

Policy Brief | November 2023

A series from the Southern Regional Education Board on the 2022 Higher Education Leadership Foundation Conference

The Future of Academic Affairs 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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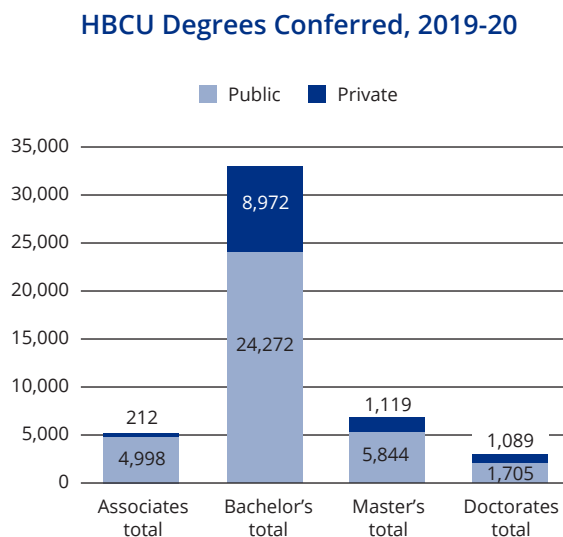
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This report explores the experiences of conference attendees who participated in the Academic Affairs sessions over the three-day convening. Over the course of the conference, attendees developed partnerships with other institutions. This unprecedented opportunity to bring together various HBCU leaders and stakeholders helped to lay the foundation for future convenings and foster further collaboration and innovation.

Academic Affairs for Success

Academic Programs

When HBCUs were founded in the 1800s, the goal was to educate Black Americans in agriculture and vocational trades. Today, programs are often established to meet career needs and help increase diversity in typically homogeneous fields. Some HBCUs offer a comprehensive selection of degrees and majors while others focus on specific fields such as liberal arts, science, technology, engineering and math, professional fields like law, medicine and pharmacy, or associate degrees and certificate programs. In 2019-20, some 48,200 degrees were conferred by HBCUs — 11% were associate degrees, 69% bachelor’s degrees, 14% master’s degrees and 6% doctoral degrees.



All institutions of higher education must be ready to quickly adapt, add or discontinue programs in response to declining federal and state financial support, growing competition among institutions, increased requirements for reporting on student outcomes and performance, and the rapidly changing needs of the labor market. These include the need to focus on technology, offer new workforce-relevant credentials and provide programs that are flexible and accessible to working adults. The ability to quickly adapt programs to meet changing workforce needs and provide flexible, accessible education will be critical for HBCUs to fulfill their objectives of providing an excellent education for Black Americans and promoting diversity in the workplace.

Academic Support for Student Success

In recent years, postsecondary institutions, policymakers and educators have realized the growing importance of academic and career guidance for college students. Beyond helping students select coursework, academic advisors guide students toward self-discovery and help them set life goals and tackle academic challenges. Typical career services include individual

mentoring, career interest assessments, workshops on major selection, job search, résumé preparation and interviewing, career libraries, networking opportunities and job fairs. However, career services are often provided unevenly across institutions, and many students report difficulty accessing support services or finding relevant services that help them navigate today's rapidly changing labor market. As institutions seek to adapt guidance programs to the evolving needs of graduates and employers, HBCUs face a steeper climb than predominately white institutions. HBCUs tend to enroll more first-generation college students who may need intensive support to persist and graduate.

Faculty and Leadership Development

Strong mentoring programs can further faculty members' professional development and foster positive outcomes during the tenure and promotion process. Additionally, mentoring by HBCU faculty members is often exemplary and has encouraged and empowered students to pursue graduate and professional programs. Mentoring at student and faculty levels is key to fostering institutional success. However, heavy workloads, lower salaries compared to predominantly white institutions, and limited involvement in institutional decision-making can pose significant challenges to supporting a well-functioning HBCU faculty.

Overarching Concepts and Challenges

Accreditation

Participants in the Academic Affairs conference sessions described challenges related to accreditation standards and processes. Many accreditation processes have changed and evolved to require more data and demonstrate impact through data usage. Just as the accreditation systems have evolved and adapted to make sure the student needs are being met, HBCU academic affairs offices also need to be adaptive and develop strategies that will allow for successful accreditation processes. As many participants noted, it is important to ensure that a wide variety of faculty and staff are involved in the accreditation process from the onset and to adopt policies and procedures that demonstrate the culture and success of the institution.

Institutional Finances

HBCU financial issues were the main discussion topic. Participants relayed their concerns about an ongoing conflict between financial management and financial resources. Participants agreed that HBCU financial issues that challenge accreditation result from serving students who often cannot afford to pay tuition and fees. This mission impacts every aspect of academics from being able to hire leading faculty, to providing students with the resources and support needed to succeed. Participants acknowledged that now is a good time for HBCUs to reach out to funders and partners for support, since HBCUs are in the limelight and the funders want to help.

HBCUs of the Future

Technology's impact on faculty and student needs and responsibilities was also discussed. While many institutions had slowly been embracing new learning technologies, the global pandemic accelerated the need for functional technology to continue day-to-day learning and institutional business. While many faculty were able to make the technological shifts needed to continue teaching and supporting students, this was not always the case. Successful adoption of new technology for instructional purposes varied widely at public, private, large or small institutions, depending on resources, willingness to adapt, institutional support and more.

Participants in the Academic Affairs sessions shared anecdotes about faculty members unable or unwilling to lean into the new technological practices needed to address asynchronous learning and fulfill their responsibilities as faculty members. The pandemic highlighted the technological shortcomings of some HBCUs as well as the inability of some faculty to adapt to changing responsibilities. Their positions were no longer just about teaching, but also leading, mentoring and guiding students on how to adapt to change – technological or otherwise. While many faculty members left the profession during the pandemic, participants told many, if not more, stories about faculty members who went above and beyond to support students during this trying time.

Ideation

During the Academic Affairs sessions, participants agreed that ideas and solutions are birthed from gatherings such as the IIC 2022 conference and that before this moment, there had not been a space to think about the sustainability of academic affairs within higher education and specifically within HBCUs.

Innovation

New Academic Programming

Participants in the Academic Affairs sessions agreed that business-as-usual was not working and that faculty, staff and administration cannot and should not continue to do things in the same way. What was practical for HBCUs and academic affairs 20 years ago may not be practical today. In addition to relying on tried-and-true efforts in academics, multiple participants suggested that institutions should look to their own students for new and innovative ideas for academic programming. For example, several academic affairs representatives ruminated on what degree programs or credentialing could look like for students interested in social media. From content creation to social media marketing, session participants acknowledged the need for new credentials to attract and address a new generation of HBCU students.

Faculty Diversity

Additionally, participants agreed that HBCUs and faculty need to discover new ways to invest in students wanting to obtain advanced degrees. Several academic affairs representatives highlighted their disappointment that higher education in general is not producing enough doctorates from Black and Indigenous people, thus decreasing sustainability. The SREB report *Now is the Time to Focus on Faculty Diversity* corroborates this sentiment indicating that often, students do not see themselves reflected in the academic leaders in their classrooms. The report further indicates that the lack of representation is problematic, as research from multiple sources shows that racial and ethnic diversity has positive effects on the educational experiences and outcomes of students.

Collaboration

Sharpening a Competitive Edge: How HBCUs Leverage Their Strengths with Strategic Partnerships discusses the cultural makeup of HBCUs as their greatest strength and using this strength will help the institutions to forge new pathways. Partnerships with corporations, government entities and predominantly white institutions can help to increase philanthropic donations from these organizations and provide a variety of cultural exchanges and perspectives to entities that can also benefit from helping to develop Black scholars with baccalaureate and other advanced degrees. The article indicates that HBCUs are uniquely able to serve Black students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds through academic and cultural environments that promote a desire to learn.

Outside of HBCUs

Throughout the Academic Affairs sessions at the IIC 2022 conference, participants reflected on these same sentiments. Speaking from firsthand experience, several participants shared that partnering with larger HBCUs and predominately white institutions helped to build capacity among staff and, consequently, provide greater support for both faculty and students. When applying for National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health grants, participants highlighted the need to leverage institutional strengths and partner with organizations and institutions that can help strengthen the grant applications, making them more likely to be selected.

On-campus Collaboration

Collaborative efforts within individual institutions were identified by participants as both a challenge and an opportunity. Before considering any joint efforts, HBCUs should clearly understand the students they are serving. To better support students academically, session participants agreed that developing critical thinking and communication skills are a key to success. Participants affirmed in multiple sessions that everyone on campus is responsible for teaching students how to speak and write effectively. Supporting students and faculty becomes easier when institutions work to break down internal silos.

Final Takeaways and Building Blocks

The three-day IIC 2022 conference offered an unprecedented opportunity to bring together HBCU leadership, funders and industry change agents to ideate and contemplate the future of the HBCU sector. The individual track-based sessions allowed participants to dive deeper into more focused areas. The conversations in the Academic Affairs sessions revealed several overarching themes to include the following:

1. Building the necessary processes for accreditation and include key constituents from the onset.

HBCU academic affairs must be adaptive and able to develop strategies that will allow for successful accreditation processes. Ensuring that a wide variety of faculty and staff are involved in the accreditation process from the beginning and adopting policies and procedures that demonstrate the culture and success of the institution can facilitate successful movement through the accreditation process.

2. Building a framework for new and innovative academic programming.

Instead of relying on business-as-usual tactics in academics, HBCUs and academic affairs should look to their own students for new and innovative degree programs and credentials. While traditional degree programs can still serve the needs of a large portion of the student population, new programming can help students prepare for careers of the future.

3. Building partnerships on- and off-campus to support the needs of students and faculty.

HBCUs and their academic staff should work to leverage their institutional and academic strengths. This can help to build capacity among staff and provide greater support for both faculty and students. On that same end, building internal partnerships on campus can help break down barriers and further support the needs of the staff, students and communities served by the institution.

4. Building the infrastructure (human, capital and technological) to sustain the institution.

Although the global pandemic highlighted technological shortcomings at HBCUs, and some faculty and staff were unable to adapt to changing responsibilities, most institutions were able to successfully shift to online learning and continued to support students on their academic journeys. By providing students and faculty with the necessary human capital and technological infrastructure needed to support learning, HBCUs can continue to provide teaching, leading and mentoring experiences to help develop students as they launch careers or pursue advanced degrees.

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