

The Time Is Now:

HBCU Presidential and Chancellor Leadership, Institutional Resilience, and the Rise Toward Carnegie R1 and R2 Research Classification

Leadership

Governance

Institutional Resilience

Carnegie Classification

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Introduction

The United States is at a pivotal moment in its pursuit of economic leadership and national competitiveness. As artificial intelligence, biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, healthcare, and financial services reshape industries at an unprecedented pace, the demand for a highly skilled and broadly prepared workforce has never been greater. Recent executive action has made this urgency explicit, directing federal agencies and private sector partners to invest in workforce pipelines across technology, healthcare, manufacturing, finance, and other high-growth industries as a matter of national priority (Executive Order 14283, April 23, 2025; Executive Order 14278, April 23, 2025). Simultaneously, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that STEM occupations will grow twice as fast as non-STEM fields, and global competitors are making substantial investments in research and innovation, creating urgent pressure on American institutions to strengthen their talent pipelines, research enterprises, and institutional infrastructure (Taylor & Wynn, 2019). Meeting this moment requires not only resources, but also visionary, stable, and strategically positioned institutional leadership capable of preparing the next generation of American workers, researchers, and innovators across every sector of the economy.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are uniquely positioned to answer this call. These institutions have a long and distinguished record of preparing highly skilled professionals across STEM fields, serving communities, including high-need regions such as the Arkansas-Louisiana-Mississippi Delta, where access to rigorous STEM education has historically been limited (Owens, 2012; Taylor & Wynn, 2019; Toldson, 2018). HBCUs have not only sustained this mission under persistent resource constraints, but they have also done so while navigating complex political landscapes, evolving workforce demands, and shifting federal priorities. This track record is not a footnote in the story of American higher education. This is evidence of institutional resilience at its most consequential.

The time is now for HBCUs to be recognized and resourced as the research powerhouses many are actively working to become. A growing number of HBCUs are pursuing Carnegie Research Classification advancement, moving from Research College and University (RCU) status to R2 and R1 designations. This pursuit reflects a broader institutional ambition: to expand research infrastructure, grow externally funded STEM research enterprises, attract and retain research-active faculty, and establish HBCUs as full and competitive participants in the national research ecosystem. These institutional efforts are increasingly situated within a broader national policy context that recognizes the role of HBCUs in advancing the nation's educational, scientific, and economic priorities. In April 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order establishing the White House Initiative to Promote Excellence and Innovation at HBCUs, underscoring the critical role of HBCU presidents and chancellors in shaping the nation's educational, scientific, and economic landscape.

Central to this pursuit are the quality, stability, and strategic vision of HBCU executive leadership. As higher education increasingly operates in a complex environment shaped by financial constraints, demographic shifts, political pressures, and the transformative impact of AI on the workforce, the role of university presidents or chancellors has become one of the most demanding leadership positions in the country (The Economist, 2024; Sandler, 2024). Hodge-Clark et al. (2017) explained that leadership governing educational institutions plays a crucial role in determining their success or failure. Leadership has been defined as "a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization" (Yukl, 2013, p. 2) and as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2018, p. 43). Within the

HBCU context, institutional leadership aligns with Rost's (1991, p. 99) definition as "an influence among leaders and collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (cited in Matthews & Jones, 2021). Effective and sustained presidential and chancellor leadership is not simply an administrative concern. This is a prerequisite for the kind of institutional transformation required by Carnegie research reclassification.

The historical and sociopolitical dimensions of HBCUs make their leadership context particularly significant. As Esters et al. (2016) argued, an effective HBCU president requires deep knowledge of the politics that govern both HBCUs and the communities in which they are situated. HBCUs function within a political climate wherein their legitimacy is often contested, and their relationships with governmental entities are sometimes contentious. The turnover of presidents and chancellors has hit HBCUs particularly hard, dating back to the early 2010s (Kimbrough, 2017). McLean (2023) posited that since 2022, more than 20 HBCUs have been led by interim, acting, or departing presidents, representing nearly one-quarter of all HBCU institutions. Yet, within these challenges lie significant opportunities for transformative change. By fostering leadership development pipelines, advocating policy reforms, and strengthening governance structures, HBCUs can build resilient ecosystems that support both institutional growth and leadership stability (Fletcher et al., 2024; Fletcher et al., 2025).

This report presents findings from NSF Award #2534132 (HBCU-UP RAPID: HBCU Leadership Crisis on STEM Broadening Participation and Research Capacity Building), drawing on a national survey and qualitative findings from a convening of HBCU presidents, chancellors, alumni, industry partners, NSF leadership, and accreditation representatives. It concludes with forward-looking recommendations grounded in the conviction that the path to Carnegie research preeminence for HBCUs is not only achievable but already underway at institutions that have aligned leadership, governance, and institutional strategy toward that goal.

The time is now to understand what is working, build on it, and invest in it at scale.

The Role of Presidential and Chancellor Leadership in Institutional Resilience

There is a particular kind of strength that defines an institution not simply by what it achieves in moments of prosperity, but by what it sustains in moments of pressure. For HBCUs, this strength has a name: resilience. It is the capacity to absorb disruption, adapt to shifting conditions, and continue advancing toward long-term institutional goals, even when the circumstances are unfavorable, the resources are constrained, and the political winds are uncertain. At the center of that resilience is leadership. Specifically, the leadership of the president or chancellor sets the tone, holds the vision, and makes the decisions that determine whether an institution bends or breaks when tested.

For HBCUs, the president or chancellor is far more than a chief executive officer. These individuals simultaneously serve as the public face of the institution, its chief fundraiser, its primary advocate before state and federal legislators, its bridge to industry and corporate partners, and the strategic architect of its long-term vision. As higher education has grown increasingly complex, the demands placed on presidents and chancellors have grown exponentially (The Economist, 2024; Sandler, 2024). The resilience of an HBCU is, in many ways, a direct reflection of the depth and durability of the relationships its president or chancellor has built and the degree to which those relationships can survive a leadership transition intact.

The research literature is clear that leadership effectiveness and stability are among the most consequential variables in determining institutional outcomes (Hodge-Clark et al., 2017). Within the HBCU context, presidential and chancellor leadership shapes donor relationships, faculty recruitment and retention, research investment decisions, accreditation standing, and the institution's overall reputation and competitiveness. When leadership is stable, strategic, and well supported by sound governance structures, institutions are positioned not only to grow but also to withstand the inevitable pressures that growth brings.

In the organizational context, resilience is not simply the ability to recover from disruption. It is the capacity to anticipate disruption, build governance structures and succession pipelines that absorb it, and continue advancing strategic priorities regardless of what changes at the executive level. The HBCUs that have made the most sustained progress toward R2 and R1 Carnegie Classification are not necessarily the ones that have avoided leadership transition. They have built institutional ecosystems capable of surviving them.

This report does not simply ask whether HBCU leadership stability matters for research advancement, as we know that it does. The more important question is what governance conditions, leadership profile characteristics, and institutional investments make an HBCU resilient enough to advance its research mission not only because of its leadership but in spite of its leadership transitions. The time is now to answer that question with evidence, document what works, and ensure that every HBCU with the ambition and capacity to advance its research classification has access to a roadmap grounded in the real experiences of institutions that have done exactly that.

The State of HBCU Research Advancement: Context and Opportunity

A quiet but consequential transformation is underway across the United States. A growing number of HBCUs are actively pursuing Carnegie Research Classification advancement, working to transition from RCU status to R2 and, ultimately, R1 designation. This is not simply an administrative milestone. Carnegie Classification advancement signals a fundamental shift in an institution's research infrastructure, faculty composition, external funding competitiveness, and long-term capacity to contribute to the national STEM research enterprise.

The political landscape has also begun to reflect this urgency. As noted earlier, in April 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order establishing the White House Initiative to Promote Excellence and Innovation at HBCUs, reaffirming the federal government's commitment to strengthening HBCU institutional capacity, fostering private sector partnerships, and ensuring that these institutions remain central to the nation's educational and economic future. Despite this momentum, a critical gap remains: no systematic, evidence-based roadmap currently exists for how RCU-classified HBCUs can achieve R2 status or how R2 HBCUs can make the transition to R1. This project directly addresses this gap.

Howard University: A Blueprint for HBCU Research Preeminence

On February 13, 2025, Howard University made history. The American Council on Education (ACE) formally conferred Research One (R1) status on Howard University, making it the first and only HBCU to hold this designation under the redesigned 2025 Carnegie Classification system (American Council on Education, 2025; Mobley, 2025). Howard had previously held R1 status from 1987 until 2005, when changes to the Carnegie methodology resulted in the institution losing the designation. The road back took nearly two decades and required deliberate, sustained, and strategically aligned institutional effort.

Under the simplified 2025 Carnegie criteria, an institution must spend at least \$50 million annually on research and award at least 70 research doctorates. In FY2023, Howard reported just under \$85 million in research expenditures and awarded 96 research doctorates. Howard's three-year average (2021–2023) was \$68.3 million per year and 97 doctorates per year (Arrojas, 2025).

President Ben Vinson III stated, "Howard University's achievement of R1 status demonstrates our research capacity and reaffirms our deep commitment to tackling society's most pressing questions through cutting-edge scholarship and technological innovation" (Howard Newsroom Staff, 2026). Bruce A. Jones, Ph.D., Howard's Senior Vice President for Research, told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: "For HBCUs, in the research that we do, there's a stated and higher commitment to historically disenfranchised communities. Elevating HBCUs to R1 status opens the door for them to acquire more resources and do more things in terms of meeting the community mission" (cited in Smith, 2024).

Howard's success was enabled by a set of deliberate, interconnected institutional decisions made over nearly a decade. In July 2018, Howard reestablished a centralized Office of Research under Jones. Under President Wayne A. I. Frederick, who served as Howard's 17th president from 2014 to 2023, Howard adopted the "Howard Forward" strategic plan with a dedicated research-elevation pillar. The pivotal external investment came in January 2023: a five-year, \$90 million contract from the U.S. Air Force and DoD to establish the Research Institute for Tactical Autonomy (RITA), the first HBCU-led university-affiliated research center. Howard's achievement is also, at its core, a governance story worth telling. When President Ben Vinson III stepped down in August

2025, Frederick returned as interim president, ensuring the institution did not lose momentum but carried it forward. That continuity of leadership is precisely the kind of governance success story this report seeks to document and replicate. As of the time of this writing, Frederick continues to serve as Howard's interim president while also serving as interim president of the Association of HBCU Research Institutions (AHRI), positioning him at the center of both Howard's individual research advancement and the broader national HBCU research coalition.

HOWARD UNIVERSITY: BREAKING THE R1 BARRIER



Figure 1. Howard University Becomes the First HBCU to Achieve R1 Carnegie Classification Status (February 13, 2025)

The Road to R1: R2 HBCUs and the Pursuit of Research Preeminence

Howard University's achievements did not occur in isolation. Commodore's (2024) white paper, *The Classification Paradox*, argues that the Carnegie methodology was “designed in a way that disadvantaged several HBCUs from the onset” and that the absence of R1 or R2 status has functioned as a 'velvet rope,' keeping certain institutions from accessing the resources and opportunities that higher classification unlocks. These are the policy and scholarly frameworks within which individual HBCU R1 ambitions are being pursued.

Morgan State University

Morgan State attained R2 status in 2018 and set 'Goal 3: Elevate Morgan's Status to R1 Very High Doctoral Research University' with a 2030 horizon (Morgan State University, n.d.). In FY2025, Morgan secured \$104.4 million in sponsored research commitments, its first time exceeding \$100 million, an 18% increase over FY2024. Morgan is projecting more than \$65 million in research expenditures, well above the \$50 million Carnegie threshold. A \$171 million Health and Human Services building opened in 2024, and a \$337 million science center began construction in spring 2025 (Pitt, 2025). The Spring 2026 commencement was a significant milestone for the university, with 81 doctoral degrees conferred, reflecting a 35% year-over-year increase from the 60 doctoral degrees conferred in Spring 2025 (Morgan State University, May 2026).

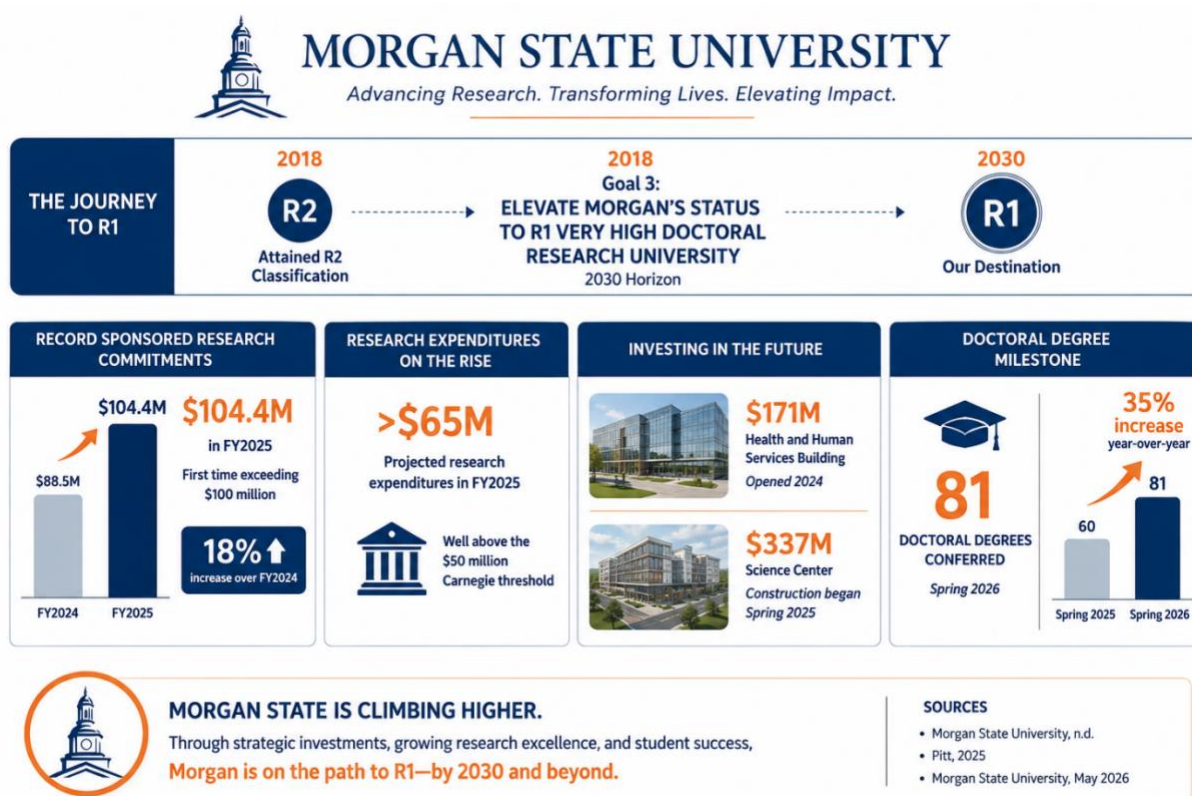


Figure 2. Morgan State University's Journey to R1: Research Investment, Expenditures, and Doctoral Degree Milestones (2018–2030)

North Carolina A&T State University

NC A&T publicly committed to R1 in 2021 under Chancellor Harold L. Martin Sr. External research award activity increased from \$62 million in FY2020 to \$147.4 million in FY2023 (L. Johnson, 2023). When the 2025 Carnegie classifications were announced, A&T had met the research expenditure threshold but produced an average of 67 doctorates between 2021 and 2023, just three short of the 70 required (Atkinson, 2025). A&T's official R1 target year is 2028. At AHRI's April 2026 launch, the university stated it “expects to become the nation's first R1 public HBCU when the Carnegie Classification completes its next review” (North Carolina A&T State University, April 2026, April).

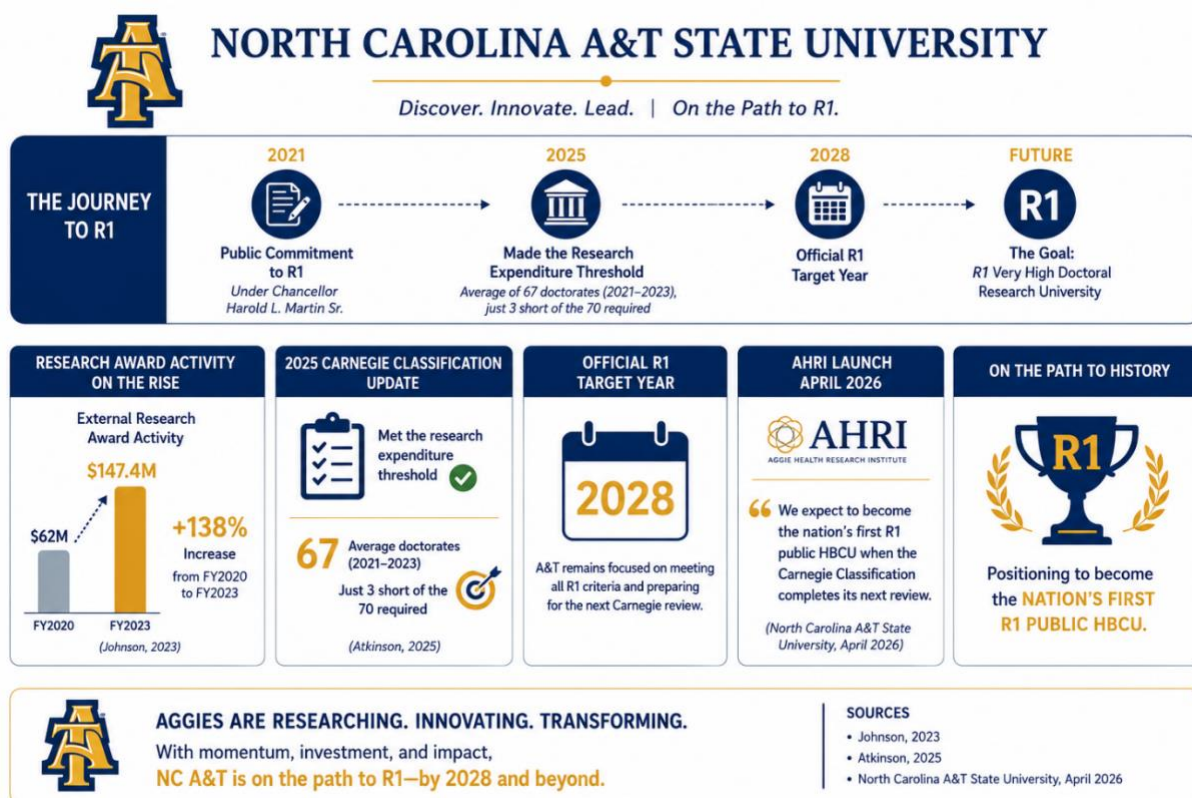


Figure 3. North Carolina A&T State University's Path to R1: Research Activity, Carnegie Classification Progress, and the 2028 Target

A Growing National Cohort

Florida A&M University attained R2 status in 2018 and set a 2030 R1 goal embedded in its 'Boldly Striking' strategic plan. Tennessee State University attained R2 status in 2019 and surpassed \$100 million in research awards in FY2022–2023. Prairie View A&M University surpassed \$50 million in annual research expenditure in 2025. Delaware State University received R2 status under the 2025 Carnegie Classification redesign. Hampton University, Jackson State University, Clark Atlanta University, Southern University, South Carolina State University, Texas Southern University, Virginia State University, and the University of Maryland Eastern Shore are among the additional AHRI member institutions collectively committed to advancing toward R1 status.

A GROWING NATIONAL COHORT

More HBCUs. More Research. One Shared Goal: R1.



THE MOMENTUM IS REAL. THE MISSION IS SHARED.

Across the nation, HBCUs are expanding research excellence, securing resources, and transforming lives.

Together, we are building the next generation of R1 institutions.



Uniting HBCU Excellence.
Advancing Research.
Transforming Communities.

Figure 4. A Growing National Cohort: AHRI Member Institutions and Their Collective Pursuit of R1 Carnegie Classification Advancement

A Unified Voice for HBCU Research Excellence: The Association of HBCU Research Institutions and Harvard's Investment

The April 2026 launch of the Association of HBCU Research Institutions (AHRI) represents what becomes possible when 15 institutions decide to pursue research preeminence together. AHRI was formally incorporated on June 14, 2023, with administrative and legal support from Howard University, and publicly launched on April 29, 2026, at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to advance research excellence, innovation, and public impact and to increase the number of HBCUs achieving R1 Carnegie Classification (discoverahri.org). Together, its 15 founding member institutions account for 50% of all competitively awarded federal research funding among HBCUs (Morgan State University, April 2026).

AHRI's offices are co-located with the Association of American Universities (AAU) headquarters in Washington, D.C. Morgan State President David K. Wilson serves as the Board Chair, and Prairie View A&M President Tomikia P. LeGrande serves as the Board Vice Chair, and Howard's interim president Wayne A. I. Frederick serves as AHRI's interim president. Frederick described the launch as “a declaration that HBCUs are not only contributors to research and innovation, but also leaders shaping a new era of discovery.” Wilson added, “The full measure of our collective research strength has not always been realized at the national level” (cited in Morgan State University, April 2026).

The launch was accompanied by a \$1.05 million, three-year grant from Harvard University through its Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery Initiative, which is committed to supporting research

infrastructure and technical assistance at AHRI member institutions (Sweet, 2026). Harvard Vice Provost Sara Naomi Bleich stated, “Through this three-year grant to AHRI, the H&LS Initiative is deepening our commitment to developing enduring partnerships with HBCUs.” Ruth Simmons offered, “AHRI marks a new chapter in the HBCU research landscape. This association brings institutions that have too often worked in isolation into sustained collaboration with one another and with the country's leading research universities” (cited in Sweet, 2026).

The Foundation Beneath the Rise: Understanding Leadership Continuity, Institutional Resilience, and Their Role in Sustaining HBCU Research Momentum

The preceding sections of this report have told a story that is, by any honest measure, remarkable and noteworthy. However, momentum, however powerful and hard-won, is not self-sustaining. Beneath every research milestone, record-breaking sponsored award total, newly launched doctoral program, and Carnegie reclassification achieved or within reach, there is a foundation. This foundation is presidential and chancellor leadership. When leadership is continuous, strategically aligned, and supported by sound governance structures, institutions build momentum. When it is disrupted, momentum is at risk.

McLean (2023) documented that since 2022, more than 20 HBCUs have been led by interim, acting, or departing presidents, representing nearly one-quarter of all HBCUs. On a single day in November 2023, 18 HBCUs were reported to be without permanent leaders (Moody, 2023). These are not merely abstract concerns. They are the lived institutional realities of a community that is simultaneously reaching for research preeminence and navigating one of the most significant leadership continuity challenges in American higher education.

Institutions that have made the most meaningful progress toward the R2 and R1 Carnegie Classification have not done so in the absence of leadership challenges. They have done so by building the institutional resilience necessary to sustain their research momentum through these challenges. What distinguished these institutions was not the absence of disruption. It was the presence of governance structures, research infrastructure, and institutional cultures capable of absorbing disruption and continuing to advance that made the difference. The rise is real. Now, let us understand the foundation it requires.

From Evidence to Action: The Study Behind This Report

The findings presented throughout this report are drawn from a study funded by the National Science Foundation under Award #2534132 (HBCU-UP RAPID: HBCU Leadership Crisis on STEM Broadening Participation and Research Capacity Building) through the NSF HBCU Undergraduate Program (HBCU-UP). This research project was designed to examine how presidential and chancellor leadership conditions, governance structures, and institutional characteristics shape the research capacity and long-term organizational resilience of HBCUs.

This project was conducted in two phases. Phase I consisted of a nationally representative survey administered to a broad cross-section of HBCU stakeholders, including current and former presidents and chancellors, senior administrators, faculty, alumni, industry partners, and board members of HBCUs. Phase II consisted of a national in-person convening that brought together HBCU presidents and chancellors, senior institutional leaders, alumni, industry partners, NSF leadership, and accreditation representatives for facilitated focus group discussions.

Together, these two phases produced a rich, multi-layered dataset that forms the evidentiary foundation of everything that follows. The findings are organized into four parts: Part I presents the survey results; Part II presents the qualitative findings from the national convening; Part III offers forward-looking recommendations; and Part IV addresses the broader impact, implications, and future directions for this work.

The Voices and Data Behind the Story: Presidential and Chancellor Leadership, Governance, and Institutional Resilience at HBCUs

The findings presented in this report emerge from a two-phase national study designed not simply to document the scope of presidential and chancellor leadership transitions at HBCUs but to understand the institutional conditions, governance dynamics, and leadership characteristics that shape how those transitions unfold and what they mean for long-term research capacity and organizational resilience. Their voices, experiences, and insights form the foundation of everything that follows.

Part I: What HBCU Stakeholders Told Us — The Leadership Impact and Implications Survey

Survey Overview

The Leadership Impact and Implications Survey was central to this research study. The survey was comprehensive in design, drawing on descriptive (unidentifiable), Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended question formats to capture a wide range of stakeholder perspectives on the impact of presidential and chancellor turnover within higher education institutions, with a specific focus on HBCUs. Participants were recruited both virtually and in person during the fall of 2023 via a Qualtrics link and QR code. The 87% response rate reflects both the urgency stakeholders attach to this issue and the breadth of engagement across various institutional roles and affiliations.

Survey Respondents

Of the invited participants, 156 individuals who met the participation requirements completed the survey, representing an 87% response rate. Approximately 85% of the respondents were between 25 and 64 years old. With respect to gender identity, 63.8% identified as female, 34.8% as male, and 1.5% as nonbinary or non-gender conforming (Table 1). Exactly 49% of the respondents currently work at or attend an HBCU, while 51% do not (Table 2). Among currently affiliated respondents, 25% reported ten or more years of connection; among previously affiliated respondents, 36.67% reported their last affiliation was more than ten years ago, providing a longitudinal institutional perspective that spans multiple presidential administrations (Table 3).

Table 1. Survey Respondent Age and Gender Identity

Age / Gender Identity	% of Respondents	Distribution (Bar)
Age 25–34	21%	
Age 35–44	28%	
Age 45–54	22%	
Age 55–64	14%	
Female	63.8%	
Male	34.8%	
Non-binary / Non-gender conforming	1.5%	

Table 2. *Survey Respondent HBCU Affiliation and Professional Roles*

HBCU Affiliation / Role	% of Respondents	Distribution (Bar)
Currently work at or attend an HBCU	49%	
Not currently affiliated with an HBCU	51%	
Faculty / Academic Staff	28%	
Senior / Executive Administrator	22%	
Alumni	20%	
Student	12%	
Board Member / Trustee	8%	
Industry / External Partner	10%	

Table 3. *Length of Respondents' Affiliation with HBCUs*

Length of Affiliation	Currently Affiliated	Previously Affiliated
Less than 1 year	16.96%	20.00%
1 to 3 years	22.32%	3.33%
3 to 5 years	18.75%	16.67%
5 to 10 years	16.96%	23.33%
10 or more years	25.00%	36.67%

Summary of Survey Findings

This survey was designed to understand the impact of presidential and chancellor turnover at HBCUs on institutional priorities, research capacity and stakeholder engagement (Fletcher et al., 2024). The UNCF Institute for Capacity Building's 2026 report independently corroborated the urgency reflected in these findings, concluding that frequent presidential turnover “weakens long-term strategic planning, stalls critical fundraising efforts, erodes stakeholder trust, and fractures the momentum needed for progress” (A. Johnson, 2026).

Impact on Critical Institutional Areas

Figure 5 below presents respondents' assessments of how presidential and chancellor turnover affects areas critical to institutional success. A substantial majority indicated high impact across nearly every category, with institutional fundraising (78%), industry partner engagement (75%), and STEM research capacity building (58%) registering the highest rates. Across six of the seven areas measured, more than half of the respondents rated the impact as high. These findings align with Freeman et al. (2016), who documented that high turnover rates compound challenges by preventing the long-term donor relationship development required for major giving.

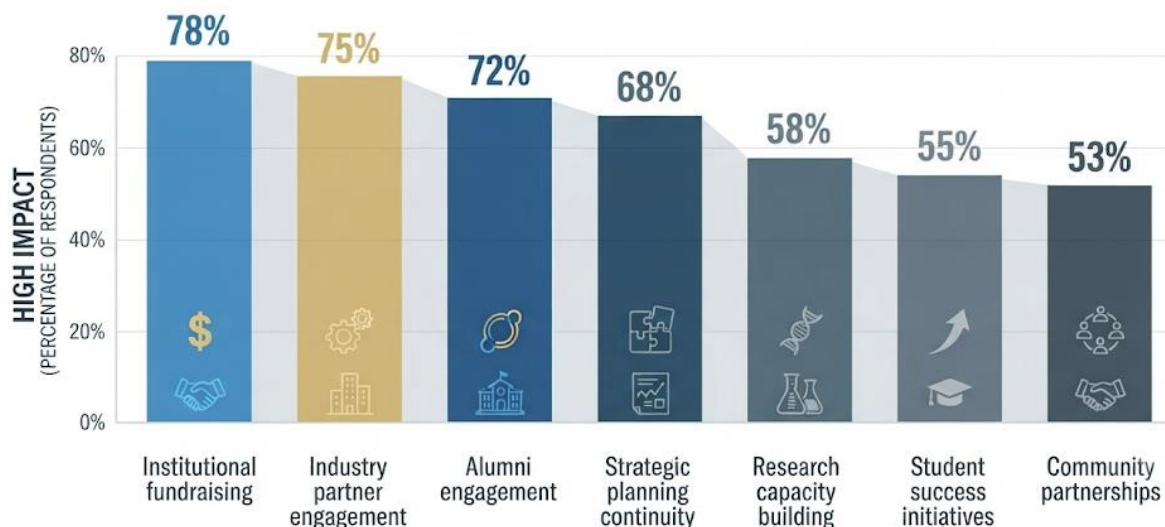


Figure 5. Respondents' Assessment of High-Impact Areas Critical to Institutional Success Due to Presidential and Chancellor Turnover

Institutional Challenges Associated with Leadership Turnover

Figure 6 below presents the institutional challenges that are most closely associated with presidential and chancellor turnover. A substantial proportion of respondents (88%) identified institutional resource constraints, challenges with state-level funding, the institution's financial position, and challenges with boards as highly impactful factors. These four challenges form an interconnected cluster of institutional pressures. Faculty and student engagement also emerged as significantly affected areas, with 69% and 52% of respondents indicating a high impact, respectively.

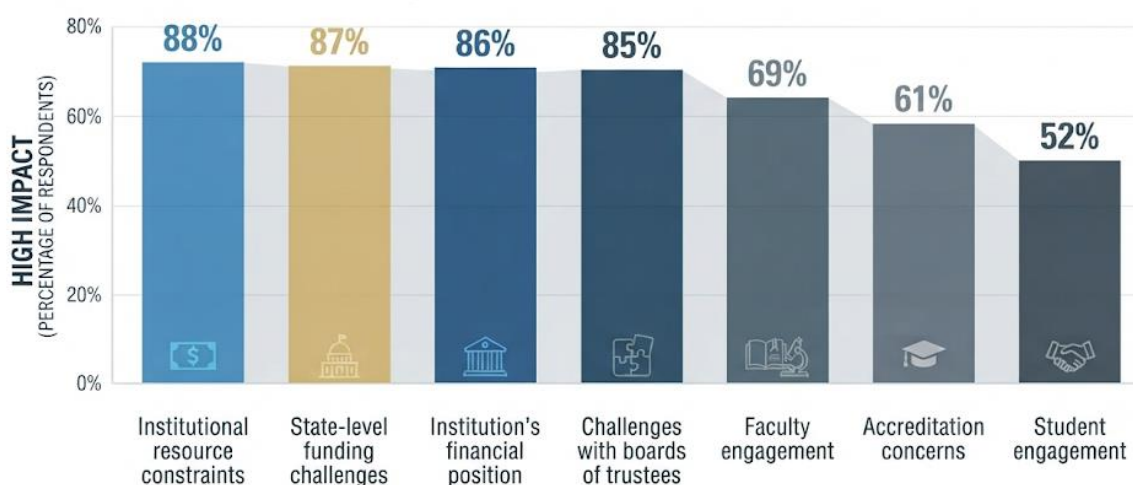


Figure 6. Respondents' Ratings of Institutional Challenges Most Critically Impacted by Presidential and Chancellor Turnover

Impact on Stakeholder Engagement

Figure 7 presents the impact of presidential and chancellor turnover on stakeholder engagement across institutional constituencies. Respondents perceived the impact to be highest at the executive level, with 79% indicating high impact on executive cabinet engagement, followed by university-level administrators (66%), faculty (69%), and students (52%). This pattern is consistent with research indicating that the relational disruption of a presidential transition flows most immediately through the leadership team before radiating outward to broader institutional constituencies (Kimbrough, 2017).

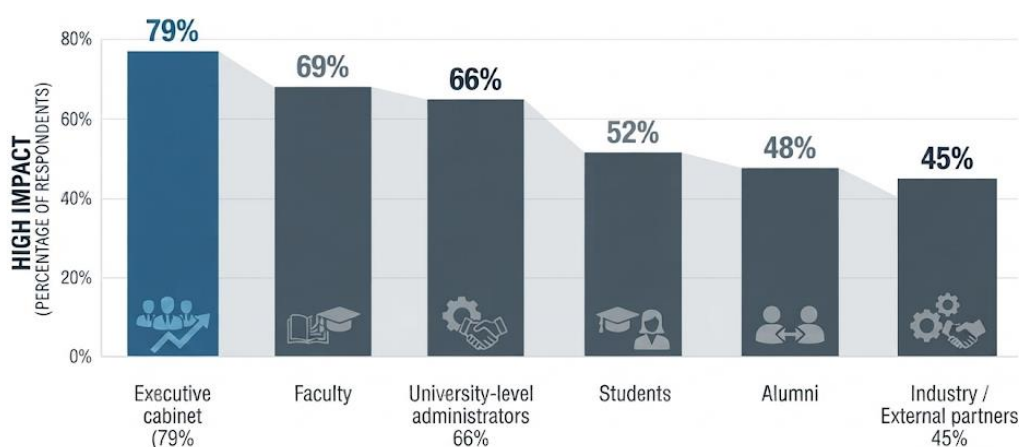


Figure 7. Respondents' Ratings of Stakeholder Groups Most Critically Impacted by Presidential and Chancellor Turnover

Impact on Morale and Retention

Figure 8 reveals a consistent pattern: morale is more heavily affected than retention across all groups, suggesting that the psychological and cultural consequences of leadership transitions arrive before the personnel consequences. Faculty morale (75%), administrative staff morale (73%), and administrative staff retention (79%) all registered among the highest rates of high-impact designation across the entire survey. Fletcher et al. (2025) examined these dynamics through the lens of capital theory, arguing that what appears to be voluntary turnover is often better understood as a response to unsustainable capital depletion.

Stakeholder Group		Morale (High Impact)	Retention (High Impact)
	Administrative staff	73%	79%
	Faculty	75%	54%
	Executive cabinet	68%	65%
	Students	50%	50%

Figure 8. Respondents' Ratings of the Impact of Presidential and Chancellor Turnover on Campus-Based Stakeholder Morale and Retention

Stakeholder Pushback as a Contributing Factor

Figure 9 below shows the degree to which stakeholder pushback and disengagement contribute to presidential turnover. Lack of alignment with other stakeholders registered the highest rate of high impact at 52%, followed by faculty pushback (40% high, 45% medium) and a lack of faculty support (42% high, 43% medium). The combined high and medium impact ratings across all categories ranged from approximately 80 to 90%, indicating that stakeholder disengagement is nearly universal in environments where leadership turnover occurs.

Contributing Factor	High Impact	Medium Impact
Lack of stakeholder alignment	52%	32%
Lack of faculty support	42%	43%
Faculty pushback	40%	45%
Alumni pushback	42%	36%
Alumni lack of support	45%	37%
Student pushback	36%	45%

Figure 9. Respondents' Ratings of Stakeholder Pushback and Disengagement as High and Medium Impact Contributing Factors to Presidential and Chancellor Turnover

Role Incongruity as a Driver of Turnover

Figure 10 below addresses role incongruity as a driver of turnover. Lack of preparation (58%) and misrepresentation of role responsibilities (52%) were identified as high-impact factors by most respondents. The Dr. N. Joyce Payne Research Center's (Payne Research Center) 2026 national study corroborated this directly: the most significant predictors of shortened presidential tenures are structural mismatches between presidential preparation and institutional context (Gallot et al., 2026).

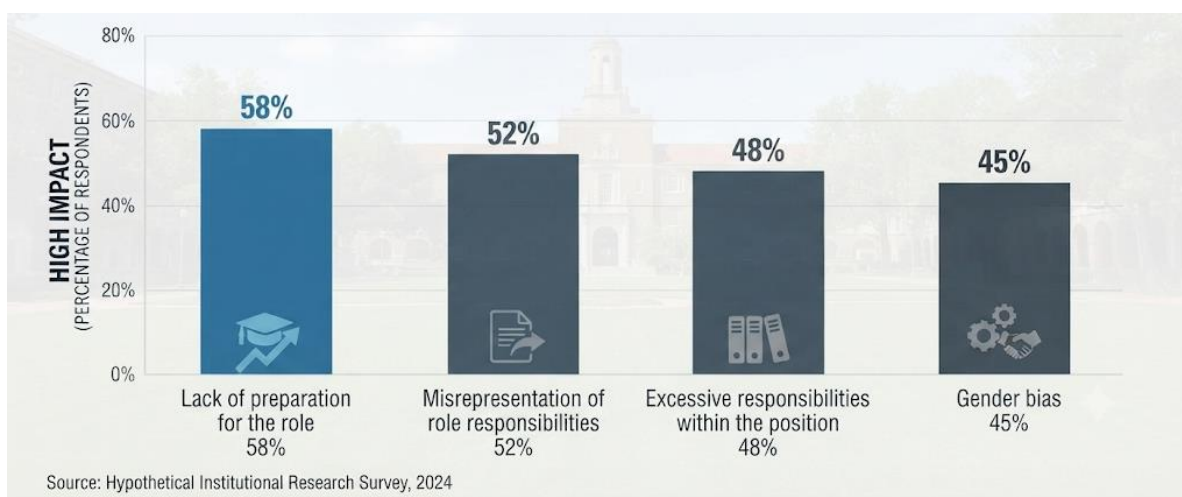


Figure 10. Respondents' Ratings of Role Incongruity Factors as High-Impact Contributors to Presidential and Chancellor Turnover

Stakeholder Concern About Turnover Levels

Figure 11 presents the respondents' overall level of concern about presidential and chancellor turnover. The results are unambiguous: more than half of respondents indicated they are extremely concerned, while an additional 17% reported being moderately concerned. In total, approximately 78% of respondents expressed significant concerns. Only 5% of the respondents reported no concerns.

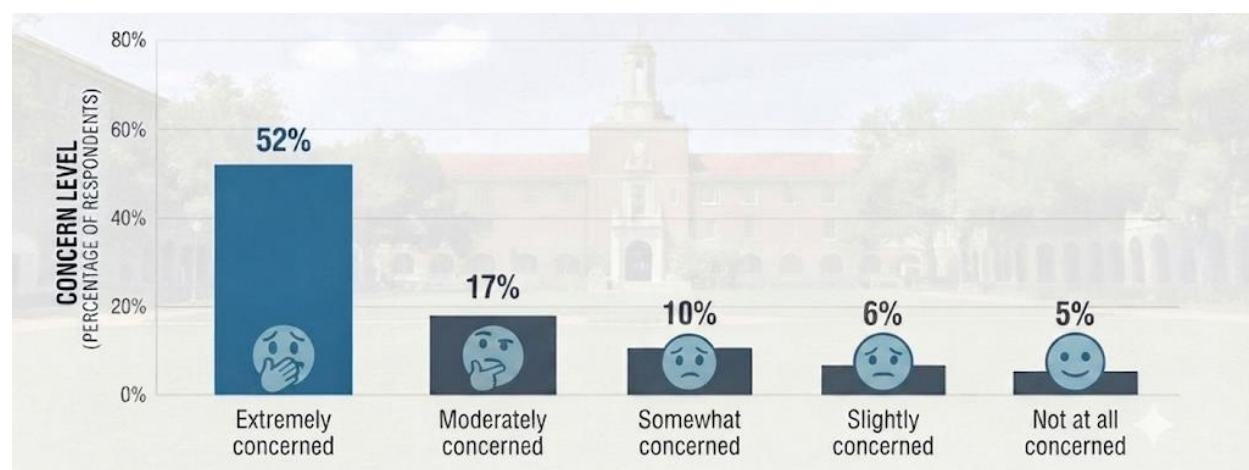


Figure 11. Respondents' Ratings of Overall Concern Regarding the Impact of Presidential and Chancellor Turnover at HBCUs

Discussion of Survey Results

The Leadership Impact and Implications Survey generated a dataset that is both empirically robust and institutionally revealing. The findings confirm what scholars including Kimbrough (2017), Owens and Commodore (2018), Freeman and Gasman (2014), and the UNCF Institute for Capacity Building (2026) documented: frequent executive leadership transitions are not simply staffing challenges. They pose structural threats to institutional resilience, research capacity, and long-term sustainability (A. Johnson, 2026).

Fletcher et al. (2024) approached this survey with a specific analytical purpose: to understand not only the institutional consequences of turnover but also the human and relational dynamics that produce it. Their framework, grounded in capital theory, proposed that presidential and chancellor turnover is often better understood as leaders prioritizing their own well-being and accumulated capital in response to the unsustainable demands of their roles rather than as a simple governance failure. As Fletcher et al. (2025, p. 5) articulated, "humanizing leadership involves acknowledging them as individuals who possess and have accumulated capital over time."

The survey established what stakeholders believe about the impact of leadership turnover on their institutions, but data alone cannot fully capture the lived experience of navigating HBCU leadership transitions, the governance dynamics behind the numbers, or the strategic wisdom of those who have led through them. Part II presents the findings from the National Convening on the Institutional Impact of Presidential and Chancellor Turnover, held August 1 and 2, 2024, where HBCU presidents, chancellors, senior administrators, alumni, industry partners, NSF leadership, and accreditation representatives came together to speak honestly and strategically about the challenges and opportunities at the heart of HBCU institutional resilience.

Part II: Convening Results

Convening Overview

The National Convening on the Institutional Impact of the President and Chancellor Turnover Crisis was held in-person on August 1 and 2, 2024, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and Florida International University. The event began on Thursday, August 1, with an Opening Plenary Session featuring an interactive discussion of the national landscape regarding the impact of executive leadership turnover. On Friday, August 2, a Morning Plenary Discussion Session was followed by a Panel Discussion Luncheon with corporate partners, foundation leaders, and key stakeholders, and an afternoon Plenary Session to formulate national recommendations.

Convening Inferences, Findings and Recommendations

The focus group discussions were led by guiding questions developed from the prior literature, NSF presentations, and survey results. Participants incorporated their prior knowledge, personal and professional experiences as current or former presidents and chancellors, and perspectives as alumni, industry partners, executive cabinet members, and student leaders. Eight themes and their subthemes are presented below.

Theme 1: Governance and Board Dynamics as the Foundation for Presidential Success and Institutional Resilience

"Communication gaps between boards and presidents can result in misunderstandings and conflicts, particularly when expectations are not clearly defined or are in conflict."

— Convening Participant

Governance is not a background consideration in HBCU institutional life. It is the structural environment within which every presidential decision is made, every strategic priority is set, and every institutional relationship is either built or broken. When governance is healthy, aligned, and functional, it creates the conditions under which strong presidents can lead effectively and stay long enough to produce meaningful outcomes.

In the available literature, governance "refers to the policymaking and decision making that occurs among the administration, trustees, faculty, and sometimes student representatives in higher education" (Taylor, 2020, p. 5). Owens and Commodore (2018) noted that SACSCOC's governance and administration requirements call for boards to conduct periodic evaluations of their presidents. However, accreditors have found that institutions consistently struggle with three interconnected governance failures: problematic board composition, inconsistent or absent presidential evaluation practices, and an inability to implement functioning, shared governance structures. The accountability expectation runs in both directions: boards are responsible for evaluating presidents fairly and transparently and equally responsible for ensuring that their own composition and practices support stable, mission-aligned leadership (Commodore, 2018).

Nelms and Schexnider (2020) argued that failing to address governance deficiencies risks undermining "long-term institutional effectiveness, academic excellence, and sustainability," and that "a new paradigm is required to ensure the selection of trustees who are committed to fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities differently than is the case currently." The UNCF Institute for

Capacity Building's 2026 Stable Leadership report identified governance as the single most cited structural factor contributing to shortened presidential tenures (A. Johnson, 2026), with Kimbrough describing it as “the pain point for everybody: how boards select presidents, support presidents” (A. Johnson, 2026).

Subtheme 1: Governance and Alignment

The convening group underscored the critical importance of strong governance and strategic alignment between presidents and board members as prerequisites for institutional success. The participants expressed consistent concerns about the misalignment between the board's strategic priorities and the institution's actual needs. Commodore (2018) noted that issues of cultural fit and poor board-presidential relations are among the most reliable drivers of frequent turnover and ongoing institutional turmoil. The AGB argued that for most HBCUs, “the margin for error is near zero, so the board must get it right” (Nelms & Schexnider, 2020). Kimbrough argued that board members need HBCU-specific training and professional development that accounts for the unique history and culture that impacts institutional decision-making (cited in Weissman, 2026).

Subtheme 2: Strategic Governance

Effective governance and strategic alignment between university leadership and board members are crucial for institutional success, and “the success or failure of any college or university hinges upon the leadership that governs the institution” (Hodge-Clark et al., 2017, p. 1). Participants highlighted the importance of cultivating strong relationships with board members, investing in trust and open communication, and understanding the distinct political environments within which individual HBCUs operate. The HELF national convening at Virginia State University in May 2026 confirmed that the most persistent governance failure was the conflation of governance with operational management: the board's temptation to manage rather than to govern (Watson, March 2026).

Subtheme 3: Board Training and Development

Convening participants underscored the critical importance of board training and development, emphasizing that well-prepared boards are essential for addressing the unique challenges HBCUs face in the current climate. The UNCF's 2026 partnership with the Higher Education Leadership Foundation at Wiley University and the HBCU Executive Leadership Institute at Clark Atlanta explicitly extends leadership development investment to boards as well as presidents (UNCF, March 2026). The UNCF Institute for Capacity Building has indicated that a report specifically studied boards and presidents who successfully built stable, productive governance partnerships (A. Johnson, 2026).

Subtheme 4: Internal Conflicts Between Presidents and Board Members

Internal board conflicts are among the most disruptive and least publicly discussed challenges in the governance of HBCUs. Freeman noted that when presidents feel hamstrung and unable to make the decisions they believe are best for the institution, the result is situations that become “in some ways untenable” for even the most capable leaders (cited in McLean, 2023). The UNCF Institute for Capacity Building's 2026 report specifically recommended reimagining board governance through empowered board chairs as one of its four primary structural recommendations for reducing HBCU presidential turnover (A. Johnson, 2026).

Subtheme 5: Effective Board Effort

Participants emphasized the importance of active board engagement with institutional committees and stakeholders to ensure effective governance, informed decision-making, and a comprehensive understanding of institutional challenges. The Journal of Blacks in Higher

Education noted that decision-making at the board and leadership levels is “critical for institutional stability, order, and overall performance,” and that this process must be continuous, consistent, and deliberately structured (Hargrove & Dawkins, 2026).

Subtheme 6: Addressing Biases, Governance Challenges, and Communication Gaps

Participants acknowledged several internal challenges and biases within institutions that can hinder effective governance, including alumni influence on boards, presidential selection and institutional culture alignment, the impact of political influence on board composition, and communication barriers between presidents and boards. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) argues that there must be consensus among all key stakeholders about the type of leader required and that the search process must be thorough, transparent, and grounded in genuine institutional self-knowledge (Nelms & Schexnider, 2020).

Theme 2: Choosing Well and Supporting Long by Rethinking Presidential Selection and Evaluation at HBCUs

"The search committee must be strategic and ask the right questions. Some candidates have no experience leading research institutions; thus, they do not know the direction of the vision."

— *Convening Participant*

If there is a single moment in the life of an HBCU that carries more consequence for its long-term trajectory than any other, it is the moment when a governing board selects its next president or chancellor. Kauffman (1974) argued that selection should be guided not only by the general characteristics of effective leaders but by the specific needs and goals of the institutions they are appointed to govern. Freeman and Gasman (2014) established that the characteristics of HBCU presidents and their role in grooming the next generation of leaders are deeply shaped by fit between the leader and the institution. The Payne Research Center's 2026 national study found that the alignment between demonstrated competencies and institutional context distinguishes presidents who thrive from those who do not.

The Strategic Alignment of Search Committees

Participants emphasized that search committees carry an institutional responsibility that is rarely taken as seriously as it deserves. The American Council on Education's guidance on presidential searches emphasizes that governing boards and search committees must be aware of what they are looking for and why (Burmicky et al., 2023). Kimbrough (2024) recommended that HBCU boards include a former HBCU president or higher education scholar on every search committee to help validate candidate qualifications using data and expertise that lay board members may not possess.

Prioritizing Alignment, Commitment, and Research-Ready Experience

Participants highlighted with notable consistency that leading a research-intensive or research-aspiring institution requires a specific kind of presidential preparation and experience that not every candidate possesses. The Payne Research Center's 2026 report noted that prior research shows that it takes approximately ten years for a college president to implement meaningful systemic changes at their institution, but the average HBCU president serves just 4.9 years (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, March 2026). Kimbrough (2024) noted that some HBCU boards have intentionally hired underprepared presidents so that the board could effectively run the institution, describing this as one of the most damaging governance failures in the sector.

Theme 3: Building What Lasts Through Succession Planning, Leadership Pipelines, and the Strategic Preparation of Future HBCU Leaders

"A well-crafted- succession plan is essential for maintaining leadership continuity. It should focus on identifying and preparing internal candidates for future leadership roles, while establishing clear procedures for presidential searches and transitions. The plan also benefits from structured mentorship programs that pair current leaders with promising administrators, helping them develop the skills required for executive responsibilities. In addition, strong emergency leadership protocols ensure the institution can respond effectively to unexpected vacancies and maintain stability during periods of transition."

— *Convening Participant*

If HBCUs are serious about sustaining the momentum they have built, they cannot continue to treat leadership transitions as unexpected occurrences. Dr. Christine Johnson McPhail defined succession planning as “the deliberate and systematic process of identifying, developing, and preparing potential candidates to assume leadership roles within the institution” (McPhail, 2023). The UNCF ICB 2026 report found that the 11 UNCF member institution presidents with prior presidential experience averaged ten years in their current positions, dramatically outpacing the sector-wide average of 4.22 years. Presidents who came to the role prepared to stay (UNCF Institute for Capacity Building, 2026).

Internal Leadership Pipelines

Participants emphasized that one of the most powerful things an HBCU can do to protect its institutional momentum is to identify and develop leadership talent from within the community. HBCU Money (2025) documented that institutions that prioritize internal development build lasting leadership ecosystems by cultivating their alumni and administrative talent.

Presidential Search and Transition Procedures

Participants called for clear, transparent, and institutionally informed procedures for presidential searches and leadership transition. The Thurgood Marshall College Fund reaffirmed in its 2026 landmark report that it is “critical that HBCUs find the correct fit through a search firm that understands the complexities involved” (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, 2026).

Mentorship Programs and Leadership Development

The HBCU Executive Leadership Institute at Clark Atlanta University is specifically designed to prepare future HBCU presidents through a comprehensive curriculum. In March 2026, the UNCF announced a formal partnership with the Higher Education Leadership Foundation at Wiley University and the HBCU ELI at Clark Atlanta to launch a structured leadership development pipeline for HBCU leaders seeking executive roles (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, 2026).

Emergency Leadership Protocols and Crisis Readiness

Not all leadership transitions are planned in advance. McPhail (2023) argued that succession planning must include a proactive needs assessment, the identification of high-potential individuals well in advance of vacancies, and emergency interim leadership processes that can be activated quickly and transparently when needed.

Theme 4: Funding the Future Through Leadership Continuity and Long Term Institutional Investment

"Frequent leadership turnover disrupts an institution's long-term stability, making it harder to secure major grants that require sustained engagement and consistent oversight. It also undermines long-term financial planning, as shifting leadership can stall or reverse multi-year budget strategies. The philanthropic landscape is especially vulnerable to this instability because major donors rely on strong, enduring relationships with institutional leaders, relationships that are often weakened or lost when presidents change too frequently."

— *Convening Participant*

Money follows trust. Trust follows leadership. The total endowment of all 100 or more HBCUs combined would be approximately \$6 billion, while Harvard University's endowment alone sits at \$56.9 billion (Bennett & Cuevas, 2025). This structural disparity means that HBCUs have far less margin for the financial disruption that frequent leadership turnover produces. The UNCF ICB 2026 report found that HBCU presidents serve an average of just 4.22 years, significantly shorter than the national average of 5.9 years, and that frequent turnover "weakens long-term strategic planning, stalls critical fundraising efforts, erodes stakeholder trust, and fractures the momentum needed for progress" (UNCF Institute for Capacity Building, 2026).

Grant Acquisition and Federal Research Funding

Federal agencies and private foundations increasingly seek demonstrated institutional stability and leadership continuity when evaluating research grant applications. As Representative French Hill stated during the 8th Annual HBCU STEAM Days of Action in March 2026, "industry, philanthropy, and government must partner to build research capacity, strengthen financial stability, and develop the workforce pipelines that our HBCU students need" (Adams, 2026).

Philanthropic Giving and Major Donor Relationships

A landmark 2013 study by the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy found that "longer presidential tenure is associated with higher numbers of million-dollar-plus donations" (Edu Alliance Group, 2018). MacKenzie Scott's historic fall 2025 distribution of more than \$700 million to HBCUs was grounded in deep trust in institutional leadership and confidence in presidents' ability to deploy unrestricted funds according to their strategic priorities (Moss, 2026).

Long Term Financial Planning and Strategic Execution

A consistent and sustained financial strategy cannot be developed and executed when leadership changes every few years. A panel of HBCU administrators and scholars convened by The EDU Ledger in March 2026 identified strong leadership, mission clarity, and diversified revenue as hallmarks of the sector's most resilient institutions (Watson, March 2026).

Corporate Partnerships and Industry Engagement

Frequent leadership transitions signal institutional uncertainty, which discourages the long-term investment required for HBCU research capacity advancement. The Payne Research Center's 2026 report identified the ability to build and sustain external partnerships over time as one of the most frequently cited factors among long-tenured presidents (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, 2026).

Theme 5: Culture Is the Foundation and Leadership Continuity Is Essential to Protecting the HBCU Institutional Identity

"Frequent turnover among HBCU presidents and chancellors deeply affects institutional culture, which is central to the community, history, and shared purpose that define HBCUs. Constant leadership changes can weaken institutional identity, as new presidents bring shifting priorities, disrupt long-standing traditions, and create cultural disconnects when leaders are unfamiliar with HBCU norms. As a result, HBCU culture both challenges incoming leaders and is significantly strained by leadership instability."

— *Convening Participant*

There is something about an HBCU that cannot be found elsewhere in American higher education. It is the culture, the traditions, the homecoming, the marching band, the Divine Nine, and the sense that this institution was built for you. This culture is not incidental to the HBCU mission. It is the mission and the most powerful asset these institutions possess, and one of the most vulnerable to the consequences of frequent leadership transitions.

Owens and Commodore (2018) emphasized that new presidents must become intimately knowledgeable about their campus and organizational cultures and keep those cultures in mind when communicating change. Hatton (2012) argued that successful HBCU presidents need to fully appreciate and understand the "culture, tradition, customs, and racial dynamics of the institutions they are asked to lead." Prior research cited by the Payne Research Center (2026) has shown that it takes approximately ten years for a college president to implement meaningful systemic changes at their institution. Yet, as noted earlier, the average HBCU president serves for only 4.9 years (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, March 2026).

The Cultural Consequences of Leadership Instability

When new leaders arrive with differing visions and priorities, the core values and cultural identity that define the HBCU experience can gradually be diluted. Kimbrough (2026) noted that board members and presidents alike "need HBCU-specific training and professional development that accounts for the unique history and culture that shapes institutional decisions" (cited in Weissman, 2026). The EDU Ledger (2026) reported that without taking the time needed to truly understand an HBCU's uniqueness, institutions find themselves recycling presidents and candidates, and that the revolving door of executive leadership is deeply detrimental to the institution.

Presidential Alignment with Institutional Culture

Freeman and Gasman (2014) established that the characteristics of HBCU presidents and their effectiveness are deeply shaped by their alignment with the unique institutional contexts in which they serve. Cultural alignment and mission commitment must be weighted as heavily as academic credentials and administrative experience in the presidential selection process (HBCU Money, 2025). Gasman and Commodore (2020) reinforced that the most effective HBCU presidents bring not only strategic competence but also an authentic connection to the institution's mission, history, and community.

Theme 6: Leading at the Intersection and Understanding the Extraordinary Demands of the HBCU Presidency

"The role of HBCU presidents is exceptionally complex, requiring a delicate balance of academic leadership, financial acumen, cultural stewardship, and political savvy. These leaders must navigate the unique challenges faced by HBCUs, including historical underfunding, maintaining cultural relevance, and competition in an increasingly diverse higher-education landscape. HBCU presidents are often called upon to be not just administrators but also visionaries, fundraisers, community leaders, and cultural ambassadors. They must maintain the institution's historical mission while adapting to modern educational demands and managing relationships with faculty, students, alumni, and external stakeholders. This multifaceted role requires a deep understanding of HBCU culture and history, as well as the ability to innovate and lead change."

— *Convening Participant*

These words captured something that resonated deeply and consistently across every group discussion: there is no leadership role in American higher education quite like that of an HBCU president and chancellor. Research on successful HBCU presidents suggests that effective leadership requires demonstrated competencies in leadership, communication, strategic planning, budget management, student affairs, human resources, conflict resolution, and faculty affairs (Gallot et al., 2026). Walter Kimbrough has been direct: "HBCUs are underresourced institutions serving underresourced people, so the level of complexity of the job is much more" (Weissman, 2026).

Academic Excellence and the Learning Environment

HBCU presidents are expected to champion high-quality academic programs, support faculty research, and create learning environments that inspire creativity and meet the distinctive needs of their students. As Gasman and Commodore (2014) documented, funding disparities between HBCUs and predominantly white institutions represent a considerable structural impediment, restricting the range and extent of research endeavors that HBCUs can undertake.

Financial Stewardship and Institutional Sustainability

Presidents and chancellors are responsible for managing institutional budgets, growing endowments, securing competitive grants, and designing fund-raising strategies. Gasman and Collins (2022) documented the ongoing challenges of financial sustainability at minority serving institutions. The most effective HBCU presidents align financial strategies with the cultural and historical purpose of their institutions, honoring the legacy of what HBCUs were built to do while making the investments necessary to advance what they are capable of.

Political Advocacy and External Relationships

Navigating the political landscape is a defining feature of HBCU presidencies. Esters et al. (2016) argued that effective HBCU presidents must possess deep knowledge of the politics that govern both their institutions and the communities in which they are situated. Commodore (2018) extended this argument, noting that as scrutiny of presidential decision-making has intensified, the political dimensions of HBCU leadership have become even more demanding. Judith Block McLaughlin captured the urgency directly: "New presidents today don't have the luxury of a long entry runway" (Bailey-Vasco, 2025).

The Full Scope of the Role

HBCU presidents and chancellors must simultaneously operate as visionaries, strategic fundraisers, political advocates, cultural ambassadors, and institutional stewards. Dr. Dwaun Warmack, president of Claflin University, offered a reflection that many in the field have echoed: “Sometimes leaders come in and think they have to dismantle everything that happened before them to create their identity. That is so far from the truth” (cited in Watson, May 2026). Lynch (2024) further complicated this picture by arguing that sex disparity represents an underexamined dimension of the HBCU presidential leadership crisis narrative itself, noting that the structural demands placed on presidents require leaders to make difficult decisions and develop alternative means of funding acquisition that may or may not be within the infrastructural capacities of the institutions they serve. This burden falls unevenly across gender lines and deserves far greater attention in both research and governance practice.

Theme 7: The Strength in Staying and How Leadership Continuity Builds Stakeholder Trust, Institutional Morale, and Shared Vision

“The web of relationships that support an HBCU’s success can be seriously weakened when presidents or chancellors turn over frequently. Constant leadership changes can fragment the campus community and erode the strong sense of unity that HBCUs are known for. Alumni may also feel disconnected or discouraged, and local community partnerships, often one of an HBCU’s greatest strengths, can suffer when there is no consistent leadership to maintain those relationships.”

— *Convening Participant*

Among the most consistent and consequential themes to emerge from both the national survey and the convening were the following: the strength of an HBCU’s relationships with its stakeholders, the health of its internal culture, and the clarity of its institutional vision are all deeply and measurably connected to the continuity of its executive leadership. The longer presidents remain in office, the more stability and continuity their institutions experience, and the lower the likelihood of costly internal conflicts (Röbken, 2007). The UNCF ICB 2026 report described frequent turnover as central to institutional resilience and growth and concluded that it “weakens long-term strategic planning, stalls critical fundraising efforts, erodes stakeholder trust, and fractures the momentum needed for progress” (A. Johnson, 2026).

Shared Vision and Institutional Momentum

Institutional vision produces real momentum only when it is genuinely shared across the campus community. Research on alumni engagement supports this directly: institutions that establish regular communication with their graduates and demonstrate transparency in leadership generate higher levels of donor commitment and long-term financial support (Nature Research Intelligence, 2025). Building this kind of shared vision takes time; it requires a president or chancellor who is present long enough to learn the institution’s culture, build authentic relationships, and earn the trust necessary to bring people along toward a common goal.

The Impact of Leadership Transitions on Stakeholder Relationships

Frequent leadership turnover fragments the campus community, undermines the sense of unity that is a defining characteristic of HBCUs, and can cause alumni disengagement. Kimbrough (2017) observed that any momentum that is built can quickly be erased when institutional executives depart. Hill (2023) reported that the departure of an HBCU president produces destabilizing effects on staff morale and donor giving, noting that HBCU presidents play a uniquely

central role in cultivating the stakeholder relationships that other institutional leaders are rarely positioned to replicate.

Institutional Morale and the Culture of Confidence

The relationship between presidential and chancellor continuity and institutional morale was one of the most emotionally resonant themes in the convening discussions. Faculty morale is particularly vulnerable during transitions. Brown and Freeman (2004) identified student retention, accreditation concerns, financial instability, and the absence of shared governance as persistent internal challenges facing HBCUs. Elliott and Kellison (2021) emphasized that internal conflicts over institutional missions and purposes remain ongoing obstacles to stability and advancement.

Operational Continuity and Institutional Resilience

Strategic planning cycles are disrupted when incoming presidents reset institutional priorities instead of building on the work of their predecessors. The UNCF Institute for Capacity Building (2026) concluded that repeated leadership turnover simultaneously drains institutions of talent, momentum, and credibility (A. Johnson, 2026). In the absence of strong institutional resilience structures, it is a direct and compounding threat to an institution's capacity to pursue its most ambitious goals, including Carnegie research classification advancement.

Theme 8: Reputation Is an Asset and How Leadership Continuity Shapes How the World Sees HBCUs

"Public and internal perceptions of the institution can also be harmed by frequent leadership changes. Media coverage often becomes negative, shaping how the public views the university. Accrediting bodies may question the institution's stability, and employers may worry about the quality and consistency of its graduates."

— *Convening Participant*

Reputation is not simply what people say about an institution. It is the accumulation of every perception, media story, accreditation review, employer conversation, and enrollment decision that shapes how the world understands what an HBCU is. Rahman (2018) established that 18% of students choose HBCUs specifically based on institutional reputation. Gasman's landmark 2011 analysis of more than 300 news articles written about HBCUs found a deeply troubling pattern: media coverage consistently overly emphasized turmoil in HBCU leadership, treated governance failures as defining institutional characteristics, and almost never used HBCUs as examples of governance excellence (Smith, 2024). This media-driven feedback loop, in which negative coverage of leadership instability led to fewer philanthropic contributions and lower enrollment, has not been fully broken.

Media Coverage and the Narrative Problem

HBCU Digest's longitudinal reporting documented that HBCUs have experienced annual turnover rates of 25 to 35% in key leadership positions from 2013 to 2014 and noted explicitly that this pace carries compounding reputational harm (cited in Smith, 2021). Hunt Scanlon Media's 2026 report quoted Dr. Harry Williams directly: "When you have leadership instability at our HBCUs, there's this ripple effect that extends well beyond just one single college campus" (Hunt Scanlon Media, 2026).

Accreditation and Institutional Viability

Freeman et al. (2016) documented that SACSCOC reports regarding HBCU institutions frequently cited financial mismanagement, poor leadership, and governance failures alongside high

presidential turnover as interconnected warning signs of institutional vulnerability. HBCU Digest's 2017 to 2018 analysis found that five of the eight HBCUs placed on accreditation warning or probation that year had experienced leadership turnover in the preceding twelve months (Broussard, 2026).

Employer Perceptions and Graduate Outcomes

Employers who are aware of chronic leadership instability at an HBCU may question the consistency of academic quality and the reliability of the institution's professional networks. Morris (2016, p. 7) noted that the frequent turnover of HBCU presidents at an average of three years, compared to seven years at predominantly white institutions, was particularly costly in terms of long-term planning and the external partnerships that support student outcomes.

The Leadership Ripple Effect

Presidential transitions routinely trigger changes in provosts, deans, department chairs, and other senior administrative positions. Kimbrough noted that this ripple effect is one of the most consistent and damaging patterns in HBCU leadership turnover, and that faculty and alumni who observe it repeatedly need to ask hard questions about what governance conditions are producing it (The EDU Ledger, 2025).

The HBCU Legacy and the Long View

Perhaps the most sobering reputational concern participants raised is one that transcends individual institutions: the risk that persistent leadership instability narratives will gradually obscure the extraordinary historical legacy and current momentum of HBCUs as a sector at precisely the moment when that legacy and momentum are gaining the national visibility they have long deserved. The HBCU community has earned a positive trajectory. Protecting and advancing requires institutions to be as intentional about their reputational stewardship as they are about their research ambitions and their Carnegie Classification goals.

Part III: A New Paradigm for Sustaining HBCU Leadership, Governance, and Institutional Resilience

The findings presented in Parts I and II of this report tell a story that is both urgent and instructive for the future. The recommendations that follow are drawn from that evidence, informed by the existing literature, and designed to offer clear, practical, and forward-looking guidance for HBCU leaders, governing boards, federal agencies, philanthropic partners and policymakers. Lee and Keys (2013, p. 32) argued more than a decade ago that “one of the critical components for repositioning HBCUs for the future will be leadership.” This argument is even more urgent today. Nelms and Schexnider (2020) captured the governance dimension directly, arguing that “a new paradigm is required to ensure the selection of trustees who are committed to fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities differently than is the case currently.” The Payne Research Center’s landmark 2026 national study reframed the entire conversation: the problem is not simply that HBCU presidents leave too soon. Too many arrive without the preparation, support, and governance conditions necessary to succeed long enough to make lasting progress (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, March 2026).

Recommendation 1: Longitudinal Research Study of President/Chancellors

Both prior research and convening participants emphasized the need for comprehensive and systematic research on academic institution presidential leadership. It was recommended that such research be supported under the National Science Foundation (NSF) umbrella and potentially culminate in a National Academies report. This body of work yields critical insights into effective leadership strategies, common challenges, and best practices. Participants also emphasized that for institutions to thrive, there must be a concentrated effort to better understand board dynamics, evaluate board effectiveness, and assess how these factors influence the selection and support of university presidents and chancellors.

Moreover, research conducted by organizations such as Quality Education for Minorities and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund underscores the unique challenges faced by presidents and chancellors, particularly those shaped by identity factors such as gender. Dominici et al. (2009) argued that “women are still underrepresented in academic leadership positions” and Reis and Grady (2018) noted that “women face organizational challenges related to career advancement.” More recently, Lynch (2024) argued that sex disparity is the real but underreported crisis embedded within the broader HBCU presidential leadership crisis narrative, and that any longitudinal research agenda on HBCU executive leadership must center gender as an analytic variable rather than treating it as a peripheral concern. Participants recommended conducting a comprehensive longitudinal study incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to develop a holistic understanding of presidential turnover and identify systemic barriers.

Recommendation 2: Establishing a Presidential Committee for Strategic Support and Advocacy

It is recommended that HBCUs establish a Presidential Committee to serve as a dedicated support team for presidents and chancellors. This committee assists with daily responsibilities while functioning as a confidential advisory group, providing guidance on sensitive matters and strategic decisions. The creation of a Presidential Committee represents a strategic response to the increasing crisis of leadership turnover. Committee members can be selected for their expertise in key areas such as governance, fundraising, communications, public policy, and higher education leadership. By providing informed advice and easing the burden of day-to-day

executive responsibilities, this structure would help reduce burnout, improve leadership retention, and ensure continuity of institutional progress.

Recommendation 3: Establish a National Committee on the Evolution of University and College Governance

Given the findings from prior literature, survey, and convening results, a national-level committee dedicated to examining and enhancing governance across higher education institutions should be developed. This committee would be charged with conducting a comprehensive review of the existing literature, analyzing successful institutional governance models, and identifying best practices relevant to the 21st-century higher education environment. The committee's mandate includes developing policy recommendations and guidelines for board composition, leadership strategies, and governance structures. As Lee and Keys (2013, p. 27) emphasized, “HBCU governing boards have struggled with the balance between effective governance, setting parameters and goals for institutional success, without becoming involved in the day-to-day operations of the university.”

Recommendation 4: Transforming HBCU Board Governance: A Policy and Best Practices Driven Framework

Regarding board composition, several recommendations were made to support the implementation of best practices for both board structure and operations. These include instituting term limits to bring in fresh perspectives, establishing regular accountability measures to evaluate board performance, and ensuring that board members possess diverse skill sets and areas of expertise. Owens and Commodore (2018) stress the importance of board diversity, stating that “establishing a diverse board of trustees at an HBCU can contribute to an increased trust in the decision-making process.” The AGB highlighted three key issues with reference to governing board structures: selecting the right members to address the right issues and engaging in the right manner to serve institutions. Nelms and Schexnider (2020) acknowledged that the most pivotal role of governing boards is selecting the right leaders and seeking opportunities to develop relationships with presidents, especially before fundraising initiatives.

Recommendation 5: President/Chancellor Succession Plans, Training and Development

HBCUs must develop well-defined succession plans for their presidents and chancellors to ensure leadership continuity and institutional stability. These plans should include the ongoing identification and development of internal candidates through mentorship programs, temporary leadership assignments, and executive-level responsibilities. Institutions should establish transparent and structured procedures for presidential searches and recruitment, along with emergency leadership protocols to address unforeseen vacancies in the future. To strengthen the leadership pipeline, institutions should offer targeted training programs for both current and aspiring leaders. Lee and Keys (2013, p. 28) observed that academic institutions “have a history of strong leaders that have guided them through Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement, integration, persistent underfunding, and other challenges. Institutions still need strong leadership, but they also must have smart, visionary, and knowledgeable leadership at the board, presidential, administrative, and dean levels.”

Recommendation 6: Narratives of Impact: Leveraging Media to Promote HBCU Excellence and Leadership Continuity

HBCUs must adopt a proactive, collective approach to reputation management and historical narrative shaping. By promoting positive discourse and crafting unified messages, these institutions can protect their legacy, strengthen public perception, and reduce the need to constantly defend against negative portrayals. The participants discussed the role of social media in shaping public perceptions. One participant urged HBCU presidents to spend less time responding to online negativity and more time actively telling their institution's story, recommending posting four to five positive stories per day across social media platforms to proactively shape the narrative. Ultimately, effective reputation management requires intentional communication strategies, storytelling, and alignment with institutional goals.

Part IV: Impact and Implications

"Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remain integral to American students' pursuit of prosperity and well-being, providing a pathway to a career and a better life. This order will continue the work begun during my first Administration to elevate the value and impact of our Nation's HBCUs as beacons of educational excellence and economic opportunity that serve as some of the best cultivators of tomorrow's leaders in business, government, academia, and the military."

— White House, Executive Order, April 23, 2025

The findings of this study arrive at a consequential moment for HBCUs and the nation. This study demonstrates, across both the national survey and the convening, that the capacity to fulfill the federal commitment to HBCU excellence is inextricably linked to the quality, stability, and strategic alignment of executive leadership and the governance structures that support it. McLean (2023) documented that since 2022, more than 20 HBCUs have been led by interim, acting, or departing presidents, representing nearly one-quarter of all HBCUs. This level of executive instability disrupts grant pipelines, delays infrastructure investments, strains relationships with legislators and donors, and undermines the long-term strategic planning that Carnegie research classification advancement requires (Fletcher et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, this study provides evidence of institutional resilience. Across the convening discussions and survey responses, participants consistently identified governance practices, leadership development strategies, and institutional conditions that have enabled HBCUs to maintain forward momentum, even through periods of executive transition. These are not considered anomalies. They are models and deserve to be studied, documented, and replicated on a large scale. Fletcher et al. (2024) stressed that conversations about HBCU leadership stability must extend beyond campus walls to state and national policymakers. Investing in HBCU leadership means recognizing and protecting leaders' various forms of capital, including human, social, cultural, symbolic, and economic (Fletcher et al., 2025).

Part V: Future Work

The findings presented in this report are not endpoints; they provide a foundation for a broader research agenda focused on understanding and strengthening institutional capacity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The survey and national convening findings illuminate a critical insight: the consequences of presidential and chancellor turnover cannot be understood as isolated personnel events. Leadership disruption propagates across interconnected institutional systems, affecting governance, internal capacity, external relationships, institutional reputation, and ultimately research advancement.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Fletcher et al. (forthcoming) conceptualized HBCU leadership continuity across four interdependent levels: the microsystem, which encompasses internal operations and institutional capacity; the mesosystem, which encompasses relationships among governing boards, presidents, administrators, faculty, and stakeholders; the exosystem, which encompasses external funding, recruitment, and partnership structures; and the macrosystem, which encompasses the broader cultural, historical, and reputational context in which HBCUs operate. From this perspective, the eight convening themes, including governance and board dynamics, presidential selection, succession planning, institutional funding, cultural stewardship, the demands of the presidency, stakeholder trust, and institutional reputation, are not separate problems. They are interconnected dimensions of an institutional system in which disruption at one level can produce consequences across others.

This multilevel framework has direct implications for future research and the recommendations emerging from this study. If governance instability contributes to leadership turnover, which disrupts internal capacity, weakens external relationships, and ultimately affects institutional reputation and research advancement, then effective solutions must operate across multiple levels. Governance, leadership preparation, succession planning, funding strategy, stakeholder engagement, and institutional narrative should therefore be examined as interdependent levers rather than isolated interventions.

The most immediate direction for future work is a systematic longitudinal study of how governance structures, leadership profiles, institutional characteristics, and external conditions influence HBCU research classification advancement, particularly the transition from RCU to R2 and from R2 to R1 within the Carnegie Classification system. Despite growing national attention to HBCU research capacity, no evidence based roadmap currently exists for how institutions can systematically achieve and sustain research reclassification (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021; National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2023).

Future research should build on the data infrastructure established through this RAPID award by integrating longitudinal data from IPEDS, the NSF Higher Education Research and Development Survey, and Carnegie Classification datasets. These data can be used to model research advancement trajectories across HBCU types and examine them alongside governance variables, leadership characteristics, geographic location, enrollment trends, institutional capacity, and state and federal support (Morphew & Baker, 2004; Gasman et al., 2011; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014).

The convening findings identified governance alignment as the factor most consistently associated with perceived progress in research capacity. This finding is consistent with scholarship suggesting that governance structures, not financial resources alone, may be central to institutional research trajectories (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Minor, 2004). Future research should

test this relationship longitudinally and examine whether alignment among boards, presidents, administrators, faculty, and external stakeholders is associated with greater leadership stability and sustained research advancement.

Future studies should also examine how state and federal policy environments shape HBCU research trajectories. As federal priorities evolve and initiatives such as the April 2025 White House Initiative on HBCUs create new opportunities, research should examine how institutions can leverage these environments to strengthen research capacity and institutional stability (Kim, 2011; White House, Executive Order, April 23, 2025).

Finally, future work should distinguish between achieving research reclassification and sustaining it. Longitudinal studies should examine whether gains in research expenditures, faculty capacity, doctoral education, sponsored research infrastructure, leadership stability, and external partnerships persist through leadership transitions and changing funding environments.

The work ahead is significant, but so is the opportunity. HBCUs have repeatedly demonstrated extraordinary institutional achievement under challenging conditions. This study suggests that the conditions supporting sustained achievement are not unknowable. They are interconnected, observable, and potentially replicable. The next phase of this work is to identify how governance, leadership, institutional capacity, funding, stakeholder relationships, and reputation interact over time to create the conditions for sustained research advancement.

The time is now to move from identifying the challenges facing HBCUs to systematically identifying and replicating the conditions that enable them to overcome those challenges and sustain institutional gains.

Concluding Statement: The Time Is Now: Positioning HBCU Leadership and Governance for Research Preeminence

The findings, insights, and recommendations presented in this report tell a story that is both urgent and deeply hopeful. HBCUs have demonstrated, across generations and under conditions that would have diminished lesser institutions, that they are capable of extraordinary achievements. Now, at a moment of renewed federal attention and growing national recognition of their value, a significant number of HBCUs are setting their sights on something even larger: full and competitive participation in the national research enterprise, marked by Carnegie R2 and R1 Classification advancement.

The national survey and convening at the heart of this study have made unmistakably clear that the path to research preeminence runs directly through leadership and governance. Presidential and chancellor stability, strategic governance alignment, intentional succession planning, and cultivation of research-oriented institutional cultures are not peripheral concerns. These are the foundational conditions upon which research classification advancement is built.

In support of President Donald J. Trump's executive order, signed on April 23, 2025, establishing the White House Initiative to Promote Excellence and Innovation at HBCUs, affirmed five critical imperatives:

- Invest in HBCU leadership as a strategic national asset by developing comprehensive succession plans, strengthening presidential onboarding processes, and cultivating internal leadership pipelines.

- Strengthen and professionalize board governance through enhanced board training, clear evaluation mechanisms, appropriate term limits, and intentional diversification of board members' expertise.
- Pursue Carnegie Classification advancement with urgency and strategy, ensuring that HBCUs at the RCU level develop the research infrastructure necessary to achieve R2 status and R2 institutions do the same with R1 as the horizon.
- Build the evidence base for HBCU research advancement by supporting longitudinal research on governance structures, leadership profiles, and institutional characteristics most strongly associated with Carnegie reclassification.
- Cultivate a unified HBCU voice on research and governance through convenings, collective advocacy, and sustained knowledge sharing.

HBCUs have always been built for this moment. They were founded in the face of exclusion and have persisted through every form of adversity that the American landscape has presented. The time is now. Not to simply survive the current moment in higher education but to lead through it.

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