

**SHARING SOLUTIONS TO K-12 CHALLENGES:
HBCU LESSONS FOR THE K-12 EDUCATION SECTOR
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Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to address such an impressive and important group. Joe Nathan and his colleagues from the Center for School Change are doing the type of work that everyone who is serious about education outcomes should pay attention to. I also want to thank my colleague Sharon Smith-Akinsanya, who is our regional development director for UNCF here in the Twin Cities and who does an excellent job in keeping us and our issues on the forefront here in Minnesota.

In an economy in which a college degree is a requirement for virtually all well-paying, fast-growing jobs and career paths, much attention is devoted by both politicians and policy wonks to helping students afford a college degree.

Yet, the cost of college is just one of the two major obstacles to college degree attainment.

The other is college readiness: the failure of public education to provide many students with an elementary and secondary education that prepares them for college coursework and college success. This is especially true for students of color from low- and moderate-income families.

The education disparities that exist between African American kids and majority kids are well-documented.

According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, the gaps between African American and White 4th and 8th graders in reading and math have narrowed only slightly since the late 1970s, and have been stagnant in math since 1999.

The average freshman graduation rate—the percentage of 9th graders who graduate with their class four years later—for public high school students reached an all-time high of 81 percent in 2012, but for African American students it was only 68 percent.

Yet, there is relatively little public debate over, and few proven models for, how to provide the preparation these students need, especially given that high

proportions of students of color attend under-financed schools and are often taught by less experienced teachers.

But I am here to tell you that there is in fact a model for fostering educational success among low-income African American students, a model that has been tested and refined over more than a century-and-a-half: the historically black college and university, the HBCU.

As Vice President for Research and Member Engagement at UNCF—the United Negro College Fund—which represents 37 private HBCUs and awards well over 10,000 college scholarships each year, the large majority to African Americans, I am obviously not a neutral observer.

At the same time, my work at UNCF has afforded me an opportunity to observe the work of HBCUs at close range, and to lead several in-depth research projects into the outcomes that HBCUs have accomplished.

In some ways, HBCUs are the Rodney Dangerfield of colleges: they “gets no respect;” or should I say to an audience of educators, they “don’t get *any* respect.”

Some look at HBCUs’ origins in the post-Civil War era, when they took on the task to educate newly-emancipated African Americans, or their work during the Jim Crow era, when they served as the training ground and alma maters to historic figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall, and question whether, in an era when African Americans can attend almost any college or university, HBCUs have outlived their usefulness.

It will not surprise you when I say that my work at UNCF and with HBCUs, and the research that I have conducted and led convinces me that HBCUs not only retain their usefulness but are vitally needed. I am convinced....

That although opportunities for post-secondary education for African Americans have expanded dramatically, over 300,000 students vote every year for the continuing vitality of HBCUs with their enrollment forms and tuition checks.

That HBCUs have in fact outperformed other kinds of colleges in enrolling and graduating the students America most needs to earn college degrees: low- and moderate-income students of color, especially those whose high school education have not prepared them for college.

And that—and this is the case I want to put to you today—that the strategies that have brought HBCUs this success hold promise for helping K-12 education prepare *their* students of color for college.

The outcomes reflect HBCUs' accomplishments: HBCUs have a documented history of success with many of the same students who often leave the nation's secondary schools ill-equipped to maximize their college experience

HBCUs enroll approximately ten percent of all African American students attending four-year institutions.

But they produce 18 percent of all African American bachelor's degrees and 25 percent of African American bachelor's degrees in STEM fields—

Despite being markedly under-resourced: despite having average tuition roughly a third lower than that of comparable institutions...

And endowments that are either non-existent or so modest that a single gift of \$400 million to Harvard's endowment from hedge fund manager John Paulson exceeded the endowments of all HBCUs except one: Howard University.

And these outcomes are achieved while educating a student body that is over 70% Pell Eligible, meaning they come from the lowest economic strata of students attending college. These students require the most support to succeed, yet HBCUs have success with them despite the fact that they have less resources than most institutions to assist.

So what are the best practices that have enabled America's HBCUs to enroll, retain and graduate a population of low-income, academically underprepared students at higher rates than expected when controlling for these factors?

And what HBCU "best practices" can be adopted and adapted by K-12 school districts to improve the educational outcomes of students from these disadvantaged backgrounds?

Let me discuss six.

First: Promoting high levels of student-faculty interaction. Decades of research has demonstrated the impact of students having meaningful interactions with their faculty.

Several studies have proven that HBCU faculty engage with their students at high levels in the classroom, outside of the classroom, on research projects and in extracurricular campus activities

Students who connect with at least one faculty member, and therefore with the campus, in a deep manner are more likely to be retained and graduate. In fact, some research shows this is one of the most powerful factors in helping students--especially minority students--establish a fit with the institution, increasing their likelihood of retention and success.

K-12 schools could learn from this model, in which the cultural expectation of ALL faculty is to go above and beyond to connect to students and their families in non-traditional ways outside of the classroom to encourage their success, and to demonstrate that an adult authority figure truly cares about them and their future.

At HBCUs, this strong cultural element pays off with students who often come from backgrounds in which they feel most educators do not care about their success. An example of this in a K-12 setting is the Small Schools Initiative, for example, is designed to mitigate the size of large high schools by creating smaller schools within schools, and one of the desired outcomes is to capitalize on high levels of student-teacher interactions.

Second, Employing Intrusive advising. Called *proactive* advising by some, this strategy is deeply rooted in academic advising where faculty and staff help students clarify and coalesce their academic goals.

Intrusive advising is action-oriented and geared toward motivating students to seek help when needed and to be proactively intentional about their success.

All HBCUs, faculty and staff are encouraged to employ these strategies although they may occasionally appear to be "butting into" the lives of students.

For example, although most college-level instructors treat attendance as strictly a student's responsibility, an "intrusive" faculty member who observes that a student has missed class might call the student or even go to their residence hall to get an explanation.

And anecdotal evidence abounds about HBCU faculty stopping students on campus to implore them to take charge of their academic lives.

And, indeed, research has shown that teacher expectations have been shown to impact student performance, with teachers playing a critical role in helping students see their own promise and motivating them to work up to their potential.

Thus, “intrusive” K-12 teachers not only encourage promising students, but prod them to achieve at higher levels.

In fact, many small independent schools market this type of advising as part of their competitive advantage, giving them the ability to directly engage with students who often slip through the cracks.

Third: promoting student engagement based on culture.

Research has demonstrated the impact on student achievement of HBCUs’ practice of incorporating aspects of African American culture into the curriculum and campus rituals to promote student learning and connect students to the institution.

One powerful example of this “best practice” at work at the K-12 level is the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, two all-African American male high schools whose mission is “to reverse abysmal graduation and college completion rates among boys in urban centers.” This commitment, combined with a strong and caring faculty and a curriculum rooted in the African American male experience, has been powerful enough to counter the narrative about urban youth and instill in them a strong desire to succeed academically and matriculate in college.

You want to hear the proof of this pudding? Although 85% of Urban Prep’s students come from low-income households, the schools have sent 100% of their graduates to college for four straight years.

This strategy doesn’t have to be tied to demographics like race or gender, it can also manifest itself through the development of a strong institutional culture where there are consistently clear and high expectations of what it means for the students to live their lives as members of the academic institution’s community.

A powerful example of an HBCU doing this is all-male Morehouse College, a UNCF member institution. Morehouse freshmen go through a ceremony that indoctrinates them into what it means to be a “Morehouse Man.”

Similarly, the KIPP network of charter schools indoctrinates its students into its high-expectation, high-performance culture when they enter.

These examples and this strategy are closely related to and intertwined with the fourth strategy.

Developing a strong sense of identity in its students. HBCUs have been noted for cultivating high levels of racial consciousness in their students--80% of whom are Af-Am.

HBCU alums also exhibit a proclivity toward civic-mindedness, especially toward the African American community as they demonstrate higher levels of charitable giving, political participation and religious participation than African American college graduates who do not attend HBCUs.

At KIPP charter schools, the idea of being a proud KIPPster resonates with students and is part of the overall approach of connecting students to the institution and engaging them proactively in their own success.

Every aspect of the KIPP student experience, from the five pillars to the curriculum and deeply committed teachers, aligns students deeply with the KIPP brand, helping them to develop an identity as a KIPPster that helps them succeed in school.

The fifth best practice that HBCUs use to promote achievement in college is **Encouraging the pursuit of lifelong learning, starting with enrollment at the next level.**

HBCU students pursue graduate degrees at higher rates than African American students who attend non-HBCUs, which is why the top 10 schools that send African Americans on to earn PhDs in science and engineering are HBCUs. The theory here is that if students have a higher goal to work toward, they will work harder in their current academic pursuits.

This parallels the practice at high achieving high schools that strongly encourage college enrollment.

Once again, Urban Prep Academies in Chicago--all of whose low-income, African American male graduates have enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation for four straight years, provides an excellent example of a pervasive school culture that encourages matriculation at the next level.

Another example is found in the KIPP network's *KIPP through College* program, in which each entering class of students is tagged with the year they should enter college. This constantly reminds students to face their future, reminding them they have to do well in and finish high school to realize that goal.

K-12 schools that adopt a similar culture could spur students to higher levels of achievement because they would have a long-term goal reliant on short-term performance.

Finally, HBCU students reap the advantage of **having the option to attend school primarily with students from the same race or culture.**

The development of HBCUs as institutions whose student bodies are predominantly African American is, of course, an artifact of history: the fact is that HBCUs were the primary higher education options open to black students until the second half of the twentieth century.

But even after college options expanded for black students, research from UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute demonstrates that one of the primary reasons students choose to attend an HBCU is a desire to find a sense of belonging in what they perceive as a welcoming environment.

Our research found that African American students who choose to attend HBCUs, are often, but not always, motivated by the following interests: (1) to be in environments with people who look like them, (2) to be in what they perceive as non-racist environments and (3) to explore their cultural roots.

Additional research from the Institute reveals that low-income African American parents appreciate the option of having quality schools to choose from as long as they are in proximate neighborhoods.

In fact, many high performing traditional and charter middle and high schools, such as all-boys or all-girls schools or those that primarily enroll students from one race, already employ this element.

While some might consider these to be self-segregated schools, selectively setting up schools based on these criteria and allowing parents and students to choose these schools on their own can be powerful for families that do not often get to make these choices for themselves.

Given the recent student protests over diversity on college campuses in the past year--and the other social movements taking place in the country--HBCUs and other education institutions, regardless of their status as a charter school, public school, community college and others, all bear an often unstated and unacknowledged burden of educating future generations of leaders on how to navigate and address these issues. These strategies can be part of the tool box institutions use to do that.

Indeed, all of the strategies that I have outlined above are commonly seen in high performing middle and high schools. Each of them can be adapted to different contexts to maximize success as long as continuous assessment is utilized to determine what is and is not working.

The country's students deserve our best and we owe them at least the promise that we will try different approaches to assure their success.

HBCUs have a culture of experimentation--another lesson for the K-12 community--and testing possible solutions to eliminate the country's persistent educational disparities does not indicate failed attempts at reform, but a willingness to get reform right.

Thank you for your time, thank you for your dedication to this work and thank you for being teachers who care.