



VIRGINIA UNION
UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR THE STUDY of HBCUS

The HBCU Shift from Survival & Sustainability to Competitiveness & Transformation

*A study commissioned by the Center for the
Study of HBCUs at Virginia Union University
in partnership with the Student Freedom
Initiative and powered by EAB*





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INTRODUCTION

The Center for the Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) at Virginia Union University, in collaboration with EAB and the Student Freedom Initiative, proudly presents this report that sheds light on HBCU presidents' key priorities.

Within this study, we capture the insights of nearly sixty current and former HBCU presidents and senior stakeholders. Their invaluable wisdom, knowledge, and experiences, shared through comprehensive surveys and interviews, render this one of the largest and most recent studies of its kind.

The ideas expressed will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of HBCUs as we navigate the post-COVID 'new normal.' Key priorities highlighted include the critical need for monetary support, a robust "student success infrastructure," and expanded opportunities for economic mobility among students. These priorities stand as urgent requests directed toward philanthropic organizations, governmental bodies, and strategic partners alike.

The modern value proposition of HBCUs is clear: HBCUs produce more Black doctors, judges, and engineers than any other segment of higher education in the United States. Enabling them to access more resources and build capacity in priority areas is critical to their advancement.

The very existence of HBCUs stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit, grit, and resilience displayed by generations of Black scholars, leaders, and visionaries—a legacy continued by the presidents contributing to this report.

Our team strongly encourages all those interested to take note, extend support, and form partnerships with these presidents. By doing so, we collectively forge a brighter future that embraces progress while steadfastly upholding core values that have proven themselves as enduring beacons of diversity, academic excellence, and innovation.

This report is more than a collection of presidents' perspectives; it serves as a resounding "call to action" for every stakeholder who believes in the unparalleled power and potential of HBCUs.

—Leadership Team
The Center for the Study of HBCUs
at Virginia Union University
Published February 1, 2024

METHODOLOGY

We gathered input from 58 current and former HBCU presidents and senior stakeholders, including Congresswoman Alma Adams, who represents the 12th District of North Carolina. We received direct input from 35 current HBCU presidents, who represent over one-third of the recognized HBCUs, making this report one of the most comprehensive syntheses of current presidential perspectives post-pandemic.

On pages 32 and 33, we acknowledge all the presidents and other senior HBCU leaders who shared with us their priorities in leading their institutions to make the shift from surviving to thriving.

Overall, the leaders who participated in our study represent 44 unique historically Black public and private institutions in nine states. The institutions range from enrollments of 100 students to more than 7,400 students and six-year graduation rates of 8% to 75% among the four-year institutions (per provisional data from IPEDS). Further, the study includes perspectives of current presidents of two historically Black community colleges, as well as one historically Black law school.

While both modalities of our study—online survey and on-camera interviews—invited presidents to share their perspectives in an open-ended way, the survey provided 10 possible priorities for respondents to rank. These priorities were loosely inspired by a 2014 report by AGB (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges) on Top Strategic Issues Facing HBCUs, Now and into the Future.

We translated these priorities into rank order numbers and compared the ranks across presidents and across different characteristics of the HBCUs that the presidents represented, such as size of school and graduation rate as publicly available from IPEDS.

Please note that while we promised anonymity for the specific responses to survey questions, we sought and received permission to share the perspectives of presidents who offered their thoughts on-camera. Thus, throughout this report, you will see anonymized survey responses, quotes from identified presidents, as well as a personal reflection from the principal investigator of this study, Dr. Roderick L. Smothers, Sr., Executive Director of the Center for the Study of HBCUs.

Researchers at EAB have been honored to collaborate with Dr. Smothers and his colleagues at the Center to execute this study and synthesize the abundant collective wisdom of HBCU leaders in the pages ahead.



**PART
ONE**

**Top 5 Requests
for Philanthropy,
Government, Technical
Partners, and Other
Supporters of HBCUs**

REQUEST #1:

Understand the importance of monetary support, given the historical and continued inequities that HBCUs face.

Presidents understand how much responsibility is on their shoulders to lead and operate a sustainable institution, and they acknowledge that not every problem they face can be attributed to lack of resources. That said, they want the broader higher education ecosystem to recognize that the HBCU sector as a whole—and institutions within that sector—have been uniquely underfunded while serving students and communities with great needs for resources.

Thus, presidents emphasize the importance of infusion of monetary resources to address the significant gaps they experience in leading their institutions, despite their daily efforts to lead as creatively as possible. They also have a body of evidence to indicate that monetary support works. Their specific partnerships with industry (e.g., utility companies), with military bases, and with other well-resourced organizations have enabled them to grow their institutions.

Candidly, presidents are eager to push back on the brewing idea that monetary resources have not resulted in sustainability for HBCUs and, therefore, that monetary resources may not be the solution.

Walter Kimbrough, Past President, Dillard University and Philander Smith College, articulated this point:

“ A lot of you want to say everything can’t be solved with money, but this is a sector that we really haven’t tried it. Let’s try to see if it doesn’t work. I think it could work. We used data to show people at Dillard how our graduation rate went up when we started putting more money in for students to cut down the gap that they needed to graduate. I got that from Georgia State because that’s what they did as a major public research institution. I think that’s one of the main things that we need. We’ve got to have more resources for students because once again, it goes back to my bigger picture question. We have major income and wealth inequalities in America. We haven’t solved that problem.

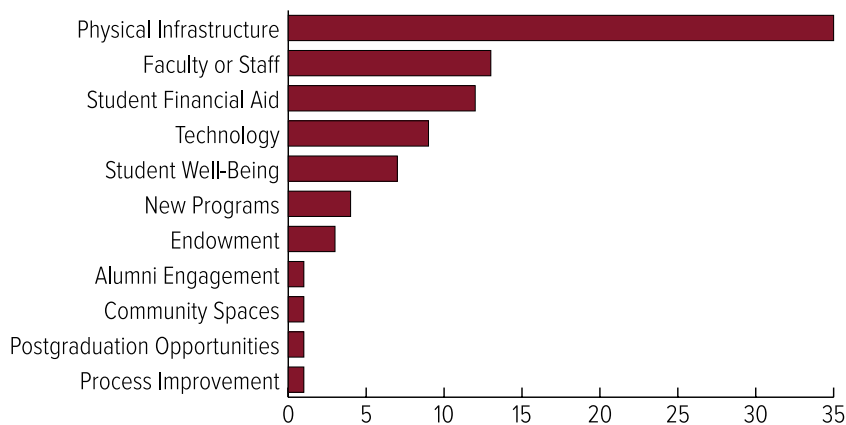
Presidents agree with Paul Jones, President, Fort Valley State University, who said,

“ I don’t see any other pathway forward that gets us to that sustainability piece.

REQUEST #2:

See your support as a proven investment with expected social returns.

We specifically asked current and former presidents to give us their ideas about what they may do with \$3M to \$5M of unrestricted funding. The chart below shows the number of times an area of spending was mentioned in their responses:



Presidents noted that with limited investment, HBCUs are enrolling only 3% of the United States' African American students and producing more than 25% of the nation's African American graduates. Furthermore, they point to studies conducted by organizations not specifically affiliated with HBCUs, concluding that people who graduate from HBCUs have better health outcomes and are more civically engaged than similar students who graduate from other institutions.

I tell the Congress all the time that we're going to have to address this issue of disinvestment and the fact that we have not received the funding that we need. There as to be some leveling of the playing field, some equity as it relates to the funding
—Alma Adams, United States Congresswoman, 12th District of North Carolina

Presidents want supporters to know that evidence shows their investment will allow HBCU presidents to advance contributors' agenda and to make a social impact at a more rapid pace than what they may be able to do in other sectors of higher education or elsewhere. HBCUs are not "a place where handouts are needed"; rather, "quality, equitable resources are needed."

They also want funders to know how personally rewarding investing in HBCUs can be.

When you see someone who may not have had an opportunity granted the opportunity, and they use that as a hand up and they move forward, that is one of the most rewarding experiences ever.
—LaTonia Collins Smith, President, Harris-Stowe State University

REQUEST #3:

Get to know HBCUs to find mission alignment.

For HBCU presidents, true partnership looks and feels like deep listening and learning between the HBCU and the supporting partner(s). Presidents are eager to better understand what the supporting institution is looking to achieve and, in turn, share what the HBCU is looking to achieve through the partnership.



What partnership looks like to me is listening, really listening and learning who we are and the value that we bring to the marketplace, to the education ecosystem. The great strength of the American education system, the envy of the world, is its diversity. You have large R1s, you have Ivies, you have HBCUs, you have HSIs and so many other institutions that students have to choose what is best for them, right? And so as we choose partners, and as partners choose us, it's important that our partners understand our mission, [and that they] are willing to get to know us, get to know our students, [and] get deeply engaged with us to better understand what our needs are. Don't just tell me what you're going to do for me. Ask me what I need. I promise you, we can share with you in some depth exactly the nature of our needs. And in doing so, we'll have a much more robust and fruitful partnership that will yield the outcomes that you desire.

—Roslyn Clark Artis, President, Benedict College

In turn, the presidents from some smaller institutions point out—with a great deal of care and respect for their fellow larger institutions—that prospective HBCU supporters would benefit from getting to know smaller institutions, as it may be possible to achieve great outcomes with the smaller institutions.



We love our brothers and sisters who represent the mighty 10 or 15, but there are so many more institutions that have so much more capacity. And I think the richness of this entire sector really isn't realized until funders, sponsors really begin to reach out and beyond the common, you know, characters if you will, and find synergy that may possibly be more in line with their personal missions and their desires with smaller [and] mid-size institutions that don't have the celebrity that our brothers and sisters who carry the weight of this sector do.

—Herman J. Felton, Jr., President, Wiley College

REQUEST #4:

Create options for students to be well-positioned for socioeconomic mobility.

Presidents are both visionary and pragmatic about how to position students for socioeconomic mobility. They look to partners to help them create options to meet the needs of prospective HBCU students and eventual graduates, many of whom are Pell-eligible, first-generation students with responsibilities for caregiving, and who will require student loans to pursue their educations.

In general, and in reference to the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling against affirmative action, some leaders mention that HBCUs do not turn students away based on race; rather, they center on creating options and socioeconomic mobility outcomes for students who have not been prioritized across the higher education sector.

Presidents shared the aspiration that when students graduate, their economic trajectory needs to be strengthened by corporate, government, and nonprofit partners who see that they are not only positioned for a solid entry-level job, but also for a pathway that allows them to achieve a level of economic security and growth far beyond their starting point.



I think it's about staying relevant and staying current in our curricula that we offer to our students. Partnering with organizations, government, and business to make sure that we are paring students in a way that's going to be meaningful for them post-graduation, setting them up for success beyond completion of their degrees.

—Aminta H. Breaux, President, Bowie State University

Presidents want supporting partners to think about creating options for students. As examples, presidents mentioned state flagship institutions creating partnerships with HBCUs within and beyond their state. Others mentioned partnerships with companies that have tuition reimbursement programs so that students can avoid the burden of debt and be able to improve their lives and those of their families. Others, including the president of a historically Black community college, mentioned the importance of partners supporting skilled trades with positive economic mobility outcomes.



HBCU students have different entry points and they have just as many exit points.

—Patricia Sims, President, Drake State Community & Technical College

REQUEST #5: ***Advocate for connectivity.***

Presidents' comments were nuanced about the benefits of partnering across the community, from the local to the national. They cited the importance of identifying all potential partners within a 50-mile radius of campus, including cities, businesses, and organizations, to support the HBCU in their area as an "economic driver."

Presidents emphasized that every constituency that touches the HBCU and its mission needs to be connected to the others, noting that a stronger nexus between state government, federal government, and philanthropy can help HBCUs make more progress. They acknowledged that students and families and the HBCUs are doing the best they can to provide quality experiences for students to achieve the American dream. Yet, they recognized that more needs to be done across local, state, and federal government, as well as within the corporate and philanthropic communities.



When these four segments come together, that's when higher education is done right. They've done it for Harvard, Yale, MIT, RIT, UVA, Virginia Tech, VCU, U of R; we need parity in our space and resources as an intentional assistance in creating our universities and colleges in America.

—Hakim J. Lucas, President, Virginia Union University



**PART
TWO**

**Top Priorities of
HBCU Presidents**

TOP 6 PRIORITIES OF CURRENT HBCU PRESIDENTS

This list reflects the priorities of **32 current presidents**. Among these participants, **Enrollment Management** and **Student Success** ranked as the first and second priorities, respectively.

	PRIORITY
1	Enrollment Management
2	Student Success
3	Fundraising and Endowment
4	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities
5	Academic Program Relevance
WRITE-IN	Talent

While we did not provide extensive definitions of **Enrollment Management** and **Student Success**, we analyzed qualitative input as to the presidents' interpretation of each of these priorities. A clear connection between the two areas can be made, as presidents may be interpreting both as the broad activity of enrolling and retaining students to and through graduation, which many of their comments indicate. Despite this potential lack of distinction, the quantitative responses do indicate that most current presidents surveyed view "enrollment management" as the first priority. We find that these areas warrant further exploration among presidents given that presidents prioritize these so highly.

Additionally, in future work, it would be important to further define **Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities**, specifically distinguish between physical infrastructure and technology infrastructure, as many cited the need for both. It was not entirely clear if one of these types of infrastructure upgrades is more important to current presidents than the other.

PRIORITY #1: ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Across several write-in responses, ***“enrolling students”*** looms large. One president of a four-year private institution mentioned that, with \$3–5 million in unrestricted funding, they would address ***“enrollment management”*** along with ***“refurbishing or redesigning living-learning quarters.”***

Another president of a four-year public institution would use unrestricted funding to ***“invest in the key revenue-producing functions like enrollment growth.”***

Still another president of a four-year public institution indicated ***“strategic enrollment management and growth”*** an important priority for all HBCU leaders.

In response to this prompt: *“What ideas do you have that you would like to share with funders, policymakers, and legislators?”* one president of a four-year institution mentioned ***“further investments in enrollment management, especially in recruiting and retention.”***

It is important to note that current presidents believe that by and large, students and their families would want them, as presidents, to invest in scholarships and career preparation to improve students’ socioeconomic mobility outcomes. Presidents are aware that the availability of scholarships—and affordability in general—as part of the enrollment process—is extremely important to students and their families.



PRIORITY #2: STUDENT SUCCESS

Current presidents, most of whom stated they hold their HBCUs accountable for well-defined student success outcomes, are eager to share how and why they prioritize student success. ***“When building a strong student success infrastructure, institutions must first strategically define student success and what measures are most needed at that institution,”*** said a president of a four-year private HBCU. Many presidents refer to proven solutions and call for more investment to scale these solutions.

Claflin University's President, Dr. Dwaun Warmack, shared a perspective reflected in comments from many other presidents as he described strong, data-informed definitions of student success along a continuum ***“from recruitment, matriculation, graduation, gainful employment.”***

Several presidents alluded to focusing on **“student outcomes measurements and support,”** and as the word cloud shows, **“focused”** and **“goal”**-based advising and support.

Science of Student Success

We asked current presidents:

“What do you believe differentiates your institution in terms of how you help students achieve their goals?”



PRIORITY #2: STUDENT SUCCESS *(continued)*

A president of a private HBCU notes, *“We are a leader in social mobility and success”* and identifies the need to *“continue to hire committed scholar practitioners to advance student success and leverage technology.”* Others indicate they have already *“created a pathway for underprepared students (defined at our institution as those first-time freshmen whose final high school GPAs were under a 2.5) to develop the foundation they need to be successful.”*

Several institutions share unique programming, ranging from free summer bridge programs to paid internship programs to emergency funds to support centers on campus for food, clothing, and mental wellness.

Presidents emphasize their *“laser-focus on student success”* and the need for *“fully immersive wrap-around support,” “meeting students where they are,”* and *“caring for individual student development and success.”*

One president of a four-year private HCBU mentioned, *“We should invest more in programs that support and facilitate student success, linking personal well-being and character development with intellectual and career development,”* while another zeroed in on *“personal attention across the spectrum from first-generation to non-first-generation students.”*

One president described how they *“stopped trying to be like other places and focused on the students we have, not the ones we wish we had, and not the ones we used to have—it is amazing how much more likely students are to be successful when the institution has a growth, not fixed, mindset about its students.”*

Current presidents with more time in the role of president focus on enrolling and retaining students to and through graduation.

As noted, presidents may not be distinguishing Enrollment Management from Student Success. We find that when comparing the priorities of more tenured presidents (i.e., those who self-reported five or more years of experience as a president) with priorities of presidents with fewer than five years of experience, the more tenured presidents prioritize student success more than those with less tenure. This kind of prioritization trend also shows up with presidents of larger schools (by enrollment) as well as public institutions. The data seems to indicate a correlation between the relatively more resourced schools and the student success priority.

Comparative Priorities of Current Presidents by Their Tenure

	TENURE OF 5+ YEARS (15 PRESIDENTS)	TENURE OF <5 YEARS (17 PRESIDENTS)
1	Student Success	Enrollment Management
2	Enrollment Management	Fundraising and Endowment
3	Academic Program Relevance	Student Success
4	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities
5	Fundraising and Endowment	Academic Program Relevance

PRIORITY #2: STUDENT SUCCESS *(continued)*

The larger the school by enrollment, the higher the “student success” priority.

Analyzing current presidents' priorities by size of institution, we found that Presidents of HBCUs with the greatest enrollments (2,000+ students) identified **Student Success** as their highest priority, whereas presidents who represented mid-sized HBCUs (between 1,000 and 2,000 students) identified **Student Success** as their second-highest priority (second to enrollment management), and institutions with the smallest number of enrolled students (<1,000 students) identified Student Success as their fourth-highest priority, following **Enrollment Management**, **Fundraising and Endowment**, and **Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities**.

Comparative Priorities of Current Presidents of HBCUs by Student Enrollment

	2000+ STUDENTS <i>(8 PRESIDENTS)</i>	1000-2000 STUDENTS <i>(13 PRESIDENTS)</i>	<1000 STUDENTS <i>(11 PRESIDENTS)</i>
1	Student Success	Enrollment Management	Enrollment Management
2	Fundraising and Endowment	Student Success	Fundraising and Endowment
3	Academic Program Relevance	Academic Program Relevance	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities
4	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities	Student Success
5	Enrollment Management	Fundraising and Endowment	Academic Program Relevance

Designation of public vs. private influences presidents' prioritization of student success.

Across the 10 public four-year HBCUs, presidents ranked **Student Success** over all other potential priorities, while the leaders of the private institutions ranked **Student Success** after **Enrollment Management**, **Fundraising and Endowment**.

Comparative Priorities of Current Presidents of Public vs. Private HBCUs

	PUBLIC <i>(10 PRESIDENTS)</i>	PRIVATE <i>(22 PRESIDENTS)</i>
1	Student Success	Enrollment Management
2	Enrollment Management	Fundraising and Endowment
3	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities	Student Success
4	Fundraising and Endowment	Academic Program Relevance
5	Academic Program Relevance	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities

PRIORITY #3: FUNDRAISING AND ENDOWMENT

The next two broad areas: Fundraising and Endowment and Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities are closely ranked by current presidents. As noted, we understand that Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities could benefit from further disaggregation, and the Center looks forward to future study and analysis related to the distinct priorities of technology infrastructure and physical infrastructure.

Fundraising and Endowment ranks as a high priority of current presidents.

Since “fundraising and growing the endowment” is somewhat like a wish for more wishes (or more genies when a genie grants a limited number of wishes), the importance of fundraising and growing the endowment cannot be understated. This is especially true for current leaders who believe that HBCUs deserve a minimum of “equitable funding,” which a variety of indicators suggest is not yet in place for HBCUs.

One president of a four-year private institution put it succinctly, saying *“funding for general operations is imperative”* and *“we MUST find a way to grow endowments for our schools.”*

Presidents referred to *“gaps in facilities funding,” “gaps in critical deferred maintenance,”* and *“gaps in student retention funds,”* as well as a desire for an overall increase in *“grant and philanthropic funding.”* Some presidents noted that they *“are aggressively seeking funding through earmarks and need support.”* Others described great creativity in their current efforts. One leader mentioned that even a small increase in funding would improve *“the morale of an institution and its internal stakeholders.”*

Further, one president believes that it is important to *“demystify the use and management of the endowment”* along with growing it, with another mentioning their great success across the last five years in increasing their endowment *“by 100%”* and increasing their *“total assets over 1,000%.”*

Former presidents identified Fundraising and Endowment as the number one priority, tied with Academic Program Relevance. (We cover the perspectives of former presidents more extensively ahead.)

PRIORITY #4: INFRASTRUCTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND FACILITIES

Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities is a high priority with an emphasis on both physical and technological infrastructure.

The priority of *Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities* reflects many HBCU presidents' belief that now is the time to modernize physical and technological aspects of the institution, given that investment in HBCU infrastructure has been insufficient since the birth of these institutions.

Nearly all current presidents' write-in responses raise the notion of investing in and leveraging technology for student success.

A few presidents contrast the need for one-time major upgrades to real property (living, learning, and administrative spaces) and the recurring need for state-of-the-art technology.

Presidents also commonly related the connection between the physical and technology environment with the student experience, mentioning their desire to ***“upgrade facilities, improve processes, and enhance the student experience.”***

When asked about how they might make use of \$3M to \$5M of unrestricted funding, many referred to infrastructure, including deferred maintenance, as an important use of the funding. ***“As a private [institution], the ability to find funding that directly allows impact to infrastructure and technology is crucial and will propel an institution to self-agency,”*** said one president.

PRIORITY #5: ACADEMIC PROGRAM RELEVANCE

Evolving the academy through academic program relevance is imperative.

Without extensively defining **Academic Program Relevance**, we note that current presidents rank this priority among their top five. (Former presidents rank this as their number one priority, tied with fundraising and endowment growth.)

In response to what makes an HBCU move from surviving to thriving, current presidents representing both public and private institutions cited **“relevant academic programs”** along with **“student advising.”** Other presidents, when asked to opine on what students and families would prioritize, mentioned **“competitive academic programs that ensure sustainable career outcomes.”**

“We must remain competitive with our academic programs in addition to co-curricular activities,” stated a president of a private four-year HBCU.

Since HBCU presidents prioritized **Student Success** differently, we became curious about potential differences in other priorities by factors such as graduation rates of their respective institutions. Our analysis revealed the relative priority of **Academic Program Relevance**: specifically, leaders of institutions with below HBCU-average graduation rate prioritize **Academic Program Relevance** more highly.

We identified institutions' six-year graduation rates from the most recent IPEDS data (March 2022), which included 79 HBCUs with more than 50 students in their first-time full-time four-year degree-seeking cohort. The distribution of six-year graduation rates was bell-shaped, with approximately 60% of these HBCUs graduating between 25% and 45% of their students within six years.

While **Enrollment Management** and **Student Success** are the top two considerations across leaders of institutions, regardless of whether their current graduation is less than or greater than the midpoint of 34.6% (see below), we found it interesting to learn what leaders of institutions with “above average” graduation rates prioritized after **Student Success**. While both sets of institutions (below and above the midpoint) prioritized raising funds, institutions that are above the HBCU average graduation rate prioritize **Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities**, while those below the HBCU average prioritize **Academic Program Relevance**.

Comparative Priorities of Current Presidents of HBCUs by Graduation Rate

	SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE <34.6% (17 PRESIDENTS)	SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE >34.6% (13 PRESIDENTS)
1	Student Success	Enrollment Management
2	Enrollment Management	Student Success
3	Academic Program Relevance	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities
4	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities	Fundraising and Endowment
5	Fundraising and Endowment	Academic Program Relevance

PRIORITY #6: INVESTING IN TALENT

Investing in talent is mission-critical.

In write-in responses, more than half of the presidents (9 of 17) who responded to the question, “What additional priorities would you add for all HBCUs?” noted that a top priority would be to invest in talent.

To the question of what should be added to the top of the list of priorities for their specific institution, one current president of a private institution answered “faculty.”

Another president of a four-year public institution mentioned **“faculty & staff pay and benefits,”** while another mentioned **“sourcing quality talent,”** and a third mentioned **“employee professional growth and development.”**

“ One president noted that **“we have to be able to compete for the best talent if we are to maintain a viable institution.”**

This idea of investing in talent was also mentioned frequently as a possible important priority for all HBCU leaders. They indicated a priority across several different roles at the institution. One president articulated this sentiment by saying **“Succession planning for executive leadership and leadership bench development are critical needs at every level in our sector.”**

Another president mentioned **“coaching for presidents/CEOs.”**

Rounding this out, another president mentioned **“leadership pipeline development.”**

Two different presidents mentioned **“faculty renewal”** and **“increasing capacity for additional staffing.”**

One president summed it up by saying that all HBCU leaders would consider it an important priority to develop **“a committed, dedicated, motivated and loyal TEAM!”**

FORMER PRESIDENTS' TOP AREAS OF FOCUS

We gathered input of current presidents and former presidents by administering separate surveys to the two groups. The surveys included different initial demographic questions, but all other questions were the same. In analyzing the results, we cross-checked all current presidents with their listing as a current president on their institution's website (as of October 31, 2023).

Though we have focused the analysis on the input of the current presidents to gain insights into what current presidents of HBCUs prioritize, we found former presidents' top priorities to be mostly consistent with current presidents, with a slight difference in order: tied for first place was **Academic Program Relevance** and **Fundraising and Endowment**, with **Enrollment Management** a close second. The next priority was **Student Success**.

However, former presidents included **Accreditation** as well as **Governance and Leadership** and **Entrepreneurial Leadership** among their top six priorities, so we elaborate on those comments below.

	PRIORITY
1	Academic Program Relevance Fundraising and Endowment
2	Enrollment Management
3	Student Success
4	Accreditation
5	Infrastructure, Technology, and Facilities
6	Governance and Leadership, and Entrepreneurial Leadership

On Accreditation

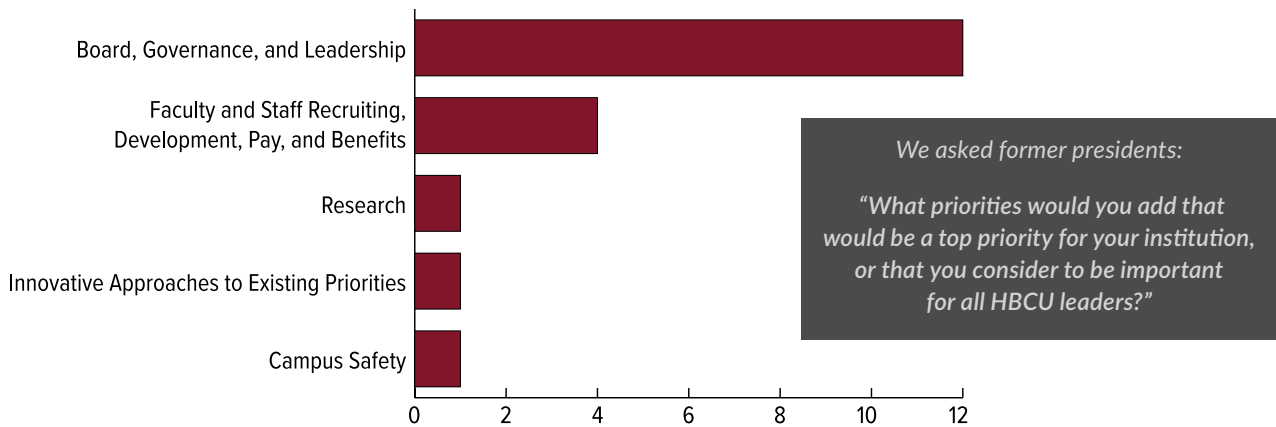
Former presidents especially called out **Accreditation** as a priority. For example, a former president of a four-year private HBCU advised other leaders to ***"become an expert in the area of accreditation and be passionate about your institutional purpose"*** in response to the question about how HBCUs can move further along the journey from survival and sustainability to competitiveness and transformation.

On Governance and Leadership/Entrepreneurial Leadership

While many former presidents indicated the importance of leadership, ***"a high-performing executive leadership team"*** including models of servant leadership, nearly all former presidents responded with these priorities: ***"navigating board governance," "maintaining strong board relations," "improved governance (board)," "board training," "board development and strategic planning,"*** and ***"maintaining strong board relations and having a well-trained board."***

FORMER PRESIDENTS' TOP AREAS OF FOCUS *(continued)*

One former president of a four-year private institution describes that a high priority for their HBCU would be *“developing trustee board [members] that understand their roles and the impact of their relationship with the President and the success of the institution.”*



Summing up the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership, general leadership, and board relations, one former president of a four-year private HBCU writes:

“The HBCU journey from survival and sustainability to competitiveness and transformation is one that is very challenging that requires the support of all key constituents of the institution, faculty, staff, alumni, community, administration and the board. To reach a level of competitiveness and transformation, the institution must have transformative leadership, a supportive board and other key constituents willing to work together to advance the college. It is also important that the institution has a transformative strategic plan that challenges all to implement the changes necessary to elevate the college/ university to a higher level. Moreover, the institution must embrace an entrepreneurial approach to ensure that it is generating the revenue and resources to support and sustain a competitive environment for the institution.



“Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero.”

African Proverb

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Dr. Roderick L. Smothers, Sr., Executive Director of the Center for the Study and Preservation of HBCUs, reflects on his own and fellow presidents’ perspectives.

On more than one occasion, I have heard this African Proverb used by Dr. Johnetta Cole, President Emerita of Benedict and Spelman Colleges and Dr. Norman C. Francis, one of the longest serving college presidents in U.S. History. They used the proverb to encourage the Presidents and Chancellors of HBCUs to tell the stories of their institutions and to use their voices to amplify—unapologetically—the needs of those institutions so that their students could be better served.

As we come to the completion of this HBCU Priorities Survey, I am proud to say that from “the president perspective,” a compelling and powerful story is told about their priorities and a clear narrative has been formed. The results represent a resounding echo from those “Lions” roaring in the trenches to save, sustain, transform and elevate our nation’s beloved HBCUs.

These echoes represent 58 HBCU leaders lending their voices to this important work by the completion of the survey, as well as 13 interviews that I conducted in my role as Executive Director of the Virginia Union University (VUU) Center for the Study of HBCUs. These combined inputs position this study as one of the most comprehensive reports of the last quarter century and perhaps beyond. These presidents understand what it means to not only represent the work, but to live it daily.

In a post-pandemic environment, the current and future position of HBCUs look very different. Enrollment trends are shifting in favor of short-term credentials with slight increases in freshman enrollment; performance-based funding measures that impact federal aid are on the horizon; the reimagination of business and student success models have become paramount; and state and federal laws and mandates affecting campus cultures—inside and outside of the classroom—are just a few of the prevailing issues with which the modern day HBCU president/chancellor must grapple. In fact, the new normal at the turn of twenty-first-century will require colleges and universities, including and especially HBCUs, to evolve and shift to a new posture of transformation and competitiveness.

The data collected, however, not only prioritizes the issues that HBCU presidents consider to be important today and into the future (see page 13), but it also provides five focus imperatives that must be considered as the necessary shift occurs.

FIVE FOCUS IMPERATIVES	
Vision, voice, and leadership matter.	The diverse backgrounds of the participating presidents spoke resoundingly to the reality that leadership makes a difference. Visionary leaders must be courageous enough to amplify the successes and needs of their institutions, while simultaneously exhibiting the savviness needed to address the multifaceted demands of their constituent bases.
Partnerships and collaborations are key competitiveness enablers.	Strategic partnerships and collaborations that yield the engagement and resources needed for new levels of competitiveness appeared to be a top priority for most of the responding presidents. The data also revealed that internal collaborations are also necessary in a shifting future-focused environment.
Enrollment Management and Student Success are indelibly linked.	The emergent themes surrounding the necessity for strategic enrollment growth and improved student success models was another clear competitiveness imperative. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center continue to support the looming and inevitable student enrollment cliff. Hence, a strategic focus on setting up current students for success should be prioritized by presidents and their leadership teams.
Strengthening institutional capacity to improve infrastructure and spawn innovation is a must.	From recruitment to online learning opportunities to physical environs, the data spoke very loudly on this matter. HBCUs must innovate. HBCUs must transform their digital experiences. HBCUs must upgrade old facilities and build new infrastructures and systems that will provide technologically advanced educational experiences that lead to new levels of competitiveness for their students, faculty and staff. This sentiment, without question, was one of the most urgent emergent themes. The ability to transform and shift in this space will make the difference between those who succeed and those who fail.
HBCUs must be mission-driven and future-focused.	The survival of HBCUs over the past 150+ years and the meaningful contributions that they have made to society can be largely attributed to the fidelity to their unique historic missions. Now focused on the future, HBCUs must boldly declare a multifaceted, future-focused vision and mission, while simultaneously cementing a strategy that secures their contemporary relevance and place in the global marketplace of the future.

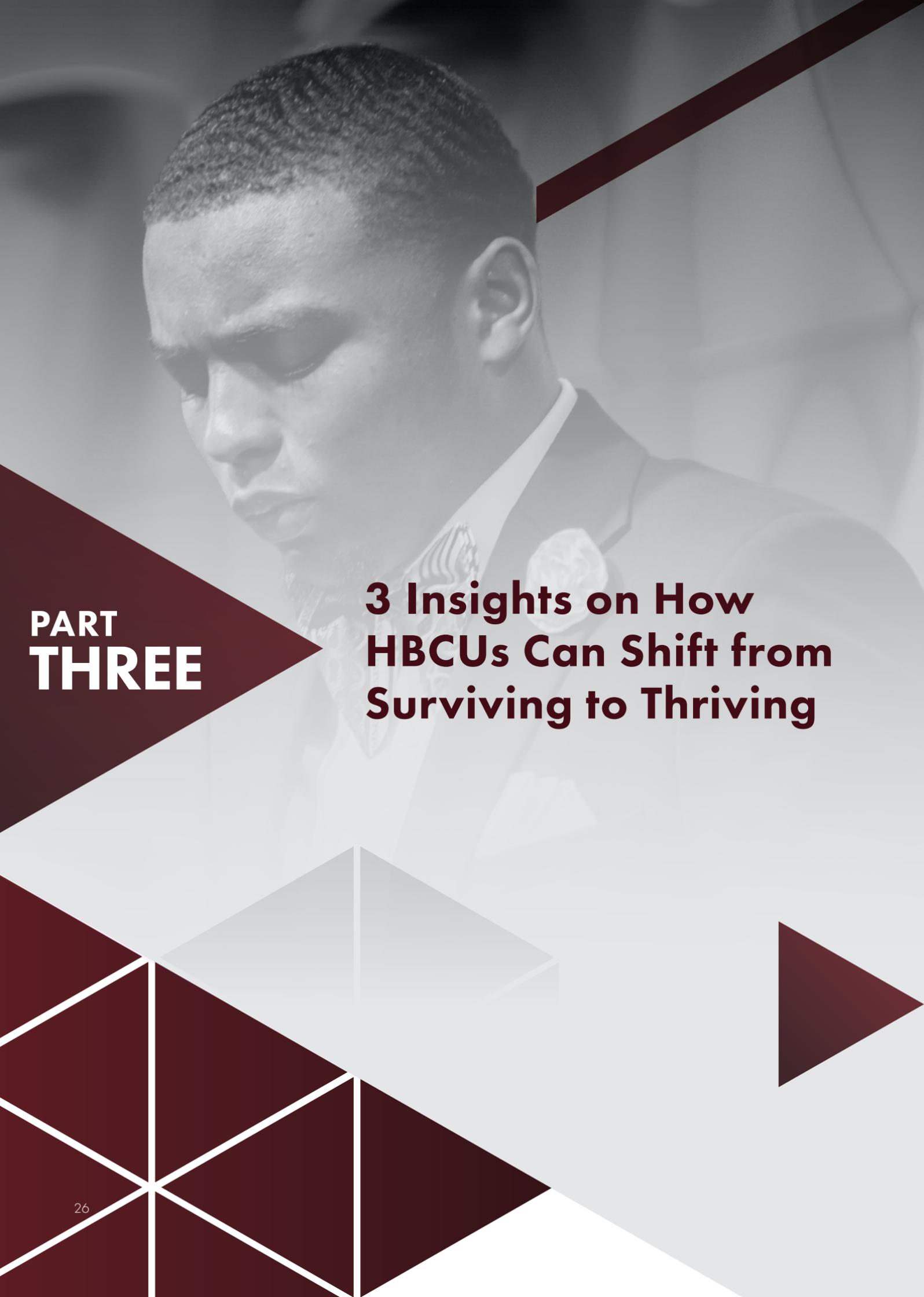
My nine-year journey as President/CEO of Philander Smith College also informed my own personal responses to the survey. In response to a common refrain that I often received in the form of a question as an HBCU President was “Are HBCUs still relevant?” With pride, I would respond with data and facts that provided the questioner with a different perspective to consider. In effect, I was telling the story from the perspective of the Lion and not the Hunter.

The reality is that significant progress has been made at our HBCUs. They are historic in their mission, yet they represent the best-in-class of the future. They are and continue to be under-resourced, yet they continue to produce results that would suggest they have unlimited resources.

Their students are majority first-generation, low-income, people of color from underserved communities, yet they continue to defy the odds due to the quality education and nurturing that students receive at an HBCU. Ultimately, the successes of these students/graduates comprise the success stories that define the HBCU experience.

This report provides a much-needed refreshed perspective on HBCU transformation and competitiveness. The results are a narrative changer. It sets forth the priorities through the lens of HBCU presidents who understand that transformation starts with getting the right data and the right message in the hands of the right people so that they can make the right decisions at the right time. To the reader, now is the time, to invest in and collaborate with your local HBCU.

—Dr. Roderick L. Smothers, Sr.



**PART
THREE**

**3 Insights on How
HBCUs Can Shift from
Surviving to Thriving**

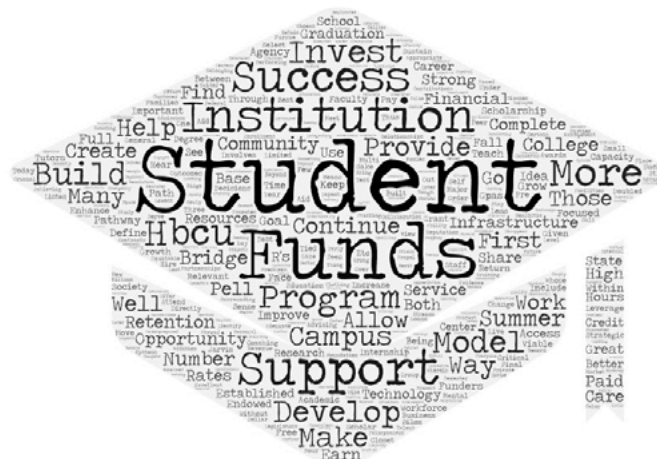
INSIGHT #1

Invest in the “Student Success Matrix of Metrics” and “Intrusive Advising”

Throughout this study, we asked presidents for their ideas and collective wisdom on how HBCUs can make the shift from surviving to thriving, from sustainability to vitality. As a quick observation based on presidents’ written responses to this question, their collective wisdom centers on placing the student first, i.e., investing in student support and success that will in turn drive institutional success, so that each HBCU can have an even greater positive impact on the community.

We asked current presidents:

“Please share any other thoughts that come to mind in the HBCU journey from survival and sustainability to competitiveness and transformation.”



It is worth repeating that presidents strongly believe in the wisdom and results that come from investing in what they call the “continuum,” the “student success matrix” of metrics, and “intrusive advising.”



From recruitment, matriculation, graduation, gainful employment, there’s a continuum to ensure no student falls through the crack during that space. We’re intentional about creating strategies for that.

—Dwaun Warmack, President, Claflin University

One president defines the role of student success coaches and personnel from different student support offices as “coming together to provide intrusive advising in a data-informed capacity.”

Paul Jones, President of Fort Valley State University, describes Fort Valley’s partnership with Georgia State University and its National Institute for Student Success: “That is really important because I think that when we don’t get up over that hurdle, in many cases, [students]...are in worse shape.”

In many presidents’ experiences, when data-informed, intrusive advising is accomplished intentionally, student retention and graduation steadily improve.



We have student success coaches. They are with students all four years to ensure seamless advising. Also, we have early intervention where everybody plays a role: deans, student success coaches, financial aid, housing, student affairs. They meet once per month [to address]...who is on the early alert list to ensure that we are following up. We now have an 81% retention rate because of the intentionality.”

—Dwaun Warmack, President, Claflin University

INSIGHT #2

Remain Focused on Graduating Students Who Elevate the Community

HBCUs must remain focused on graduating students who elevate the community. Presidents pointed to each HBCU's foundational ethos, whether rooted in religious principles or principles of social contribution.

President Herman J. Felton, Jr. of Wiley College paraphrasing John Wesley, describes this by saying, ***“Do all the good you can to all those who you can for as long as you can.”*** He goes on to say that students can go anywhere, get a quality education, move on to graduate school, ***“jump out into the private sector,”*** and do good work. The role of HBCUs, he believes, is that of ***“producing good human beings to be part of the global society.”***

In addition to the focus on STEM and other careers with greater potential for upward economic mobility, many presidents encouraged fellow HBCUs and supporters of HBCUs to stay committed to producing graduates who pursue teaching, social work, and other vocational areas that often do not compensate to the same level as engineering, computer science, medicine, and some specializations in the legal field.

“ *I think that someone has to be responsible for the social and moral fabric of our nation and that's a space that especially the small liberal arts HBCU performs far and above any other. If you want [children] ...to reach the 3rd grade reading level, you're not going to get there with an engineer, but you're going to get there with a teacher. I think that this focus on STEM is absolutely right. I am a STEM graduate myself, but it can't be at the expense of elementary school teachers, social workers, those people that get us to the place where we can be the best engineers and computer scientists in the world. Don't discount being a liberal arts institution and the value that it has brought to our nation. Somewhere we've got to find a way to balance that so that we can continue to allow people to be great philosophers and thinkers and writers, and that's what HBCUs do. And we want to continue to do that unapologetically because we define that as student success as well.*

—Paulette Dillard, President, Shaw University

HBCUs' commitment to their graduates' impact on the community is nearly universal.

“ *If we can grow incredible men and women—which we do—transform their lives into being something different, if we can give them the skills so they can go out and make money, whether they're working for a corporation, working for the government or on their own as an entrepreneur, I think we're winning. And that's success. And then having that same impact on their community. We take them and we send them back to their communities to make a difference.”*

—Makola Abdullah, President, Virginia State University

INSIGHT #3

Continue to Fight for Rights and Recognition of the Role of HBCUs

HBCUs must continue to fight for rights and recognition of their role in United States, especially the smaller institutions that are less well-known. Presidents feel that it is important for HBCUs to unite to grow their scope in the nation's higher education ecosystem, where many institutions have billion-dollar endowments, pointing out that no HBCU has a billion-dollar endowment.

Despite more attention being given to HBCUs in the last few years and their own appreciation of the importance of evolving with modern technology and economic opportunities, presidents believe they must remain extremely vigilant to enable successive generations of students and broader society to highlight the role of each and every HBCU.



While we are fighting for our rights moving forward, we've got to [protect]...the rights that our ancestors have secured for us. Human rights, women's rights specifically—are being attacked. Stepping back and reprioritizing things that are important for our students for them to carry on and make sure that our institutions exist in the future.”

—Patricia Sims, President, Drake State Community & Technical College

HBCU leaders are committed to collectively highlighting successes and opportunities. Several admit to under-appreciating the importance of storytelling and marketing to garner more support. Many presidents' comments call for a doing ***“a better job of collectively highlighting our successes.”***

Paulette Dillard, President of Shaw University, reminds us, ***“You can't give to or invest in something you don't know about.”*** President Dillard has committed herself, as have the dozens of other leaders who have participated in this study, to share their stories. And in her words, ***“They are amazing stories.”***



A man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt, is standing in a meeting room. He is holding a pen in his right hand and gesturing with his left hand. The room has a whiteboard and a large window in the background. A large, dark red triangle is overlaid on the image, pointing towards the right. The word "CONCLUSION" is written in white capital letters across the middle of the triangle.

CONCLUSION

A VISION FOR PARTNERSHIP ACROSS HBCUs

Presidents believe in partnerships across HBCUs, especially across smaller HBCUs. At a high level, they seek to amplify the strengths that each institution brings to the table and to work together to create new opportunities to serve students and communities. There is clear agreement that, holistically, institutions can come together to “scale up” what they do and that partnering together on amplifying strengths is essential to *“create a margin for excellence.”*

“ *I deeply believe that collaboration is the new form of domination...Ultimately, we need a margin for excellence. Subsistence, basic, ‘make your budget,’ that’s not where the game is. The game really is on developing that margin. That allows us to be innovative and creative and [to] scale up*

—Roslyn Clark Artis, President, Benedict College

Presidents describe three examples of what partnership could yield:

1. Purchasing Power: They mention preferential pricing and purchasing power for state-of-the-art solutions. Noting that many HBCUs have relatively small enrollments, they describe ways that several can present themselves as one institution, whether that is geographically or per some other criteria, to receive better pricing for a solution or a better solution for a given price.

2. Shared Services: Presidents described shared services ranging from IT infrastructure to cybersecurity to data analytics, as well as student-facing services, such as career skills development and mental health services.

“ *As we look at what we will be facing in cybersecurity, it is going to be impossible for our universities to afford the insurance and some of the things that will come along with cybersecurity and supporting that mandatory effort. We are going to have to come together as a consortium of schools to make sure that we’re able to meet the needs as it relates to cybersecurity....As we look at the hard-to-fill positions and sponsored programs, it would be beneficial for us to collaborate to share resources. What we learned during Covid is that telehealth is very important. Perhaps there is a way to share those resources as well.*

—LaTonia Collins Smith, President, Harris-Stowe State University

3. Sharing World-Class Talent: While acknowledging that this is very challenging in terms of maintaining differentiators, presidents asserted that it may be time to think about how to share faculty and course offerings, especially across large geographies. One president described these forward-thinking institutions as perhaps “really cracking the new code for survivability.”

In participating in this study and working together, HBCU presidents strive to create a bridge over the resource-divides between them, between HBCUs as a sector of higher education and other parts of higher education, and—most important, in the words of **President Hakim J. Lucas of Virginia Union University**—*“between all students whom they seek to position to change the destiny of their own lives and the lives of their families and communities.”*

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

We thank the 58 participants of this study, including Congresswoman Alma Adams, who represents the 12th District of North Carolina. As of October 31, 2023, we have cross-referenced the role and title each president submitted with links to their institutional affiliations here in this table. While we promised anonymity as to the specifics of their response to those who participated in the survey portion of the study, with their permission, we quote those 12 presidents who were interviewed on-camera.

The Center acknowledges that despite our effort to incorporate the input of the presidents of all HBCUs, our study represents only 44 unique institutions out of a possible 104. Please note that for our analysis, we consider 104 HBCUs comprised of a combination of the Rutgers MSI List, which is derived from existing federal grants and grant applications, and the IPEDS HBCU designation, which derives its definitions from legislation that established HBCUs as a designation. While Rutgers and IPEDS agree on 101 HBCUs, IPEDS also counts Selma University and Southern University Law Center, and Rutgers additionally counts Morris Brown College.

	Institution	State	4-Year or 2-Year	Public / Private	Name Provided	Role / Title Provided	Current or Former	Survey and/or Interview
1	Arkansas Baptist College	AR	4-Year	Private	Calvin McFadden	President	Current	Survey
					Fitzgerald Hill	President	Former	Survey
2	Benedict College	SC	4-Year	Private	Roslyn Clark Artis	President & CEO	Current	Both
					Marshall Grigsby	Senior Advisor for Higher Education	Former	Survey
3	Bennett College	NS	4-Year	Private	Phyllis Worthy Dawkins	Executive Director, HBCU Executive Leadership Institute	Former	Survey
					Suzanne Walsh	President	Current	Survey
4	Bethune-Cookman University	LF	4-Year	Private	Trudie Kibbe Reed	President (Dr.)	Former	Survey
5	Bowie State University	MD	4-Year	Public	Aminta H. Breaux	President	Current	Interview
					Paige Blake	Student Member of The President's Board of Advisors on HBCUs	Current	Survey
6	Claflin University	SC	4-Year	Private	Dwaun J. Warmack	President	Current	Both
7	Clinton College	SC	4-Year	Private	Lester A. McCorn	President	Current	Survey
8	Delaware State University	DE	4-Year	Public	Harry Williams	President & CEO	Former	Survey
9	Denmark Technical College	SC	2-Year	Public	Willie L. Todd, Jr.	President/CEO	Current	Survey
10	Dillard University	LA	4-Year	Private	Rochelle Ford	President	Current	Survey
					Walter Kimbrough	Interim Executive Director, Black Men's Research Institute	Former	Both

	Institution	State	4-Year or 2-Year	Public / Private	Name Provided	Role / Title Provided	Current or Former	Survey and/or Interview
11	Edward Waters College	FL	4-Year	Private	A. Zachary Faison Jr.	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
12	Fisk University	TN	4-Year	Private	Frank L. Sims	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
13	Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University	FL	4-Year	Public	Elmira Mangum	<u>President</u>	Former	Survey
14	Fort Valley State University	GA	4-Year	Public	Paul Jones	<u>President</u>	Current	Interview
15	Grambling State University	LA	4-Year	Public	Rick Gallot	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
					Dr. Leonard L. Haynes III	<u>Senior VP and Special Advisor for HBCU Initiatives</u>	Former	Survey
16	Harris-Stowe State University	MO	4-Year	Public	LaTonia Collins Smith	<u>President</u>	Current	Both
17	Huston-Tillotson University	TX	4-Year	Private	Melva Wallace	<u>President and CEO</u>	Current	Survey
					Larry Earvin	<u>President</u>	Former	Survey
18	J. F. Drake State Community and Technical College	AL	2-Year	Public	Patricia Sims	<u>President</u>	Current	Both
19	Jarvis Christian College	TX	4-Year	Private	Glenell M. Lee-Pruitt	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
					Lester C. Newman	<u>President</u>	Former	Survey
20	Kentucky State University	KY	4-Year	Public	Ronald A. Johnson	<u>Interim President</u>	Former	Survey
21	Lane College	TN	4-Year	Private	Logan Hampton	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
22	Lincoln University of Missouri	MO	4-Year	Public	John Moseley	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
23	Miles College	AL	4-Year	Private	Dr. Steven E. Hairston, CFRM	<u>Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Development</u>	Current	Survey
24	Mississippi Valley State University	MS	4-Year	Public	Jerryl Briggs	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
25	North Carolina Central University	NC	4-Year	Public	Charlie Nelms	<u>Chancellor</u>	Former	Survey
26	Oakwood University	AL	4-Year	Private	Leslie Pollard	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
27	Paul Quinn College	TX	4-Year	Private	Michael Sorrell	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
28	Philander Smith College	AR	4-Year	Private	Cynthia A. Bond Hopson	<u>Interim President & CEO</u>	Current	Survey
					Dr. Lloyd Edward Hervey	<u>Interim President/Chair of the Division of Education</u>	Former	Survey
					Roderick L. Smothers	<u>President/CEO</u>	Former	Both
29	Saint Augustine's University	NC	4-Year	Private	Christine Johnson McPhail	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
					Dianne Boardley Suber	<u>Special Assistant to the President</u>	Former	Survey
30	Shaw University	NC	4-Year	Private	Paulette Dillard	<u>President</u>	Current	Interview
					Dr. Dorothy Cowser Yancy	<u>President Emerita</u>	Former	Survey
31	Southern University and A & M College	LA	4-Year	Public	Dennis J. Shields	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
32	Southern University Law Center	LA	Other	Public	John Pierre	<u>Chancellor</u>	Current	Survey
33	Spelman College	GA	4-Year	Private	Helene Gayle	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
34	Stillman College	AL	4-Year	Private	Norman Golar	<u>Interim Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Research</u>	Current	Survey
35	Talladega College	AL	4-Year	Private	Gregory Vincent	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
36	Tennessee State University	TN	4-Year	Public	Dr. Glenda Glover	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey
37	Tougaloo College	MS	4-Year	Private	Beverly Wade Hogan	<u>President</u>	Former	Survey
38	University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	AR	4-Year	Public	Laurence B. Alexander	<u>Chancellor</u>	Current	Survey
39	Virginia State University	VA	4-Year	Public	Makola Abdullah	<u>President</u>	Current	Both
40	Virginia Union University	VA	4-Year	Private	Hakim J. Lucas	<u>President</u>	Current	Both
41	Voorhees College	SC	4-Year	Private	Dr. Ronnie Hopkins	<u>President and CEO</u>	Current	Survey
42	Wilberforce University	OH	4-Year	Private	Algeania Freeman	<u>President/CEO</u>	Former	Survey
					Elfred Anthony Pinkard	<u>President</u>	Former	Survey
43	Wiley College	TX	4-Year	Private	Herman J. Felton, Jr.	<u>President</u>	Current	Both
44	Xavier University of Louisiana	LA	4-Year	Private	Reynold Verret	<u>President</u>	Current	Survey





ABOUT THE PARTNERS

ABOUT

The Center for the Study of HBCUs, in partnership with the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), at Virginia Union University is a national research center whose vision is to become the country's preeminent institute for the advancement of scholarship on Black colleges in the United States and beyond. The Center has a discovery agenda that ranges from foundational inquiry to translational and disruptive, transformational innovations. The Center for the Study of HBCUs conducts rigorous, evidence-based research that aims to advance the University's research agenda, expand institutional capacities, transform institutions, eradicate institutional inequities, and ensure the future of HBCUs in the nation and beyond.



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CENTER FOR THE STUDY *of* HBCUS

Our mission is achieved through four primary activities or roles:

1. CONDUCT research and scholarship;
2. CONVENE the HBCU scholarly community;
3. MOBILIZE resources in support of advancing HBCU research;
4. DISSEMINATE research and scholarship broadly.

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ABOUT

Student Freedom Initiative (SFI) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that provides a catalyst for freedom in professional and life choices for students attending a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) by increasing their social and economic mobility. In close collaboration with participating schools and other strategic partners, we address the wealth gap through the lens of affordable access to a college education, opportunity for hands on professional and life training, integrated student services, and technology enhancement. We provide support to students that enable their future personal and professional success in a global marketplace and targeted support to participating institutions that increase their resiliency and competitiveness as anchors within their respective communities.

Among Student Freedom Initiative's Strategic Outcomes Are:

1. Liberate students to make professional and life choices;
2. Increase African-American economic mobility;
3. Provide more favorable terms and flexibility than alternatives;
4. Institutionalize scalable platform to support students;
5. Enable HBCU transformation, resilience, and increased competitiveness;
6. Provide transformative model for policy, researchers, and policy advocates.

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