However, it should be noted that more than half of those that have closed, the "magnificent 12," were junior colleges established in Florida in 1949 that were shut down or merged into predominantly white institutions (PWIs) after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.[14] HBCUs should not be equated with predominantly Black institutions (PBIs), which achieve that status based on a percentage

of enrollment of Black students. PBIs were defined by Congress in 2008 as undergraduate institutions that enroll 40 percent or more Black students in degree-granting programs.[15] PBIs do not have a specific mission to educate Black students, and most of them were previously PWIs that underwent a change in the racial composition of their student population but have not necessarily changed the culture of the institution to meet the needs of Black students.[16] The difference between the two types of institutions is summarized by Krystal Williams and her co-authors in their 2021 article "Centering Blackness: An Examination of Culturally-Affirming Pedagogy and Practices Enacted by HBCU Administrators and Faculty Members." They write, "Black colleges and universities [HBCUs] remain vital as bastions of Black culture in the United States, with the ever evolving need to understand and connect with the current social realities of Black communities."[17]

It is important to note that HBCUs do not restrict enrollment to only Black students or employment to exclusively Black faculty and staff. In fact, because they often are an affordable option, non-Black students are increasingly enrolling at HBCUs. According to NCES, "The composition of HBCUs has changed over time. In 2022, non-Black students made up 24 percent of enrollment at HBCUs, compared with 15 percent in 1976."[18]

Characteristics of HBCUs: Care and Support, Culture and Environment, and Community and Pride

Care and Support

Because HBCUs were established to educate Black students, with the twin goals of creating pathways for upward economic mobility and nurturing Black excellence and pride, they place great emphasis on nurturing and lifting up students. Care at HBCUs is expressed in multiple ways that involve a safe and welcoming campus environment, mentoring programs, relationship building between students and faculty, support services, and affordability. Smaller class sizes and closer faculty-student relationships contribute to a more personalized learning experience.

Support for Black students at HBCUs is demonstrated through various means, including academic, social, and financial support structures that are tailored to their unique needs. Some key ways this support is provided include a culturally relevant curriculum and environment, academic support, financial support, social and emotional support, career development, leadership development, and family and community engagement.

HBCUs offer Black students a space in which they can feel safe and valued. Derrell Taylor was Student Government Association President at Tennessee State University (TSU) during the 2023–2024 academic school year. He says of his alma mater, "I chose to attend an HBCU because I wanted to enter into an environment [where I would be completely received as] a real person and not a number."[19] Dr. Tasha Andrews-Carson, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs at TSU, echoed that sentiment: "HBCUs provide something for Black students that can never be recreated or imitated. HBCUs equip students to, even if just for a few years, be the majority in every room, space, and table. Our institutions give Black students a sense of family and identity, pride in who they are and how they look, and the confidence to go out and face the rest of the world."[20]

Mentorship programs at HBCUs play a crucial role in supporting students academically, personally, and professionally. Having mentors who understand the unique challenges faced by Black students can positively impact their educational journey. Many organizations provide mentoring to Black high school students in collaboration with HBCUs, including the Atlanta-based HBCU Rising, Virginia's community-based tutoring program, and the Seattle-based WHOLE (With Hope Our Lives Excel) mentoring program. There are also many national mentoring programs for HBCU students, including HBCU Day-One-Ready and Career Readiness and Mentoring program. However, HBCU students primarily benefit from faculty and staff mentoring on campus. According to a recent article in *Times Higher Education* and drawing from a 2015 Gallup survey,[21]

> **"The teaching-intensive nature of HBCUs provides students with more opportunities to engage with faculty, contributing to a greater likelihood of mentoring relationships. Mentoring at HBCUs extends beyond the traditional academic adviser role to a familial nature, where mentors express genuine care and concern for students as individuals. Faculty commitments include helping with class schedules, providing emotional support, attending students' family events, ensuring students are well prepared for job interviews, and much more."[22]**

HBCU faculty value relationship building with students, and this is easier for Black students at HBCUs, where the faculty is more likely to share life experiences with them. According to the NCES, in 2021, 6 percent of faculty at U.S. colleges and universities were Black,[23] while a 2001 report cited that the faculty at HBCUs was 60 percent Black.[24] According to a 2015 Gallup survey, HBCU graduates credit faculty and mentors for their success. "More than one in three Black HBCU graduates (35%) strongly agree that they had a professor who cared about them as a person, a professor who made them excited about learning, and a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams; only 12% of Black non-HBCU graduates strongly agree they had all three experiences."[25]

Having a diverse faculty that reflects the student body can contribute to a more inclusive educational experience. It provides students with diverse role models and perspectives. HBCUs employ dedicated and experienced faculty and staff who are committed to the success of Black students, and because many HBCU faculty members are Black themselves, they understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Black students.

HBCUs demonstrate care for students by providing support services that are culturally affirming and personally validating.[26] Many HBCUs offer specialized support services, such as tutoring, counseling, and academic advising, to help students navigate the challenges of higher education successfully.[27] Student retention services include programs for first- and second-year students as well as transfer students. Some schools even have outreach programs for families to support student success.[28] In an interview with one of the authors, Dr. Tasha Andrews-Carson talked about how her office supports first-year students:

> **"The Office of First-Year Experience is a hub for cultivating and engaging new students on our campus. Here, in the Office of FYE, we believe that student engagement is one of the greatest predictors of academic success and persistence. Students who take advantage of opportunities through our office have a greater chance to thrive—in and out of the classroom. Much of today's research proves that engaged students are more connected to their campus community, develop more personal skills, and have a more positive overall well-being. Our team works very hard to create that opportunity for first-year students."**

A promising external student support program was launched in 2022 when the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the Partnership for Education Advancement began a four-year initiative to provide services to over 11,000 students at sixteen public HBCUs. The program has a dual purpose of helping institutions build capacity to continue services to students post-initiative and providing one-on-one coaching to students. The coaching is designed to help students "work to clarify their academic, career, and personal goals; identify potential obstacles and a plan to overcome them; and stay motivated as they encounter challenges on the path to completion."[29]

Care at HBCUs is also expressed by making a post-secondary degree affordable for Black families. Tuition at HBCUs is often lower than at comparable non-HBCU schools.[30] However, student debt is still a real problem for HBCU graduates.[31] HBCUs often have robust financial aid programs and scholarships that are specifically designed to support Black students. This helps reduce financial barriers to education. According to NCES, full-time, first-time undergraduate students enrolled at HBCUs are more eligible for federal financial aid, compared with full-time, first-time students attending all institutions (77 percent vs. 70 percent).[32] In addition, "the average federal grant amount for students enrolled in private, not-for-profit four-year HBCUs was $3,200, and the comparable average for all private, not-for-profit four-year schools was $2,900."[33] Institutional support for students at public HBCUs is higher than the national average, although it is lower for students at private HBCUs.[34]

Culture and Environment

While HBCU culture is inimitable, across HBCU institutions researchers have noted how they promote awareness of and pride in Black culture, Black history, the accomplishments of Black people collectively and individually, and Black contributions to all areas of life, but especially to social and political justice movements. HBCUs offer culturally relevant curricula and extracurricular activities, they nurture a sense of belonging in the academy and also in academic disciplines, and they provide students with an immersive experience of living in a community that both centers and celebrates Blackness.[35] Derrell Taylor said of his experience at TSU,

> **"I feel like [HBCUs], such as Tennessee State University, are successful in helping students thrive and flourish, [because being both Black and successful are the standard for excellence]. As I have been in a lot of rooms where I've been able to look up to people that I have seen do [incredible things] or I have seen become something of themselves, well, it is a lot easier to be inspired when that someone looks like you, or when they've been through the same things that you've been through."**

HBCUs often incorporate a curriculum that reflects the cultural and historical experiences of Black students. This can enhance engagement and a sense of belonging and helps Black students connect with the material and feel more engaged in their education. Dr. Kyle Patrick Murray, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Alumnus of TSU, said in a recent interview, "HBCUs provide course options—particularly General Education options—that put specific focus on Black history, Black literature, Black politics, etc., in ways that many PWIs [predominantly white institutions] cannot accommodate or have the faculty to cover."[36] Recent TSU graduate Anissia Fleming writes,

> **"I have greatly benefited from taking multiple classes centered around the Black population—Black Politics, Black Arts and Literature, and African American Philosophy to name a few. These courses are necessary in equipping students with the knowledge and tools needed in order to succeed in advancing intellectually and thriving in the post-graduate world as well as understanding aspects of life from different points of view as a Black person in the United States of America."[37]**

HBCUs also provide culturally relevant experiences to their students and alumni. One of the most beloved HBCU experiences is homecoming. According to an essay in BestColleges.com, "While many university homecomings come and go without much notice, homecomings at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are annual events that everyone circles on their calendars."[38] The HBCU homecoming experience is so deeply rooted in HBCU culture that in 2022 the National Museum of African American History & Culture featured it in exhibits and events.[39] Although this particular exhibit is no longer on display, it is a permanent part of the museum's web page as part of the history of HBCUs.[40] Another resource for understanding the significance of homecoming is The Road to Homecoming, a four-part series produced by HBCU GO and Ford, Inc. Many of the most memorable HBCU cultural events happen during

homecoming, including step shows, tailgate, the homecoming parade, the homecoming football game, coronation (the official installment of the Royal Court), marching band performances, and halftime shows featuring music, dance, and the presentation of the Student Government Association President and Vice President and the Royal Court.

Ashley Little is the CEO and founder of The HBCU Experience Movement, a series of books capturing the stories of HBCU Alumni about their college experiences. While most of the books focus on individual schools, Little has produced two books highlighting HBCU marching bands.[41] HBCU marching bands are famous all over the world for their movement away from military-style formation and music to incorporating dance and popular music in their performances. Two showcases for HBCU marching bands are the Honda Battle of the Bands in Atlanta, Georgia, and the National Battle of the Bands in Houston, Texas. Dr. Little also gathered stories from the Royal Court's kings and queens because of their importance in the HBCU experience. The Royal Court is elected by the student body based on several criteria, including academic standing and engagement with or service to the school. The kings and queens and other members of the student government spend the following year representing the school at external events and representing the student body on campus.[42]

Another feature of the homecoming is the step show. According to the National Museum of African American History, "Stepping, a ritual dance performance based on synchronized movements and linked to African cultural traditions, originated among Black fraternities in the mid-1900s."[43] The Divine Nine consists of nine historically Black fraternities and sororities founded between 1906 and 1963 when Black students were allowed to enroll at PWIs but were not always welcome there. Greek life enabled these students to find community and support.[44] Today, fraternities and sororities at HBCUs develop step routines to express the community and spirit of their organizations. The nine Black fraternities and sororities exude another layer of Black excellence.

The significance of the Yard at HBCUs cannot be overstated. It is the epicenter of campus culture and often treated as a sacred space. According to One Yard, a virtual gathering space that shares information about HBCU homecomings, "The Yard is a celebration of unapologetic Blackness. It's the gathering place on campus where students can hang out, catch up between classes, break intellectual bread, get it in at the campus party, or fall in love. The Yard helped fuel the Civil Rights Movement of the '50s and '60s."[45] Today, the Yard has remained a pivotal area on HBCU campuses; it plays a critical role in ensuring students make the most out of their four-year college experiences. From Greek Row to the Old and New Courtyards and much more, each HBCU has its own take on this historically coined term, which shaped HBCUs then and uniquely embodies it in their own way today.

Political and social advocacy is also an integral part of the HBCU experience. HBCUs have a strong emphasis on social justice and activism, encouraging students to become advocates for positive change in their communities. Writes Emma Sullivan, student advocate and research assistant at Every Learner Everywhere, "Students at HBCUs were at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and social justice movements from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries."[46] The impact of HBCUs on social justice movements is documented by the National Museum of African American History & Culture, which highlights the role HBCUs have played in five particular eras: post-Reconstruction, the early twentieth–century period of Black prosperity in certain urban areas, the post–World War I New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–1970s, and the Black Lives Matter movement that began in 2020.[47] In each of these periods, and throughout their history, HBCUs have trained Black leaders, raised the consciousness of Black students about race issues, nurtured Black arts and entrepreneurship, challenged Jim Crow and other segregation laws and policies, and housed Black think tanks and intellectual centers.[48]

The use of honorifics is a widely accepted practice at HBCUs. The campus community as well as visitors are expected to address those holding a doctorate or those with a medical degree as *Dr.*; to use *Rev.* for ordained clergy; and to use *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, and *Ms.* rather than first names. The tradition of using honorifics is a way to show respect for a person's professional accomplishments. When students are addressed with an honorific, it conveys to them a sense of maturity and purpose: that they are not children, but adults in the campus community. What's more is the sense of acceptance, equality, and respect brought forth by the use of honorifics. It calls attention to the status that was once denied to Black people in the United States and that Black people are still progressing toward.

Community and Pride

HBCUs provide a unique sense of community and belonging for Black students, who often feel marginalized and isolated in predominantly white institutions.[49] This sense of community is fostered through various activities and events, such as engagement with the greater community in which the HBCU is located, mentorship programs, and student organizations. Krystal Williams writes of this connection between the schools and local communities: "HBCU administrators and faculty members suggested that one of their greatest assets is generating a strong sense of connection to Black populations outside of the institution—not only to those in its immediate proximity, but also to larger communities of Black people."[50]

According to the Community Development Action Coalition (CDAC), "Most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are located in or near underserved communities where many residents lack access to high-paying jobs, quality schools, or other economic advantages."[51] The CDAC works with school and community leaders, students, and business owners to build economic opportunities in the local community. The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Historically Black Colleges & Universities Grant Program provides grants to HBCUs "to partner with local and national organizations and businesses to revitalize local economies, generate employment opportunities, and rebuild communities."[52] One particular example of the impact of this program occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina:

> **"When Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana in 2005, numerous HBCUs worked with HUD to assist in the recovery efforts. They provided a range of services, including homeownership counseling, assistance with rebuilding and restoring houses and commercial buildings, operating daycare centers and summer camps, coordinating neighborhood cleanup projects, and sponsoring community health fairs."[53]**

A 2016 article in *HBCU Lifestyle* featured several community outreach programs, including Fayetteville State University's partnership with Campus Kitchen to provide nutritious meals to the local community; Paul Quinn College's WE Over Me Farm, which provides low-cost and organic produce to the local community; and the Morgan Community Mile, a collaboration between Morgan State University and the city of Baltimore to improve education, the environment, and the economic health of the neighborhoods adjoining the university.[54]

HBCUs tend to have strong alumni networks that actively engage with the local community and current students, providing mentorship, networking opportunities, and financial support. Lady Buds, a program based out of the Spelman College Office of Alumnae Engagement, pairs teen girls in Atlanta with an alumna member who mentors them with the goal of advancing their educational and personal goals.[55] Mentoring Brothers in Action is a mentoring program that pairs boys from Big Brothers Big Sisters with college students who are members of three Black fraternities: Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, and Omega Psi Phi. The National Association of HBCU Students and Alumni has a mentoring program for current HBCU students, the United Negro College Fund's (UNCF) National Alumni Council provides leadership training and mentoring to its members, and Divine Nine organizations are frequent partners for fundraising and volunteer work with local chapters of the United Way, St. Jude's Hospital, and the YMCA.

HBCUs often provide leadership opportunities for students, fostering the development of skills that go beyond the academic realm. This can include involvement in student organizations, community service, and campus governance. Derrell Taylor said of his leadership development at TSU,

> **"It's seldom [when] you see Black people in leadership, and being [at] an HBCU places you in the environment to see successful Black leaders, educators, authors, and musicians [frequently]. We have a culture on our campus of keeping things that we are, and/or that we aspire to be or do, close to our hearts, and it just helps me develop a [leadership] strategy upon [where being analytical and intentional are a priority]. You must know the people that you aspire to serve. You must know what they want, what they expect, and what their needs, desires, and expectations are."**

This leadership extends well beyond graduation. Despite their small numbers compared to Black graduates of non-HBCUs, HBCU alumni are overrepresented as leaders in politics and public service, arts and entertainment, business, the sciences, law, journalism, and sports.[56]

Lastly, HBCUs help Black students gain a sense of pride in their university through several intentional strategies using branding and identity, success stories and role models, and engagement with history and legacy. While this pride is rooted in culture, legacy, and strength, it endures for a lifetime.

Challenges for HBCUs

In 2023, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Thomas Vilsack informed governors of 16 states that they had been underfunding their land-grant HBCUs by over $12 billion as compared to state funding for non-HBCU land grant institutions in those states.[57] In a letter to the governors, Cardona wrote,

> **"Unacceptable funding inequities have forced many of our nation's distinguished Historically Black Colleges and Universities to operate with inadequate resources and delay critical investments in everything from campus infrastructure to research and development to student support services."**

According to Dr. Tasha Andrews-Carson, this underfunding affects recruitment as well:

> **"Funding impacts our recruitment, our retention, and our reach. Our institutions are largely made up of Black students who come to us from families that are already on the wrong side of the generational wealth gap. Many of our state-supported HBCUs have been underfunded as government leaders withheld decades of money because they have never intended for our schools to be equally supported."**

Some of the funding issues are the result of stereotypes and misconceptions about HBCUs. Adam Parrot-Sheffer argues in his essay in *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Triumphs, Troubles, and Taboos* that television portrayals of HBCUs depict them as not academically rigorous.[58] Media outlets sometimes describe underfunded HBCUs as mismanaged and in need of handouts,[59, 60] and even accrediting organizations withhold or revoke accreditation of HBCUs due to debt and mismanagement of funds.[61] Underfunding has also given an opening to state governments interfering in HBCU governance with the argument that they are saving the institution from financial peril.[62]

A second challenge that affects the reputability and credibility of HBCUs is the negative comparisons of Historically Black Colleges and Universities to predominantly white institutions. The HBCUs versus PWIs narrative is false in that both types of institutions strive to achieve the same goal: providing post-secondary education. The only valid comparison of the two types of institutions concerns funding. Data shows that HBCUs represent 3 percent of higher education institutions in the United States, enroll 16 percent of all Black higher education students, and award 24 percent of all baccalaureate degrees earned by Black people nationwide. Nevertheless, HBCUs historically have been and continue to be less funded than their PWI counterparts. The underfunding of HBCUs creates problems with infrastructure, resources, and financial insecurity that many use to argue against the value of HBCUs.

A third challenge for HBCUs is one they've experienced since opening their doors: violence and threats to the campus, students, and faculty. In her opening remarks to a congressional oversight committee, U.S. representative Ayanna Pressley noted the history of violence at HBCUs:

> **"Our HBCUs have been sources of community pride, the epicenters of Black brilliance, and yes, the constant targets of white supremacists, dating as far back as 1865, when arsonists killed forty-six Black people at LeMoyne-Owen College in Tennessee, to the 1960s when Fisk University and North Carolina A&T [University] received numerous bomb threats."[63]**

Those threats reached a peak in early 2022, when over fifty bomb threats were made against nearly twenty HBCUs across the country.[64] A year later, four schools received bomb threats.[65] In a statement announcing a series of grants to HBCUs to allow them to respond to threats, Secretary Cardona said, "The bomb threats last year that targeted several Historically Black Colleges and Universities traumatized their campus communities, disrupted learning, and drained resources by prompting costly campus lockdowns, class cancellations, and law enforcement activities."

While these challenges are ongoing, HBCU enrollment is rising[66] and recent philanthropic donations to HBCUs have boosted their profile and their economic stability.[67, 68]

Digital Learning at HBCUs

Digital learning is the use of technology to enable pedagogical practices and strategies in teaching and learning.[69] It includes a broad range of tools to engage and assess students across all learning modalities, including face-to-face, blended, and online learning environments.

Equitable digital learning takes an anti-deficit approach to teaching, learning, course design, and classroom climate. It prioritizes a sense of belonging in the class, the discipline, and the field for students historically excluded from these spaces. Equitable digital learning designs courses for inclusion, access, and success and utilizes teaching and assessment strategies that benefit racially minoritized and poverty-affected students. This section of the profile will explore the unique opportunities and challenges presented by digital learning at HBCUs, while highlighting innovative ways HBCUs are utilizing digital learning to create learning environments based on care and support, culture and environment, and community and pride for their students.

Opportunities of Digital Learning at HBCUs

Digital learning provides increased access and flexibility for students. Fully online degree programs, which cater to diverse learning styles and needs, make it easier for geographically dispersed Black students to earn degrees from an HBCU. According to HBCU Lifestyle, a one-stop website for choosing, applying to, engaging with, and giving to HBCUs,

> **"In response to evolving educational needs and technological advancements, HBCUs are now also leading in online education, providing flexible and accessible degree programs. This shift allows students to experience the unique ethos of HBCUs through a modern, digital lens."[70]**

The website features 25 HBCUs that offer fully online degree programs at all levels of education, including associate degrees, undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, and professional certificates. In 2024, *Forbes Advisor* ranked undergraduate online programs at HBCUs and found that ten schools met their "best" criteria. Each of the ten schools has five or more undergraduate degree programs online and scored 70 percent or above against 17 data points within the categories of "credibility, affordability, student outcomes, student experience, and application process."[71] According to *Forbes Adviser*, HBCUs offer good value and are inclusive of all learners.

Digital tools can provide data-driven insights that help personalize learning and address learning challenges specific to Black student populations. In 2015, 13 institutions were selected to form the Frontier Set. They received grants and services for institutional transformation in a variety of areas, including leveraging data and digital learning to improve teaching and learning in gateway courses.[72] Within the Frontier Set was a cohort of six HBCUs: Claflin University, Delaware State University, Fayetteville State University, Johnson C. Smith University, Jackson State University, and Morehouse University. Each institution addressed different needs based on their individual culture and capacity.[73] According to a report on the disaggregated HBCU Frontier Set experience, the HBCU cohort achieved its goal of "improving student outcomes and continuing progress toward closing success gaps at member campuses and systems."[74]

As a member of the Frontier Set, Fayetteville State University (FSU) had "implemented a systematic data reporting process to supplement its student success efforts and ensure data-driven decision-making."[75] Now they are using what they've learned to leverage data for student success in gateway courses. As part of their quality enhancement plan, FSU has scaled adoption of adaptive courseware in over a dozen gateway courses in a program called *Student Success: Adaptive Learning in General Education Courses*.[76] The goal of the program is to decrease D-grade, Fail-grade, and Withdrawal (DFW) rates by 8 percent over the course of their five-year implementation plan.[77] Faculty and students in the program are using data from the courseware dashboard to track progress, identify knowledge gaps, and adjust learning strategies.

Digital resources and collaborations are helping HBCUs overcome funding limitations and share best practices. In 2020, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) launched the Institute for Capacity Building (ICB), an initiative to bring together HBCUs to expand capacity, support each other, and learn from each other. The Covid-19 pandemic helped bring to focus the need for HBCUs to step up their online learning programs. According to a blog post in WCET Frontiers,

> **"As they reviewed the challenges HBCUs face when it comes to digital learning, ICB realized that there was no technology that truly fit into the HBCU method of educating students. And that method contributes significantly to the extraordinary results for Black students, especially those who are first generation and lower income. ICB had an opportunity to build an online learning system by and for HBCUs."[78]**

In 2024, ICB launched HBCUv, which is, according to its website,

> **"a virtual learning platform that reimagines Black higher education, with a visionary future for learning that is authentic, integrated, and community-centered. Not only does HBCUv reduce barriers to access across HBCUs, it provides a much-needed collaborative space that's true to the Black experience in higher-ed and beyond."[79]**

The platform hosts a variety of resources for faculty, staff, and students—information about the HBCU impact on students, engagement and donation portals, and HBCUv's research on what they found to be the eight defining characteristics of HBCUs. In fall 2024, HBCUv will open its course catalog for students at HBCUs to take online classes developed by nine HBCU Development Partner Institutions. By 2030, HBCUv hopes to welcome all 102 HBCUs onto the platform.[80]

Another course sharing initiative among HBCUs is already underway. In May 2022, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) launched the HBCU-MSI Course-Sharing Consortium, a collaboration among HBCUs and MSIs to share online courses.[81] The consortium of 30 schools provides access to a course-sharing platform powered through Acadeum. Students at any consortium school now have access to hundreds of online courses.[82] The collaboration has enabled participating schools to move more students to graduation and to save costs in offering low-enrollment specialized courses at their own institutions.

Not only are HBCUs using digital technologies to expand access to the HBCU experience, they are using it to enhance the HBCU experience. In 2023, eight HBCUs took part in a virtual college fair for high school students. This event was sponsored by HBCU Night, a nonprofit organization that "creates awareness for Historically Black Colleges & Universities and advocates for progression in the Black and Brown communities."[83] Watch the Yard is a multi-platform virtual community focused on celebrating Black fraternities and sororities and allowing alumni to stay in touch and keep abreast of what is happening in the Black Greek community. According to Essence magazine, as of July 2023 Watch the Yard had 1.68 million followers and was reaching 12 million people per month.[84]

Schools such as Florida A&M University (FAMU), Alabama A&M University (AAMU), and Morehouse College are using virtual reality (VR) to help students engage with their campus in the metaverse.[85, 86, 87] Morehouse and AAMU offer VR campus tours on their digital twin campuses, powered by VictoryXR. The FAMU virtual reality experience, called Rattlerverse, is housed within Meta Horizon Worlds. According to a FAMU press release,

> **"The Rattlerverse provides visitors with an array of experiences, including playing football on the Rattlerverse field, marching like a FAMU Marching '100' Band Drum Major, and even taking the stage in the Rattlerverse edition of Will Packer's Amphitheater."[88]**

HBCUs are also employing VR to enhance learning experiences on campus. In 2021, Morehouse College appointed Dr. Muhsinah Lateefah Morris as its first ever Metaversity Director. Two years later, under her direction, the college launched its first VR course, History of

the African Diaspora Since 1800, developed by history professor Ovell Hamilton in partnership with VictoryXR.[89, 90] According to a CNN profile in June 2023, Morehouse offers 13 courses with VR.[91] Another VR collaboration, between the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and Winston-Salem State University, is a nursing school training program that simulates common interactions for nurses.[92] Two primary goals of the VR experience are improving student retention and graduation and mitigating nursing shortages in the state of North Carolina. Fisk University in Nashville is using VR in STEM labs and classes and is looking to expand its use in non-STEM classes.[93] On the Morning You Wake is an immersive storytelling experience through VR that is based on the false missile warning to the citizens of Hawai'i in 2018. Screenings are held at educational institutions around the world. In 2022, Florida A&M University's School of Journalism & Graphic Communication partnered with the creators of the immersive documentary Games for Change to research best practices for using VR technology to tell stories and engage audiences.[94] Bowie University in Maryland has invested in a VR lab to "introduce students to Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) hardware, software, and provide an opportunity for them to apply this knowledge to applications for education, modeling, simulation, and games."[95]

Another digital learning trend, artificial intelligence (AI), is taking HBCUs by storm. Tennessee State University has heavily invested in preparing faculty and students to use AI. The institution has a dedicated Innovation Technology Center, which serves as a portal for faculty development, AI tool overviews, AI research, and community outreach. In 2023, Dr. Robbie Melton, founder and director of the TSU SMART Technology Center,[96] held an AI discovery event that was open to the public.[97] In 2024, she offered the AI for ALL Open Education Summit[98] through the AI Institute for Interdisciplinary Education and Research. These technology events are a reminder of the history of outreach of HBCUs to local communities.

While at Coppin State University, Dr. Leshell Hatley founded the Lab for Artificial Intelligence and its Applications (LAIA). According to Dr. Hatley, "LAIA is the first AI research lab at an HBCU, where I taught undergraduate and graduate students AI, machine learning, and robotics concepts and their related research methodologies."[99] With funding from the Department of Defense,[100] Morgan State University in Maryland established the Center for Equitable AI and Machine Learning Systems (CEAMLS). The mission of the center is to "facilitate the development, deployment, and verification of socially responsible and equitable artificial intelligence systems and to ensure the public is well-informed of how evolving technologies in this space affect their health, prosperity, and happiness."[101]

Challenges of Digital Learning at HBCUs

While it is important to celebrate these exciting developments in digital learning and digital technologies at HBCUs, challenges remain. Many students face barriers to equal access to technology and reliable internet, creating barriers to online learning. Biases in algorithms and content still need to be addressed. Faculty at HBCUs need ongoing professional development programs to equip them with skills for effectively integrating technology into their teaching while preserving the unique pedagogical strengths of HBCUs. And finally, data privacy issues mean that robust cybersecurity measures must be put in place and maintained to protect students and institutions.

Conclusion

At HBCUs, there is an intentionality to teaching Black students that involves celebrating Black cultures and nurturing Black communities. While the HBCU experience is rooted in HBCU traditions developed over decades, in digital learning spaces, HBCUs are hubs of technological innovation and collaboration.

If you are interested in learning more about the HBCU experience, what sets it apart from any other higher education institution, and why HBCUs must not be overshadowed, we recommend *HBCU Made: A Celebration of the Black College Experience* by Ayesha Rascoe. This book, published in 2024, is a collection of stories by HBCU alumni who are Black leaders, artists, and celebrities. We leave you with the words of three of our contributors to this profile, who wonderfully summarize what makes HBCU institutions special:

"I just love the history and the culture of HBCUs, and that gives me passion to serve them. I grew up in a home where my mother was very intentional about her children knowing Black history, and you can't talk too long about Black history without acknowledging the history of Black colleges. Once I was old enough to understand the sacrifices and risks that so many people faced so that Black students could get a college education, I felt even more passionate about HBCUs. Learning about fearless leaders like Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, who started a school for Black girls with just $1.50 and sold sweet potato pies to purchase desks and textbooks—that makes me passionate about HBCUs. I don't want their work to be in vain, and I want to do my part to continue the progression of our institutions and educational opportunities for Black people."

— **Dr. Tasha Andrews-Carson**, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, Tennessee State University

"I am a white professor at an HBCU, but I am also a second-generation alumnus of the HBCU that I work for. I cannot speak for all HBCUs, but I can speak to my passion for *public* HBCUs. Public HBCUs were established to uplift the rural poor, particularly in the South. While I may be white, my grandfather was a sharecropper, and so I sympathize with all institutions that were established to uplift the rural poor. While our institutional purpose far exceeds that mission today, that historical legacy is something that I cherish and am proud to have graduated from and to currently serve an institution that was designed for that purpose. In the present era, however, I take great pride in developing future leaders of the Black community, as well as other marginalized groups who find a shelter for their academic development at this HBCU."

— **Dr. Kyle Patrick Murray**, Assistant Professor/ Academic Advisor, Political Science, Tennessee State University

"The importance of our HBCUs cannot be overlooked. We need to support [these institutions]. I think as we face difficulties from the state, as it relates to being underfunded, it shows us that we're just not there yet with really receiving our true potential as an HBCU. Think about how much *more* great Tennessee State University could be if everyone believed that it was great. I would just say, if you have friends or family members that are attending or have attended HBCUs, allow them to let their personal brand shine, and continue to remind the world that HBCUs are very special. You cannot receive these experiences in any other atmosphere. As I mentioned earlier, we pour into each other here, we look after each other here, and we hold each other to a high standard here. I want to make sure that HBCUs continue to thrive despite any type of legislation or because of the affirmative action [ruling]. I want our communities to pride ourselves on educational achievements. Take pride in our Historically Black Colleges and Universities, please."

— **Derrell Taylor**, 2023–2024 Student Government Association President, Tennessee State University

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