

# Innovation and Ideation in Student Affairs and Enrollment at HBCUs

## About

Historically Black college and university leaders from across the country met in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2022 to imagine the future of the HBCU sector. The Higher Education Leadership Foundation hosted the inaugural Ideation, Innovation & Collaboration: The Future of HBCUs conference, or IIC 2022, to discuss successes, challenges, threats and opportunities facing HBCUs today. The IIC 2022 conference served as a clarion call for institution leaders, administrators, funders and change agents to step up at this critical juncture and address HBCU’s role, viability and sustainability within higher education.



Conference sessions provided an opportunity to share promising practices and solutions. As a conference partner, the Southern Regional Education Board has created this series of briefs to present information from the conference’s five tracks.



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The IIC 2022's student affairs track provided an opportunity to share best practices and strengthen student affairs and enrollment at HBCUs.

## Meeting Students' Needs

HBCUs are often noted for the nurturing and caring environments they offer students, from recruitment and enrollment and to the entire the student experience. Graduates of these colleges and universities believe they outperform other institutions in the way they motivate students, according to *Blacks in College: A Comparative Study of Students' Success in Black and White Institutions*. Until recently, these institutions were not successful in articulating their success to the wider higher education audience. Recent reports provided by the UNCF and other sources and organizations argue HBCUs have become more successful in articulating their impact to a more diverse audience. The past 10 years have helped to initiate significant policy and practice shifts that will have a diverse set of outcomes for these higher education institutions.

Owning and successfully sharing the individual and collective narratives of HBCUs at this critical point in their history is essential, as cited in the book *Reimagining Historically Black Colleges and Universities Survival Beyond 2021*. These institutions are often described as having a sense of community where many are engaged in the success of each student. These relationships serve as key methods for increasing student outcomes at these campuses, specifically related to retention, persistence and graduation, as noted in *A System of Othermothering: Student Affairs Administrators' Perceptions of Relationships with Students at Historically Black Colleges*.

Student affairs practitioners are significantly responsible for the nurturing and caring environments at HBCUs. These skilled practitioners often unofficially fill several roles. They may be tasked with addressing the emotional needs of students, as well as finding solutions to insecurities around basic living needs. Two-thirds of HBCU students have experienced basic needs insecurity during the coronavirus pandemic, including issues attaining food or housing, and even homelessness, reported in *Basic Needs Insecurity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. Because HBCUs disproportionately enroll low-income, first-generation and academically underprepared college students, student needs and support are a growing concern. The already stressed system issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has hurt students and HBCUs but also helped identify issues to fix. As the student body of HBCUs continues to diversify, leaders must ask what else students need from institutions. For instance, only six HBCUs have an LGBTQ+ resource center, and many students note continued struggles for LGBTQ+ students on campus, according to *HBCUs Stepping up Support for LGBTQ+ community*.

HBCU leaders, thinkers and change-makers have the opportunity to improve the lives of HBCU students and staff. The HELF IIC 2022 student affairs track encouraged participants to think deeply about the value student affairs administrators bring to institutions and how to best support their diverse students' needs, even with the lasting effects of COVID-19, and how our campuses and leadership can support overworked and overwhelmed staff.

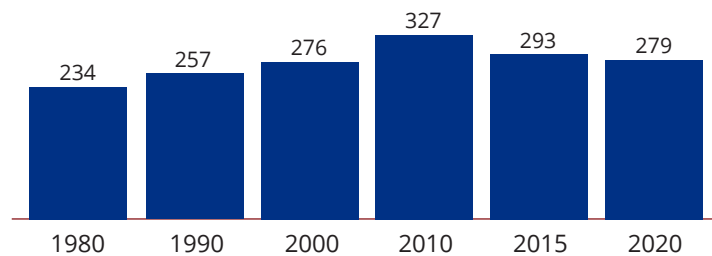
## Enrollment, Retention and Completion

The composition of enrolled students at HBCUs continues to change. Beginning as small institutions to educate African American students when there were no other options, HBCUs look vastly different today. Students from all races and ethnicities enroll at these colleges and universities. Non-Black students made up 24% of enrollment at HBCUs in 2020 compared with 15% in 1976.

The number of students enrolled at HBCUs has fluctuated throughout the years as well. From 1976 to 2010 the number of HBCU students increased 47%, from 223,000 to 327,000. But since 2010, the number has decreased 15% to 279,000 students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

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**Total enrollment at historically black colleges or universities, in thousands**



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HBCUs have an overall acceptance rate of 59%, compared to 68% among all institutions reported by NCES. Although HBCUs on average have a more cumbersome admissions process, they do have lower first-year retention rates than other higher education institutions. This is often attributed to the socioeconomic status of most students' basic needs insecurity. HBCUs disproportionately enroll low-income, first-generation and academically underprepared students. HBCU students are more likely to be Pell eligible and are more likely to have limiting pre-college factors, like high school demographics and a lack of rigorous academic preparation.

Despite these factors, HBCUs retain more students, especially students of color, than non-HBCUs, according to *Understanding HBCU Retention and Completion*. Fifty-five percent of Black HBCU graduates say their college prepared them well for post-college life, versus 29% of Black graduates at non-HBCUS, according to *Grads of Historically Black Colleges Have Well-Being Edge*. According to *The Science Behind HBCU Success*, one-third of all Black students earning doctorates graduated with a bachelor's degree from an HBCU. To expand on this success, HBCUs should actively identify strategies to make admissions and retention everyone's business on campus.

## Ideation, Innovation and Collaboration

Four areas were identified from the IIC 2022 conference sessions to support the existing literature related to ideas, innovations and collaboration in student affairs and enrollment management for HBCUs:

1. Defining student engagement
2. Determining the level of intrusive student services required for these campuses
3. Creating internal assessment protocols for student-centered services
4. Intentionality when improving student wellness.

### *Defining Student Engagement*

Higher education institutions define student engagement differently, so what it means for one campus and how it is measured does not necessarily apply to another institution. Student engagement can be explained as the time and effort that students commit to activities that are empirically linked to a college's desired outcome and what colleges and universities do to get students to participate in these activities, according to the article *What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know About Student Engagement*. For some campuses, the phrase "student engagement" refers to how involved or interested students are in the learning process, along with how connected they are to their classes, their institution and each other, according to *Designing Our Courses for Greater Student Engagement and Better Student Learning* by L. Dee Fink. Defining student engagement is the first step for successfully designing an impactful student experience and measuring the level of success in this area for all colleges and universities, particularly HBCUs.

### *Recommended Innovation*

A key strategy for defining student engagement for an institution, especially for HBCUs, is being intentional about defining it for the campus and selecting an inclusive team to lead this effort. An example is to convene a student engagement taskforce, which brings together administrators, faculty, staff and students charged with conducting an analysis of student engagement and with developing a set of recommendations to increase student engagement efforts. This process should be guided by the institution's strategic plan in order to achieve optimal success and buy-in from the campus' administration, faculty, staff and students.

### *Determining the Level of Intrusive Student Services*

With a growing sense of urgency to increase college completion rates, colleges and universities will need to transform many efforts to meet college completion goals. As these efforts are often difficult to achieve, they become even more challenging for HBCUs. Finding out what level of support is necessary for the students a campus serves is one key factor in establishing the right level of student support.

## Recommended Innovation

A substantial number of studies show that more intrusive levels of student support increases the overall retention and academic achievement for students at high risk of dropping out. Institutional leaders should have a thorough understanding of the student population they serve. To achieve this, student affairs and enrollment practitioners should create an enrollment profile for each entering class. Included in this profile should be socioeconomic indicators that create a more in-depth picture, such as average family income, grade point average, family size and geographical location. Collecting, analyzing and sharing this data with faculty and staff will help determine the types of services required to effectively support the students during their time in college, taking into consideration their lives prior to college. Gaining an understanding of the academic and socioeconomic challenges students face allows campus leaders to design customized service plans for students and be more intentional about how to invest the institution's fiscal resources.

Student services models should be modified to support students with their most critical needs. This cannot be successfully achieved without gathering the necessary data points about a campus' student population to determine the level of intrusiveness required in its student services model.

## *Intentionality for Improving Student Wellness*

As students begin their college careers, both their mental and physical well-being are important. Typically, traditional college-aged students are in good health, but they can bring with them distinct levels of external influences associated with health and health behaviors, cited in *Leadership Development for Health Researchers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. Today, issues surrounding emotional and physical well-being have significant implications for success in every area of life. This remains true for successfully navigating the college environment.

Although the data is limited related to the disparities and challenges connected to obesity in college, data does exist that suggest Black students struggle with obesity and the health disparities associated with these issues during college more than other racial and ethnic groups. Tackling issues related to helping students at HBCUs implement a healthy lifestyle while in college is one issue in which leaders in student affairs can be more intentional.

However, other issues associated with mental well-being are just as significant. Because Black students from underserved backgrounds are more likely than other racial and ethnic groups, including Asian American,s Hispanic and white students, to be exposed to traumatic events before entering college, HBCUs must ensure they have the resources to support students coping with trauma before they can even consider how to successfully support needs related to earning a postsecondary degree. A traumatic event can be defined as a "direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death, or serious injury, other threat to one's physical integrity, or witnessing an event that involves death, injury or a threat to the physical integrity of another person" as noted by the American Psychiatric Association.

## Recommended Ideation

Since HBCUs graduate a disproportionate number of Black students, historically underserved by higher education, ignoring issues related to mental health can significantly hamper their work to increase six-year graduation rates. It is important that student affairs professionals at HBCUs work with mental health experts to provide comprehensive support services that will better equip students to handle the challenges and subsequent lingering effects of being exposed to trauma, as noted in *Trauma, Environmental Stressors, and the African American College Student: Research, Practice, and HBCUs*.

HBCUs are well-positioned to address issues related to student wellness and other health disparities because these institutions possess and foster such rich and deep understanding for the African American experience.

## Creating Internal Assessment Protocols for Student-Centered Services

Student affairs and enrollment management practitioners must be practical, mission-focused and intentional about their strategies to support students in a co-curricular fashion. Creating an internal assessment protocol for student-centered services at an institution, based on the challenges identified through creating student demographic profiles, ensures that students are served in a way that supports their successful matriculation and graduation.

The nature of student affairs and enrollment management work is engaging and enjoyable, yet it is important to ensure that the process, programs and initiatives within this division are effective, mission-centric and support the institutions' curricular offerings. Developing a culture of assessment is necessary for continual improvement and innovation within institutions, and student affairs can lead the campus in designing an effective assessment model. A well-developed culture of assessment is critical for informing policymakers, such as state higher education executive offices, boards of trustees and state legislators. Assessment is not always a component of student services work that practitioners are excited about because it can often call for a reality check, as cited by Schuh in *Developing a Culture of Assessment in Student Affairs*.

## Recommended Innovation and Collaboration

Creating a culture of assessment provides a framework for data-driven decision-making that allows student services leaders to identify learning outcomes within their offices and measure progress, while aligning with assessment efforts within academic affairs. Yet creating this connected culture of assessment in student affairs requires colleges and universities to be self-critical, use several different forms of assessment that work together, and collaborate across offices. This also requires buy-in from the entire student services staff, and as well as a commitment of financial resources from executive leadership and policymakers, according to *Developing a Culture of Assessment in Student Affairs*.

Successfully communicating the effectiveness and impact of the assessment strategies in student services across campus is significant to advancing and elevating the work of student affairs and enrollment practitioners. HBCU student services practitioners can experience a greater appreciation for the value of the work they do throughout the institution by finding ways to communicate their impact with students to a diverse campus audience. Accomplishing this creates an even stronger culture for collaboration, which allows for a stronger sense of community and circle of support, something HBCUs have long been recognized for achieving.

## Final Takeaways for Student Affairs and Enrollment

HBCUs are noted for their supportive environments and sense of community. Yet, too often, these colleges and universities can function in silos, not unlike postsecondary institutions outside of this sector. When academic affairs, student affairs and other campus units work together to support students, together they can create a cohesive approach to supporting student success at any college or university.

Many HBCUs rely on enrollment to keep them operating. Student affairs and enrollment management are key to a healthy and viable institution, particularly for colleges and universities that are tuition driven. With effective strategies in both student affairs and enrollment management, HBCUs can realize greater outcomes for the students they educate and for the campus' external reputation. Determining strategic and achievable priorities for each can further build the sense of community for which HBCUs are best known.

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