

Policy Brief | November 2023

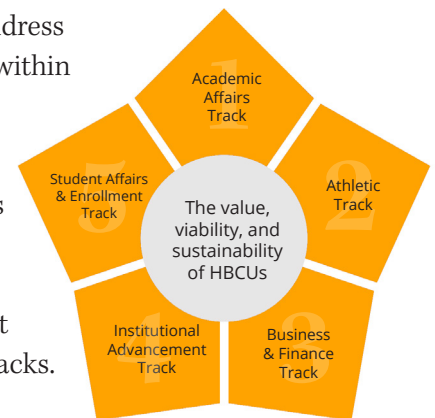
A series from the Southern Regional Education Board on the 2022 Higher Education Leadership Foundation Conference

The Future of Athletics 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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Athletics, which has traditionally been a pivotal part of HBCUs' cultural and social symbol, was one of the conference's five main tracks. In addition to addressing the new opportunities and challenges brought on by changes in policy and the landscape of collegiate athletics — including name, image and likeness and compensation for scholar-athletes — this athletics track examined how to better support scholar-athletes' needs, both academic and nonacademic. Participants in this track learned more about how to support the ongoing success of HBCU sports programs.

HBCUs play an essential role in higher education, and athletics is an area where these institutions can continue to excel. However, HBCU athletic departments face new challenges due to policy changes in scholar-athlete compensation and name, image or likeness, or NIL, limited funding and changing strategic plans. By addressing these challenges, HBCUs can provide unique opportunities for their students and communities.

Athletics at HBCUs Today

Currently, 53 of 102 HBCUs are associated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association. According to the NCAA directory, 23 HBCUs are Division I institutions (20 public and three private) and 30 are Division II institutions (15 public and 15 private). Together, these HBCUs offer 24 sports. Still, HBCU athletic departments often have access to fewer funds compared to predominantly white institutions. In *Perceptions of the Fiscal Challenges Facing Athletic Departments of Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, authors Kelly Elliott and Timothy Kellison investigate the financial difficulties experienced by HBCU athletic departments. The authors contend that HBCUs face significant revenue challenges due to serving low-income students and their smaller endowments, leading to reduced operating costs. HBCUs allocate less funding each year to operating expenses, head coach salaries, recruiting and athletic scholarships compared to other institutions. In fact, athletic and retaining funds available at Division I HBCUs rank near the bottom of Division 1 institutions.

With recent policy changes regarding scholar-athlete compensation and NIL, HBCU athletic departments are facing new challenges. An NCAA NIL policy approved in July 2021 allows scholar-athletes to earn fiscal compensation through branding and marketing deals. The policy also creates a marketing opportunity for HBCUs to apply for new funding and their alumni base to set up deals for scholar-athletes. Still, HBCUs need to ascertain ways to level the requirements of their scholars while negotiating challenges for both academic and nonacademic growth.

Established in 2007, the NCAA's Supplementary Support Fund offers grants to programs that retain scholar-athletes as they complete their degree. The SSF seeks to increase scholar-athlete retention rates and degree completion rates by offering additional funds to colleges with scarce resources, especially HBCUs. These funds support programs that help scholar-athletes overcome financial obstacles, including academic counseling, tutoring, scholar-athlete development programs, scholarships and grants.

Academic programs like the NCAA's Academic Progress Rates are another approach to helping scholar-athletes. However, the APR system has drawn criticism for unfairly punishing HBCUs for failing to meet standards such as scholar-athlete retention and academic status. These APR standards assume a baseline for scholar-athletes' origins; however, they do not consider that HBCUs have a distinct student body compared to universities with a predominately white student body. This can perpetuate systemic inequalities and unfairly penalize HBCUs and their scholar-athletes for not meeting the standards, despite doing everything they can to support them with available resources. This system can work against HBCU scholar-athletes and HBCUs, as they may not have access to the same academic resources and support as other universities, ultimately impacting their success both on and off the field. While SSF is a promising approach, there is still much to be done to address the systemic injustices that can hinder scholar-athletes at HBCUs.

Another challenge for HBCU athletic departments is strategic planning. Inadequate funding for long-term initiatives such as facility additions and renovation can impair HBCUs' ability to increase enrollment for scholar-athletes and the students overall success. Better use of marketing and social media is a cost-effective opportunity to improve community engagement. This can share scores and games schedules to athletic department websites and social media. Social media is an effective tool for HBCUs to interact with a vast fan base and raise awareness of their school. With billions of users on platforms like TikTok, X, formerly known as Twitter, and Instagram, HBCUs could share the stories of their athletes with an audience outside of their immediate community.

By using targeted social media advertising, HBCUs can reach new demographics or geographic regions and perhaps get new followers and supporters in addition to their current following. To reach a younger and broader audience, HBCUs can use platforms like TikTok to generate content that emphasizes their scholar-athletes, campus life and athletic activities in order to reach a younger and broader audience. This can help share the schools' identity and story. In general, social media can help HBCUs fortify the connection between their fans and their scholar-athletes.

To meet these challenges, HBCUs must address how to better support scholar-athletes' academic and nonacademic needs; structure athletic departments to support these needs and balance new NCAA compliance measures; meet staffing needs to support new athletic initiatives; plug athletics into overall university student enrollment efforts; manage NIL to better grow and compete; and how institutions should tackle these challenges.

Discussing Athletics at IIC 2022

During the IIC 2022 conference athletics track sessions, HBCU leaders were given space to ideate, innovate and collaborate on a brighter future for college athletics. Attendees expressed the need to learn from each other about best practices and innovative ideas and were encouraged to think creatively and question traditional methods to address challenges facing HBCU athletics programs. The following sections summarize these discussions.

Ideation

Conference participants focused on ideation as a critical way to develop innovative and collaborative practices in HBCUs' athletics programs. The discussions highlighted the need to create opportunities for learning and sharing best practices across the HBCU athletic community, gleaning innovative practices from case studies and discussions. Attendees also mentioned the need for additional conferences focused on best practices in athletic coaching, leadership and other topics.

Reimagining traditional athletic events emerged as a major theme during the ideation sessions. Participants focused on innovative and collaborative ways for HBCUs to improve these events, including licensing, citywide collaborations and sports foundations. One conference participant suggested facilitating discussions about improving athletic events through strategic questions and other people's approaches.

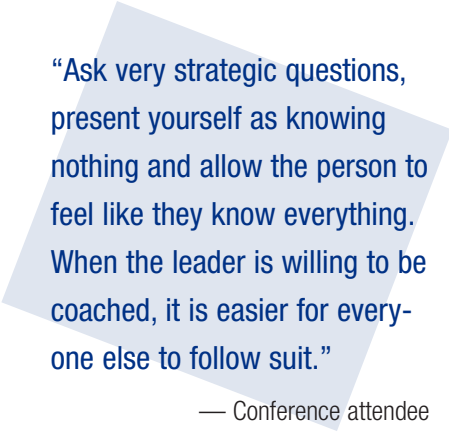
Participants also presented ways for HBCU athletic departments to remain competitive, including the need for HBCUs to collaborate with each other instead of competing, building on each other's strengths, and creating collective opportunities.

Participants also discussed how implementing innovative ways can build strong, competitive HBCU athletic programs in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Ideation discussions in the athletic track sessions provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing HBCUs athletics. By emphasizing the importance of shared learning and collaboration, participants demonstrated the potential for HBCUs to develop innovative and effective athletic programs. HBCU athletics should continue to develop and implement innovative ideas to build on their strengths and achieve success.

Innovation

The athletics sessions highlighted valuable qualitative data on athletic innovations, including current funding dynamics, the use of data, maintaining relationships to achieve success, the potential impact of NIL policies and the future of athletics programs. The balance between funding



“Ask very strategic questions, present yourself as knowing nothing and allow the person to feel like they know everything. When the leader is willing to be coached, it is easier for everyone else to follow suit.”

— Conference attendee

and sustainability was also highlighted. Participants noted that when a part of an athletic program performs poorly, it is important to determine how the funding should be allocated to improve performance. Additionally, with the implementation of NIL policies, there is a need to measure the value of scholar-athletes to an institution and compensate them accordingly.

College athletic departments are concerned about their sustainability, and there are many ways to address these concerns. For example, clearly communicating cultural and social norms from the outset can create a supportive environment for new staff that can lead to better outcomes for scholar-athletes and the athletic program. It is important to remember that cultural and social differences can play a significant role in shaping athletic departments within Division I, Division II, Division III and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. New hires may be confused as they navigate the unique dynamics and norms of each program. For instance, Division I athletic departments often face greater pressure to generate revenue and may be subject to more scrutiny. Meanwhile, Division III programs tend to prioritize scholar-athlete experiences and academic success over athletic achievement. Considering these differences, it is crucial to establish clear expectations and explain “unspoken rules” to ensure new hires can succeed in their roles. In addition, succession planning and improving the onboarding process can help address sustainability concerns.

Using data to identify how athletic events financially impact local cities was also emphasized, along with the importance of relationships between coaches and scholar-athletes. Finally, the conference attendees identified the need for better mental health and wellness services for athletes, as well as new funding and behavioral intervention strategies. By attending to these issues, athletics programs can be better positioned to address these issues in the future.

“Coaches are first responders for student athletes, ambassadors of the school in the community.”

— Conference attendee

“Coaches need to be social media savvy.”

— Conference attendee

Technology usage to help athletic departments was another key discussion point. Participants suggested developing a centralized digital platform for recruiting to advertise events and interact with fans on social media. HBCUs can maintain their competitiveness in the changing athletic landscape by adopting modern technologies.

The conference emphasized how important creativity and shared learning are to advancing athletic programming. HBCUs can stay competitive by strategically incorporating cutting-edge technology. Participants emphasized how important it is to foster teamwork, innovation and shared learning. Adopting new ideas and cutting-edge tactics would allow HBCUs to build on their strengths and leave a legacy that honors tradition and fosters greatness.

Collaboration

Conference attendees also focused on collaboration, noting that HBCUs should not be pitted against one another but instead use combined resources and forge a cohesive community. Connections, data and funding — all mentioned as critical factors in building and maintaining effective athletic programs — underscore the necessity of cross-departmental and stakeholder cooperation. Since HBCUs may struggle with having less funding and fewer resources than predominately white institutions, both presenters and participants stressed that collaboration between coaches, athletes and other stakeholders is necessary for program success.

Participants noted that coaches serve as both first responders for student athletes and community representatives for the institution. As a result, they are crucial in creating and sustaining solid connections within the organization. Additionally, coaches, student athletes and stakeholders need to work together to address mental health worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Athletics programs will need to collaborate even more in the future, especially considering the recent NIL policy changes that have become essential to athletics programs. Participants talked about how organizations must prepare for these changes and to educate scholar-athletes about the potential consequences of NIL. Without consistent standards and laws on NIL across states and programs, organizations and stakeholders will need to coordinate to address problems with fair remuneration, equity and access.


Designing effective budgets that match an institution's values will also help athletic departments remain sustainable. Institutions profit financially from their athletic programs, but to be successful, they need additional revenue streams. The long-term viability of athletics programs depends on collaboration across departments and stakeholders who guarantee funds are used effectively, leading to maximized revenue. Athletics budgets must be based on effective funding, resource allocation models and collaboration across multiple departments and stakeholders.

Strong athletics programs — especially those at HBCUs — rely heavily on teamwork. A deliberate and cooperative strategy is needed to solve sustainability issues, promote justice and fairness in athletics programs, and develop and maintain good partnerships with stakeholders. The conference offered helpful insights into how universities may foster cooperation and develop stronger sports programs.

Final Takeaways for Athletics

The IIC 2022 conference offered a platform for HBCU athletics administrators, coaches and other stakeholders to discuss and share ideas on critical issues affecting their institutions. Discussions identified solutions to challenges facing HBCU athletics and provided a forum for participants to explore ways of fostering collaboration and innovation. Five takeaways emerged:

1. HBCUs must collaborate, relying on shared strengths and beliefs to address challenges. Sharing best practices in athletics, asking questions, having meaningful dialogues and learning from one other's achievements and disappointments were identified as ways for coaches, athletes and stakeholders to excel, and help HBCUs motivate these groups to succeed.
2. HBCUs must rethink established procedures and incorporate creative alternatives that consider the changing sports sector. To ensure HBCU athletics' competitiveness, equality, and suitability, we must create a forum for learning, exchanging best practices, and encouraging group problem-solving. This forum will promote collaboration, long-term solutions and a platform for HBCU athletics to thrive.
3. Funding, using data and focusing on people and relationships are also important for athletics programs to succeed. Conference participants discussed the various factors that affect the sustainability of HBCU athletic programs, and the need to strike a balance between funding and performance in the athletic budget. They also discussed how institutions could use data to demonstrate how athletic events financially impact the local city and set minimums for royalties and cost licensing deals and merchandise.
4. Name, image and likeness discussions focused on the recent NCAA rule change that allows college athletes to profit from their NIL. The participants discussed how the rule change has affected athletic programs and how institutions can prepare for the change. There were concerns about NIL impact and how to leverage it to benefit institutions and scholar-athletes. The conference participants highlighted the need for more education to help scholar-athletes navigate NIL. They underscored the significance of attaining a balance between subsidy and performance, educating scholar-athletes, judging the worth of scholar-athletes, and forming blueprints for the future of sports programs.



“Get on your local sports tourism board. Set minimums for royalties and cost licensing deals and merchandise.”

— Conference attendee

5. The future of athletics programs focused on what institutions need to ensure their athletic programs flourish. The participants discussed the need for long-term strategic visions, better succession or pipeline planning in HBCU athletics, and using more storytelling and marketing for recruitment. They also mentioned putting scholar-athletes' images on billboards as a cost-effective marketing tool and the need for partnerships and internships for trainers, student managers, marketers, etc. The conference participants advocated for the creation of a collective video for all HBCU sports/conferences for branding and the adoption of the "Power Five conferences," which are the five most prestigious and lucrative athletic conferences in college football in the United States, to brand HBCUs.

Conclusion

IIC 2022 provided an invaluable opportunity for HBCU athletic directors and other stakeholders to ideate and collaborate on ways to enhance their programs and identify innovative approaches that celebrate institutional heritage while preparing for the changing sports world. Discussions focused on how to think creatively and push the limits of what is feasible, with particular attention paid to licensing, conferences, cities and sports foundations.

Participants focused on how to improve the HBCU athletics culture by offering Black scholar-athletes the chance to flourish both on and off the field. HBCUs are successful not just because of their athletic programs but also because they empower Black communities by offering access to higher education. HBCU athletic programs have the potential to change the lives of Black scholar-athletes.

The athletics track of IIC 2022 provided a platform for HBCU athletic directors and stakeholders to share ideas, collaborate and reimagine their programs together, and may be a model for future conferences or for organizations hoping to encourage cooperation and innovation in the sports sector. Continuing the conversations started at the conference and finding ways to implement key ideas is important so that HBCU athletic programs can thrive and empower future generations of Black scholar-athletes. HBCUs must continue to develop sports leaders and administrators who will substantially impact the sports industry and beyond through cooperation, shared learning and a dedication to promoting Black excellence in athletics.

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