

NACAC 

HBCU *ADVANCE*

INAUGURAL REPORT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3

BACKGROUND

4

OVERVIEW OF HBCU ADVANCE 2024

5

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

10

CONCLUSION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) offer students a combination of high-quality education and access to a rich cultural history that celebrates Black excellence. These institutions provide many distinct benefits for Black students that distinguish them from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIIs), including enhanced potential for upward social mobility, an environment in which they feel safe in their identity, a robust alumni and community network, and low cost relative to other institutions. However, they often face challenges that threaten their existence, including underfunding, anti-HBCU stigma, and a lack of exposure and awareness among high school students.

Cognizant of these struggles and successes, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) convened its first-ever HBCU Advance event in 2024 to lift the voices of HBCU admission and enrollment practitioners and to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion about the challenges and successes encountered by HBCU admission offices throughout the enrollment process. The conversations also uncovered recommendations to help HBCUs achieve their enrollment goals, including increasing professional development and growth opportunities for HBCU admission staff, creating deeper community ties to address misinformation and stigma, and increasing public awareness of these valued institutions.

BACKGROUND



The lifeblood of any postsecondary educational institution is its enrollment pipeline.¹ Colleges that fail to enroll enough students face existential challenges that can threaten their survival. In the face of a steady projected decline in recent high school graduates.

Despite public policy goals for improving access to higher education, enrollment and admission staff at higher education institutions are continuously asked to do more with less. Admission offices are tasked with implementing recruitment and admission strategies to serve multiple — and at times conflicting — institutional goals, including (but not limited to) goals related to finance, equity, diversity, reputation, and state policy. They must do so under significant scrutiny, including oversight or pressure from faculty, institutional leadership and governance, state and federal policymakers, alumni, the media, students and families, and the public.

While all admission and enrollment offices at institutions of higher education face these challenges, admission offices at HBCUs are burdened with additional unique difficulties. Established in the early 1800s to provide higher education opportunities for people of African descent, HBCUs have a rich history of providing higher education opportunities for Black students through fostering academic excellence, promoting cultural identity, and addressing the unique challenges faced by the students they serve. However, they also face additional headwinds that affect their enrollment goals that PWIs do not experience, including stigma, often a lack of funding, and oftentimes limited understanding and awareness of HBCUs among high school students.

Cognizant of the unique opportunities, advantages, and challenges facing HBCUs, NACAC is committed to promoting the sustainability and growth of these vital institutions. In addition to HBCU Advance, NACAC has provided support for HBCU college fairs, roundtable discussions during NACAC conferences, and engagement with HBCU admission officers to raise awareness of HBCUs among college advisors, school counselors, students, and families.

As a national organization with more than 28,000 members, NACAC maintains a pivotal position at the juncture between secondary and postsecondary education. With its longstanding commitment to expand the higher education pipeline to all students while ensuring that the workforce is prepared to meet the increasingly specialized, multicultural, global demands of the 21st century, NACAC seeks to expand opportunities to improve racial equity in higher education. The HBCU Advance convening constitutes a first step toward more directly engaging HBCU admission professionals and developing an agenda for promoting solutions to shared challenges and amplifying best practices to better serve students.

¹ Hoover, Eric. “The People Who Deliver Your Students”, *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, 2016. See: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-people-who-deliver-your-students/>

OVERVIEW OF HBCU ADVANCE 2024

Held at Coppin State University in Baltimore, Maryland, the charge of HBCU Advance 2024 was to recognize and elevate the unique advantages and disadvantages HBCU admission offices face, while highlighting the practices these institutions have enacted that could help scale successful practices for HBCUs and other institutions. HBCU Advance 2024 was designed to provide unique opportunities for professional learning and networking among attendees, including sharing best practices, cultivating professional pathways, and enhancing relationships between like-minded attendees and organizations.

A major takeaway from the event was that to be well positioned for the future, HBCUs need to **build systems and processes that serve their unique missions** instead of acquiescing to pressure to conform to systems built by PWIs that may not be best suited for HBCUs.

Keynote speakers discussed the unique HBCU perspectives that impact access, affordability, and persistence. While they highlighted the importance of keeping the HBCU experience distinct, they also noted the need for a willingness to adapt to the shifting demands of the 21st century. The enrollment cliff, once believed to be a far-off concern, has arrived. HBCUs are also becoming more diverse; in 2022, non-Black students made up 24 percent of enrollment at HBCUs, compared with 15 percent in 1976.² It is imperative for the economic survival of HBCUs, speakers said, that schools are prepared to shift outreach, admission, enrollment, and development strategies to appeal to both Black and non-Black students.

Inspired by and building off the insights provided by the keynote speakers, attendees formed small groups for frank and informed discussions on several topics pertinent to HBCUs. The conversations, organized by four questions as starting points, led to many actionable insights that helped attendees gain a deeper understanding of the unique circumstances HBCUs find themselves in. Importantly, these breakout groups also led to the creation of several actionable takeaways that attendees could bring back to their institutions to promote positive change. It is these breakout group discussions that form the basis of this report.



² National Center for Education Statistics. "Fast Facts: Historically Black Colleges and Universities". Accessed 11/4/2024. See: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=667>

BREAKOUT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Question 1: What are the unique institutional advantages and challenges specific to working in/with an HBCU admission office from your vantage point?

ADVANTAGES

Community and belonging: According to the breakout discussion groups, perhaps the most meaningful benefit of HBCUs is the powerful impact these schools have on developing students of color. Students are often drawn to HBCUs because of these schools' commitment to nurturing not just their academic growth, but their authentic selves in context of their identities as people of color. Black students who attend HBCUs are surrounded by fellow students, faculty, and alumni with similar experiences and backgrounds. These similarities allow for a strong sense of community and support unique to these schools.³ A Gallup-USA Funds Minority College Graduates Report found that HBCU graduates were significantly more likely to have felt supported at their college compared to their Black peers who graduated from non-HBCUs.⁴

Social mobility: Small groups discussed at length the role HBCUs play in Black students' potential for upward social mobility. HBCUs, since their inception, have played a large role in the promotion of upward social mobility for underrepresented students with otherwise limited access to higher education. In fact, about 30 percent of HBCU graduates will move up at least two income quintiles from that of their parents by the time they reach 30 years old. In comparison, only 18 percent of graduates from non-HBCUs achieve this income success.⁵

Robust alumni network: HBCUs maintain extensive and dedicated alumni networks that provide additional support and resources to current students. Many HBCU admission officers were once students at the schools where they now work, deepening their ties to the community and underscoring their commitment to building the next generation of students.

³ UNCF. "Why Choose an HBCU". Accessed 9/10/2024. See: <https://uncf.org/pages/why-choose-an-hbcu>

⁴ Seymore, Sean, and Ray, Julie. "Grads of Historically Black Colleges Have Well Being Edge". *Gallup*, 2015. See: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/186362/grads-historically-black-colleges-edge.aspx>

⁵ The White House. "The Economics of HBCUs. *The White House*, 2024. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2024/05/16/the-economics-of-hbcus/#:~:text=Recent%20research%20indicates%20that%20HBCUs,at%20least%20two%20income%20quintiles>

Cost: Another major advantage of HBCUs, according to participants, is their value proposition. There were significant discussions surrounding how affordable HBCUs are when compared to their PWI counterparts. On average, HBCUs cost 28 percent less than comparable non-HBCUs. Due to historical inequities, underrepresented minority students often have fewer financial resources available to them than their white counterparts, highlighting a major draw for students of color interested in attending HBCUs.⁶

CHALLENGES

Lack of funding/endowments: According to attendees, perhaps the biggest disadvantage HBCUs face is the chronic lack of funding for these schools when compared to PWIs. The average public HBCU endowment per full-time student is about 50 percent of that for public non-HBCUs. This gap is even more prevalent for private institutions, where the average HBCU endowment is approximately 21 percent of non-HBCUs. Despite several large private donations to HBCUs in 2020, the endowment gap has not only persisted, but in recent years has increased.⁷ This chronic underfunding can severely limit an HBCUs institutional effectiveness; without a steady and equitable stream of income, these schools can struggle to stay financially viable.

Stigma: Unwarranted stigma surrounding HBCUs is a major hurdle to those wishing to elevate these storied institutions. Many critics suggest that HBCUs provide a substandard education resulting in low return on investment post-graduation.⁸ While these notions are incorrect, (Research indicates that HBCUs appear to offer a better college experience for Black students compared to PWIs⁹), misinformation and disinformation persists. Participants voiced that this persisting stigma is often relayed to students by secondary schools and community-based organizations, which can lead to low interest in and application rates for HBCUs.



⁶ Taylor, Kiarra. “The Value of an Education at an HBCU: Benefits, Cost, and Impact”. Investopedia, 2024. See: <https://www.investopedia.com/the-value-of-an-education-at-an-hbcu-5187920#:~:text=Today%2C%20attending%20an%20HBCU%20offers,than%20comparable%20non%2DHBCU%20schools>.

⁷ The White House. “The Economics of HBCUs. *The White House*, 2024. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2024/05/16/the-economics-of-hbcus/#:~:text=Recent%20research%20indicates%20that%20HBCUs,at%20least%20two%20income%20quintiles>

⁸ Carter, Jarrett L, “No Greater Waste of Money Than an HBCU”. Huffington Post, 2014. See: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hbcu-return-on-investment_b_5049115

⁹ Morris, Catherine. “Gallup Survey: HBCUs Give Black Graduates a Better Experience Than PWIs”. *Diverse Issues in Education*, 2015. See: <https://www.diverseeducation.com/institutions/hbcus/article/15097371/gallup-survey-hbcus-give-black-graduates-a-better-experience-than-pwis>

Low visibility: Participants also discussed how the negative impacts of stigma can lower the visibility HBCUs often have with secondary students. While there are high-profile HBCUs like Howard University, Hampton University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College, there are dozens of lesser-known institutions that do not benefit from this level of exposure.¹⁰ These low-profile schools often don't get attention from students, parents, and school counselors, often leading to low enrollment rates and financial insecurity.

Question 2: What recommendations can HBCUs provide to all of higher education? What challenges do HBCUs face in reaching prospective students?

Small group participants spent time discussing successful practices enacted by HBCUs that they believe should be incorporated in all of higher education. They also discussed specific challenges that HBCUs face that can limit the effectiveness of these recommendations when attempting to reach prospective students.

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES/OPPORTUNITIES

Community involvement: The small groups recognized the unique power of HBCUs' community approach to recruitment. These schools often have a substantial infrastructure investment and provide large social and economic advantages to their communities.¹¹ HBCUs tend to directly and intentionally loop in the local population in their recruitment efforts through initiatives such as:

- **Personalized college tours:** As HBCUs tend to be very community oriented, their college tours tend to incorporate not just the campus, but the surrounding environment as well. Tailored to prospective students' unique interests, personalized college tours give potential applicants the full context of their potential new home.
- **Family involvement:** HBCUs are unique in that they often include potential student's family members in meetings with counselors and advisors. This family-based approach serves to generate buy-in and support from prospective student's loved ones, while acclimating them to the often-new culture of higher education.
- **HBCU liaisons in high schools:** Many HBCUs further serve their local communities by placing HBCU liaisons in secondary schools with large populations of Black students. These liaisons raise awareness of HBCUs among Black students and help prepare students for the college application process.

¹⁰ "HBCU Listing". *The Hundred-Seven*. N.d. See: <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-most-college-kids-are-taking-at-least-one-class-online-even-long-after-campuses-reopened/#:~:text=Compared%20to%20before%20the%20pandemic,million%20between%202019%20and%202022>.

¹¹ Esters, Levon and Gasman, Marybeth. "HBCUs: Catalysts for Economic Empowerment and Community Growth". *Diverse Issues in Education*, 2024. See: <https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15662625/hbcus-catalysts-for-economic-empowerment-and-community-growth>

HBCU-related training for high schools: Small group participants relayed successful experiences in providing local secondary school counselors and college advisors with information and training related to HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). By equipping these counselors with the information they need to promote these institutions, more students can become aware of and apply to HBCUs and MSIs.

CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING TO HBCUs

- **Funding challenges:** Many small group participants noted that admission offices at HBCUs are chronically under-resourced. Recruiting budgets are often extremely low, and admission officers reported feeling stretched too thin by university leadership, who often set unrealistic goals and expectations. These difficulties can often lead to delays in decision making and communication with students.
- **The low-cost paradox:** While low tuition rates and high levels of support are powerful benefits of HBCUs for students, they can pose challenges for institutions' finances.
- **Lack of student exposure/understanding:** Postsecondary professionals said they sometimes perceive an anti-HBCU bias exists among counselors, family members, and others who help advise students in their college decisions. This bias can steer potential students away from HBCUs and toward PWIs. In addition, small groups discussed the negative impacts of virtual learning on high school students' understanding of the benefits of an HBCU education as students increasingly turn to virtual learning in a post-pandemic environment.¹² HBCUs can lose the competitive edge they offer with their strong in-person community ties.

Question 3: What are recommendations on how to support HBCU admission offices in mitigating challenges or scaling up promising practices?

HBCU Advance 2024 attendees were asked to provide recommendations for how HBCU admission offices can be better supported in mitigating challenges while scaling up promising practices. Overall, HBCU admission offices need to be better supported with enhanced professional resources. These services include higher salaries, increased growth incentives, more robust professional development and training, as well as increased human resources support for staff needs. Investments in these areas would improve staff retention while providing admission offices the additional resources, support, and knowledge base they need to more effectively recruit and retain potential HBCU students.

¹² Barshay, Jill. Proof Points: “Most college kids are taking at least one class online, even long after campuses reopened”. *The Hechinger Report*, 2024. See: <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-most-college-kids-are-taking-at-least-one-class-online-even-long-after-campuses-reopened/#:~:text=Compared%20to%20before%20the%20pandemic,million%20between%202019%20and%202022.>

With regard to increased professional resources, participants shared a desire for more financial and professional development support from organizations such as NACAC. On a more personal level, participants expressed an interest in better framing their work to recognize their value to the institution, afford them a strong sense of perspective on their role in the educational ecosystem, and provide them with a better sense of the professional pathways available to them.

Another recommendation implores HBCU advocates to help change negative narratives and stereotypes of HBCUs. This can be accomplished by equipping HBCU admission and enrollment offices with up-to-date data points, fact sheets, and policy updates to prepare them to counter false claims as they appear.

POTENTIAL FUTURE AREAS OF FOCUS

Attendees finished their discussions by suggesting additional focus areas for any future NACAC HBCU Advance events. Suggested topics included:

- **Access and affordability:** HBCUs enroll significantly more first-generation and low-income Black students than PWIs.¹³ Many of these students face insecurity with food and housing. It is critical that these schools provide financial support to these students to allow them to focus on their education without chronic economic worry. Low funding and scholarship funds leave many HBCUs unable to provide such financial security to their students. HBCU Advance attendees recommend further conversations on this topic to discuss ways to increase access and affordability at their institutions.
- **Pipelines:**
 - **Leadership pipeline:** Admission and enrollment offices often have limited professional growth opportunities. Participants noted that it is difficult to advance professionally when there are few opportunities for job growth and promotion, often leading to high employee turnover rates. Participants recommended that discussions be conducted regarding ways in which employees can better navigate this workplace structure, as well as ways senior leadership can open the leadership pipeline to allow for additional employee growth opportunities.
 - **Student pipeline:** Participants communicated a desire to open the student pipeline to better serve all students regardless of location, especially those from underserved areas of the west coast and international countries.



¹³ “Report Details Barriers Faced by Students at HBCUs”. *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, 2022. See: <https://www.aecf.org/blog/report-details-barriers-faced-by-students-at-hbcus>

- **Endowment strategies:** HBCU financial endowments are notoriously low when compared with PWIs. Historically, discriminatory practices such as blockbusting and redlining led to significant racial wealth gaps, which then contributed to racial gaps in financial giving to institutions.¹⁴ Participants recommended strategic conversations to identify ways to overcome these inequities and develop recommendations on how to increase endowments at HBCUs.
- **Initiatives at other HBCUs:** Many small group participants expressed a desire to learn more about specific operational procedures and initiatives at other HBCUs. It was suggested that NACAC provide additional opportunities for HBCU professionals to meet, network, and share insights on institutional strategy.

CONCLUSION

The inaugural HBCU Advance convening reaffirmed NACAC's longstanding commitment to elevating initiatives at HBCUs. Attendees reiterated and affirmed the multiple benefits of students attending HBCUs while highlighting several key, distinct obstacles that can prevent HBCUs from maximizing their full student outreach potential. Importantly, they also provided key takeaways and recommendations that HBCU staff can implement at their institutions. HBCU Advance 2024 marks a new phase of NACAC's ever-deepening commitment to uplifting HBCUs and the students they serve. NACAC will seek further insight into these and other HBCU recruitment, admission, and enrollment topics at the 2025 HBCU Advance event in Atlanta.



¹⁴ "The Economics of HBCUs". *The White House*, 2024. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2024/05/16/the-economics-of-hbcus/>



nacacnet.org/hbcu-advance/