

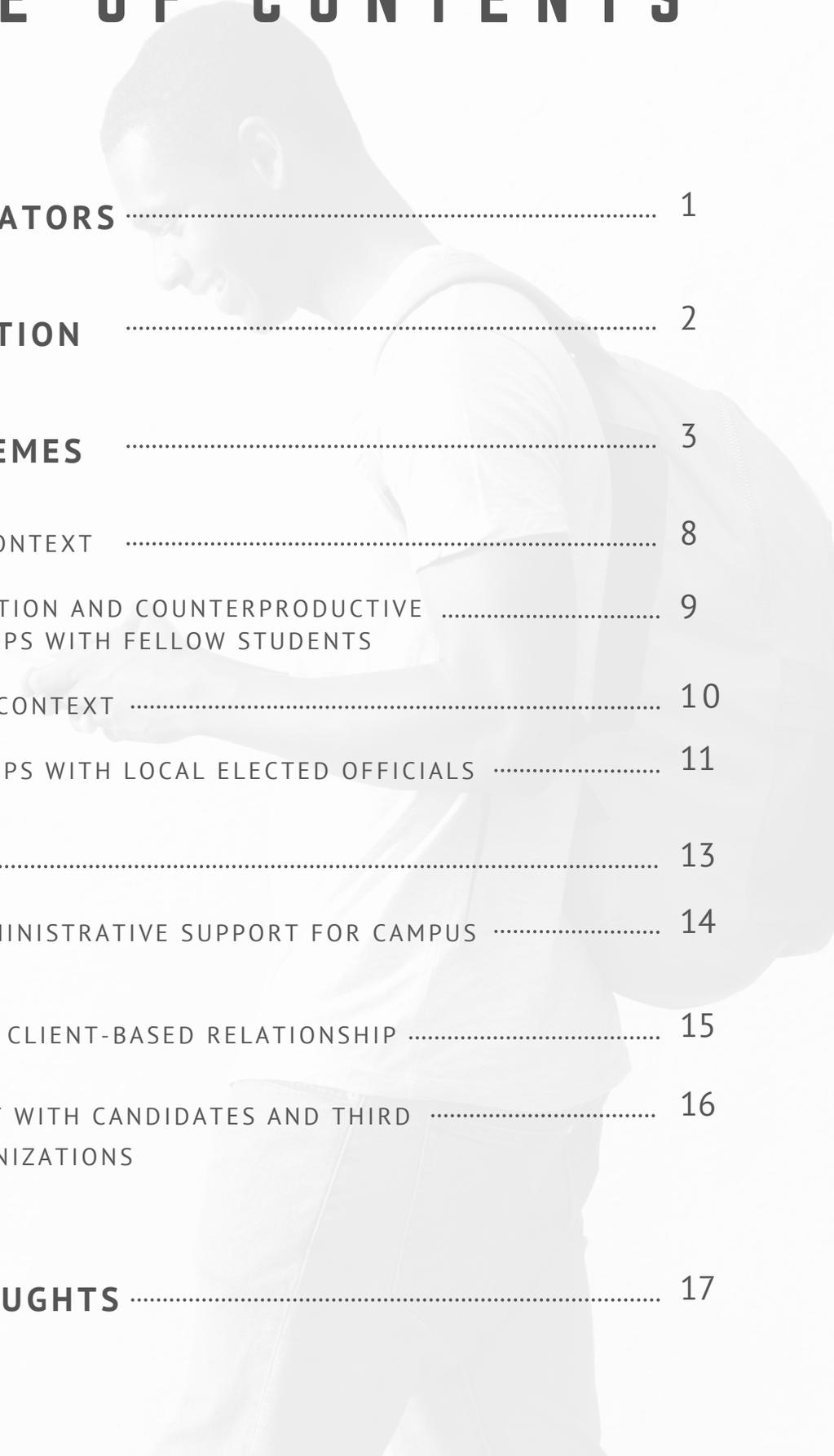
HBCU LEGACY INITIATIVE'S INSIGHTS BRIEF

*Lessons learned through conversations
with HBCU students and administrators.*

2022



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COLLABORATORS



CAMPUS VOTE PROJECT'S HBCU LEGACY INITIATIVE

Campus Vote Project's HBCU Legacy Initiative aims to identify and address barriers to student voting on HBCU campuses, and Black student voting on predominantly white campuses, through various methods of research and the creation of new and innovative resources. [Campus Vote Project](#) is a part of the [Fair Elections Center](#), a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit voting rights advocacy organization.



NAACP YOUTH & COLLEGE DIVISION*

The mission of the [NAACP Youth & College Division](#) is to inform youth of the problems affecting African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities; to advance the economic, education, social and political status of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities and their harmonious cooperation with other peoples; to stimulate an appreciation of the African Diaspora and other people of color's contribution to civilization; and to develop an intelligent, effective youth leadership

**NAACP Youth & College Division supported the 2020 student roundtable discussions which informed the 2020 Insights Brief and are referenced in this version.*



INTRODUCTION

The impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in United States history and politics is large and substantial. Since their inception, these institutions have produced pioneers of numerous industries. Their involvement in national and local movements such as organizing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which organized the Freedom Rides of 1962 (Shaw University), the Greensboro Sit-Ins of 1960 (North Carolina A&T State University), and the local desegregation activities of South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, and many more, provide proof of a commitment to civic activity and political involvement.

Given this history and tradition, it was alarming to see a 10.6% decrease in HBCU student voting and a 5.3% (1) decrease in total Black student voting between the 2012 and 2016 General Elections. However we have been encouraged by the sharp gain of 13% in HBCU student voting and 10% in total Black student voting between the 2016 and 2020 General Elections.

In preparation for the 2020 Election, Campus Vote Project's HBCU Legacy Initiative and the NAACP Youth and College Division partnered to identify barriers to student voting on HBCU campuses through open and honest conversations, called **HBCU Roundtables**.

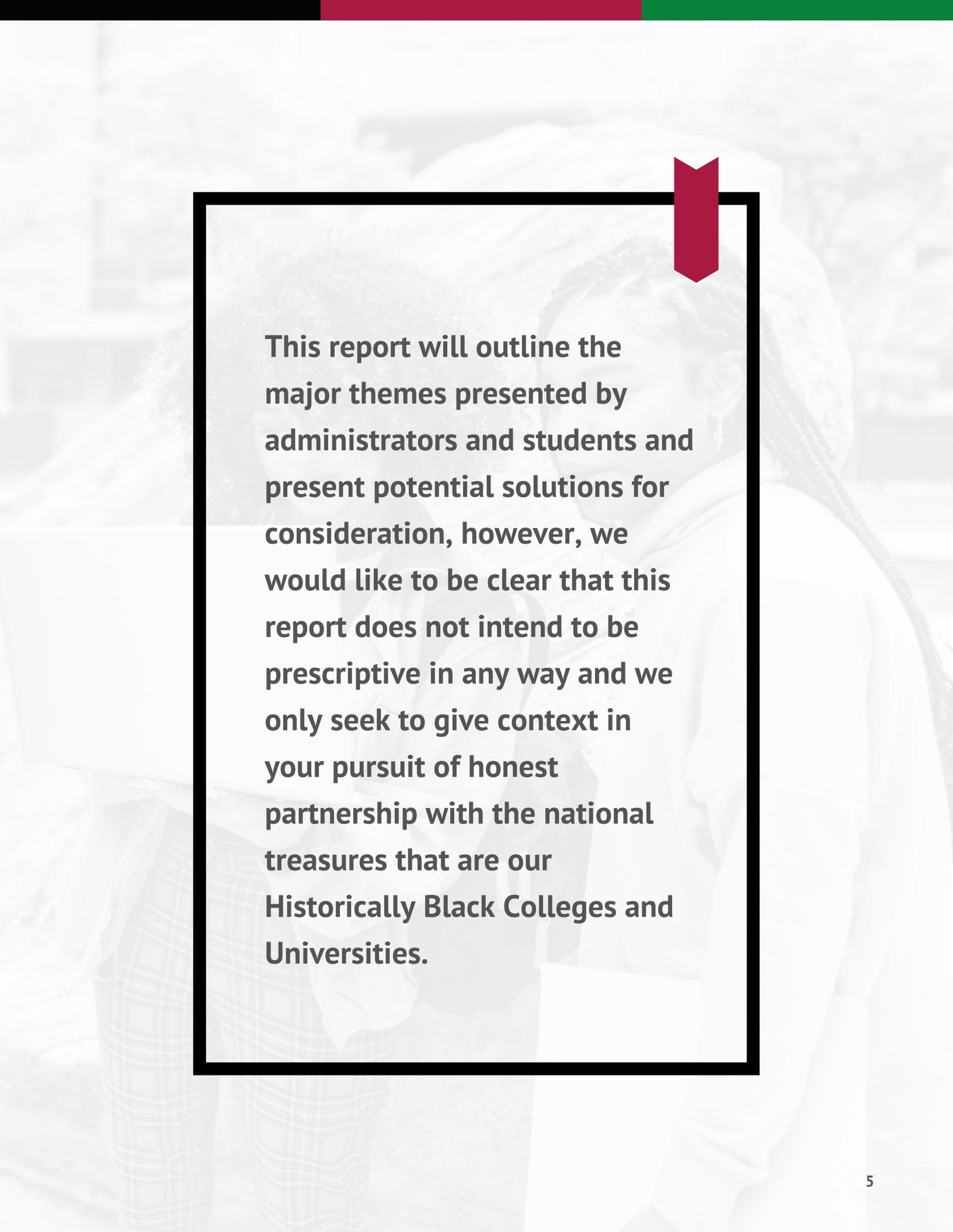
1 <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities>



The information and perspectives presented in the first HBCU Legacy Initiative Insights Brief, issued in 2020, were the result of two HBCU Roundtable discussions held on April 21, 2020 and June 04, 2020, with 45 HBCU students representing 20 different campuses. That document outlined four major themes that emerged during these discussions and proposed solutions for those who engage and support HBCU students as they exercise their right to vote.

Following the 2020 Election and after seeing the feedback students provided in the 2020 version of the HBCU Legacy Initiative Insights Brief, Campus Vote Project decided to follow-up the original report in order to create a more holistic view of institutionalization on college campuses that included campus administrators. In order to do this, we conducted hour-long interviews with administrators representing a wide range of the HBCU experience, from large public to small privates, well-funded to systemically underfunded, well-established voter engagement programming, and those who are in the process of rebuilding. Given this new information, we have added three new themes to the HBCU Legacy Initiative Insights Brief and provided more context surrounding the themes students discussed during the original HBCU Round Tables.





This report will outline the major themes presented by administrators and students and present potential solutions for consideration, however, we would like to be clear that this report does not intend to be prescriptive in any way and we only seek to give context in your pursuit of honest partnership with the national treasures that are our Historically Black Colleges and Universities.



MAJOR THEMES

After interviewing campus administrators, we identified four major themes and universal barriers that should be considered when working with HBCU's from an administrative perspective:

1. **Cultural Context.**
2. **Historical Context.**
3. **Lack of and/or Intermittent Funding.**
4. **Partnership vs. client-based engagement.**

Additionally, the following major themes were the most prevalent and universal barriers that emerged during the HBCU Roundtables with students:

1. **Lack of administrative support for campus work.**
2. **Contentious relationships with local elected officials and offices.**
3. **Misinformation and counterproductive communication with fellow students.**
4. **Intermittent engagement with candidates and third party organizations.**

The themes are broken down into “contributing factors” that aid in understanding the larger issue presented by the major themes.

Prospective solutions for each major theme have also been provided to help third-party organizations and candidates begin to think about their approaches for engaging HBCU campuses, as well as to inform students and administrators about the intrinsically tied issues they are facing on their campuses in their respective roles.



CULTURAL CONTEXT

Historically Black Colleges and Universities, like The Ivy League, are destination institutions with very rich legacies that draw students from all over the country. This presents unique circumstances for civic engagement of their students, like drawing students from many states all with differing election laws. Navigating the election laws for multiple states makes it difficult for campus programs to help all students register and vote, and can confuse students who see information intended for those registering and voting at their campus addresses. Students wanting to register and vote where they grew up, out-of-state or even in a different county or parish, can also easily miss deadlines that happen months and weeks before an election. Many states also impose additional requirements on individuals who do not register and vote in-person for their first election.

Campus Vote Project saw the impact of this firsthand during the 2020 presidential election, when a student from Florida, attending an HBCU in Georgia, did not receive their home state's absentee ballot in time to vote. The student did everything right to be eligible, but the ballot never showed up. This student was told by an election worker that while they did fill out the paperwork correctly and did it before the statutory deadline, they still didn't do it in enough time. This meant they wouldn't be able to receive the ballot and vote. These kinds of experiences with the voting process while not unique to HBCUs have a higher probability of happening because their populations come from all over the country. Such an experience can be devastating to a first-time voter and has the potential to have them walk away from the process altogether.



PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

For third party organizations and candidates:

- Develop resources that are more specific to HBCUs and their unique populations in collaboration with administrators and students.
- Simplifying policy that affects HBCU communities.

For HBCU Admins:

- Develop programming that goes beyond voter registration. Programs need to empower and educate students about how policy and politicians affect their lives.

MISINFORMATION AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FELLOW STUDENTS

Similarly, students reported confusion, misinformation, and counterproductive relationships with other students that may be partially attributed to the confusing cultural context. During the 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections we saw misinformation become a problem that touched every part of our society and HBCU campuses were not exempt. Inaccurate and/or skewed information from biased sources caused conversations about the legitimacy of the electoral process and the value of the Black vote. This in turn created an additional barrier for students working to increase voter engagement on their campuses. To add to the negative discourse, some students have a disconnect in understanding of how the elected offices and other ballot measures affect them as students and citizens in general.

Students reported that some of the contributing factors were:

- Social media influenced by ads, elected officials, and third party organizations can skew peer to peer sharing inaccurate information.
- A lack of citing sources and awareness of bias, as well as trouble identifying credible sources of information.
- Rapidly changing election information due to COVID and newly implemented laws not being widely shared, trusting elected leaders who have power but no credibility or lack proper knowledge.

One student explained, “You have too many people spreading wrong information about voting and candidates, which encourages people not to vote based off of things that aren’t even true.”

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS



For third party organizations and candidates:

- Relational organizing from trusted high propensity voters.
- Clear nonpartisan sources that have updated election information.
- Continue HBCU roundtable discussions for student awareness.
- Multiple rounds of reviewed content before shared on social media
- Create a culture of civic engagement on HBCU campuses through intentional outreach, education and support to HBCUs (*Example: Fresno State*).
- Cultivate media literacy by developing and maintaining *a list of credible sources of liberal, neutral, and conservative spaces*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

HBCUs have a rich history of being at the center of fights for the advancement of human rights in America and specifically voting rights. The significant legacy that HBCU students and institutions played in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s includes:

- **The first lunch counter sit-in, in 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, started by four North Carolina A&T students.**
- **The founding of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, by HBCU student leaders Diane Nash, Marion Barry, John Lewis, Julian Bond, and James Bevel at a meeting at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina in April of 1960.**
- **Students from HBCUs organized the 1961 Freedom Rides across the South and Mississippi Summer in 1964.**

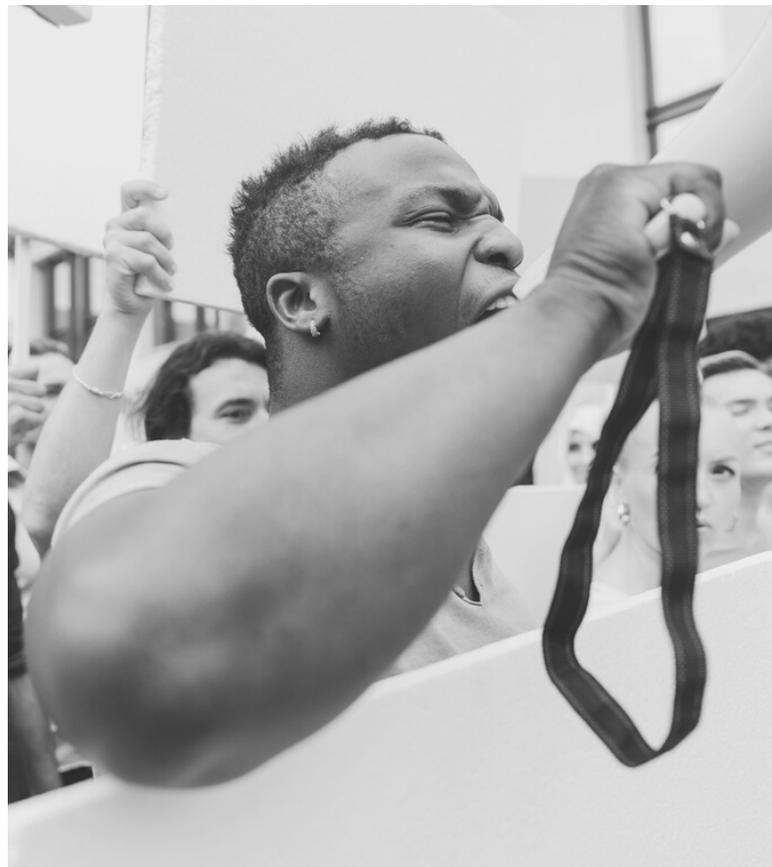
An HBCU administrator explained that HBCUs are literally the reason students across America have the right to choose their residency, “Because you got to understand where we are. We believe we are at ground zero in this whole fight. The case that the students started fighting back in the early 70s made its way all the way to the United States Supreme Court. And that action by the Supreme Court gave every college student the right to determine where they declared their residence. That was our case (Allen V. Waller County, Texas).”

This seminal 26th Amendment challenge brought change to a voter registration practice that singled out Prairie View A&M University students for discriminatory treatment by local election officials when attempting to register to vote, based solely on their status as students. The challenge continues to have an impact on that institution as well as across the country 50 years later. The administrators that were interviewed signaled that the legacy of fighting for civil and voting rights is still very much alive on HBCU campuses, but students can be exhausted from that expectation. They recognize that there is a line they should draw for their students.



For their students, faculty, and administrators HBCUs are safe havens for Black brilliance, expression, and identity tucked away from the gaze and opinion of the white culture. This tradition has largely been upheld, making partnering with these institutions on civic engagement fundamentally different from dealing with Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The campus administrators and faculty are more protective of which organizations and what information is promoted or even allowed on their campuses to interact with students. There are policies such as having to be endorsed by an on-campus organization or staff person before you can set up a table or pass out any literature.

One administrator explained, “So our office sets the rule. So just like for any student organization, so an outside entity wants to come to campus to pass on information or to do an event, they would just register with us. And so for us, we’re just looking for, what is your organization? What are you looking to pass out? When do you want to come? Who’s your representative, things like that, um, for me, I prefer for the organization to have some type of connection with the student.”



This can bring potential conflict with local elections officials and third-party organizations who are looking to retrofit programs that work in other places without proper consideration and conversation with campus administrators.

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

For third-party organizations and candidates:

- Work together with other 3rd party organizations whenever possible.
 - Since HBCU work with multiple organizations to receive the funding necessary to execute programming, typically they find themselves under intense deadlines to complete multiple reports asking for the same information for the same programming that happened on campus. Not only is this cumbersome for the administrators, but it also limits the impact a collaborative effort on the HBCU campus could have.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS AND OFFICES

Given the historical context between local elected and elections officials, it isn't terribly surprising that there is a level of distrust between students and their local elected and elections officials. One student explained, "One of the things that happened while we were trying to get a voting location on our campus was that an elected official released a letter saying that we don't need one because it was homecoming week and we wouldn't be worried about voting anyway."

Local elected officials have the ability to provide a wealth of resources and guidance to HBCU students. Unfortunately, the relationship between local elected officials and HBCU students does not always live up to the potential that it could because of contention caused by adherence to stereotypes or differing political views. When this relationship becomes adversarial, students and local elected officials can be robbed of beneficial insights and resources that aid both in their aim to serve the campus and surrounding communities. Some of the contributing factors shared by students were polarized political views in conflict with administration, lack of clarity surrounding the roles and responsibilities of local elected officials, and lack of interest until crises or issues arise



PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

For Admins:

- Creating an official or non-official group of students interested in local government to: Create and establish relationships with local officials, host town hall meetings with questions specifically from and for HBCU students, and develop creative outlets-- through art, social media, etc.-- to engage and inform students on current issues and local officials with the student body.



FUNDING

One major theme that spanned across all interviews is the lack of funding institutionally to do civic engagement work. We have observed campus administrators typically rely on grants and internal budgets to execute the work. The funding sought includes paid internships for their students, grants from third-party organizations, and resources created by those organizations that are non-partisan in nature.

“Just to give you an idea, this area was created from a \$50,000 grant that we were awarded in 2015, I stretch those funds until actually, I’ve just spent the last of them supposed to be a one year grant, I just spent the last of my funds [in 2021] and I have no more funds.”

This was a particular problem for the institution that didn’t have C-suite support and needed to prove the value of civic engagement work they are doing. HBCUs are historically underfunded which means rarely do you find administrators doing just one job. So in practice, we run into administrators whose job description doesn’t include civic engagement work and have taken on that responsibly in addition to their normal duties.

‘What is your Staff capacity? “I am the staff.”’

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS



For third party organizations and candidates:

- Create a search engine for HBCUs to be able to find and apply for grant money for these programs.
 - Be intentional about creating a hub for HBCU’s in the Legacy Initiative to connect with one another and make it easier for Campus Vote Project to distribute information about grant opportunities.

LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT FOR CAMPUS WORK

Students discussed concerns over administrative support, typically referring to administrators at higher levels than those who actively support civic engagement, during their roundtables. They explained that administrators support students and oversee campus operations in many facets, but at times this dynamic can create tension between the two parties in the process of increasing voter engagement on HBCU campuses. Causes for this tension can range from a lack of resources that the administration has to support the students, to the fear of endangering certain funding streams that allow the institution to continue its core operations. Regardless of its origin, this tension creates a barrier to student work and voter engagement on many HBCU campuses.

One student lamented, *“I find it heartbreaking to see and to have dealt with various members of academic administration, who teach and work with students at these schools, silence and block the efforts of student-led civic engagement.”*



Some contributing factors discussed by students included:

- **Engagement with students who may not have certain knowledge or skill sets.**
- **Limited resources for development and support of students passionate about voter engagement work on their campus,**
- **A lack of accountability on the part of the administration to provide voter engagement resources to the student population.**

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS



For Admins:

- Increase support of students interested in democratic and civic engagement work on campuses through student development and faculty mentoring programs.
- Actively engage students outside of the usual majors or social circles normally involved in voter engagement work.
- Ensure administrative follow-through for the provision of voter engagement resources and information.



PARTNER VS. CLIENT-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

An overwhelming message shared by campus administrators boils down to treating administrators and HBCU students like partners in this space, instead of clients that you need to meet a quota. It is imperative that outside organizations respect the long history and expertise that administrators and students bring to the civic engagement space about their campuses and culture. This includes being an intentional collaborator and building sustainable relationships, or at least being honest about what you need so that HBCUs can respond accordingly. Every administrator had a different, yet remarkably similar story of third-party organizations setting up shop on campus to register students, without a conversation with administrators. In the worst of cases, these third-parties confused students and did not properly register them. Once the damage is done they leave campus at the end of the election.

Even organizations that come on to campus and establish relationships disappear until the next election cycle. A campus administrator explained, *“...I need, for our organizations that do this work every day to start thinking differently about how they do this work, don't come in here in the season, you need to come in here for a whole reason. Like, if you come you got to hang with us you can't jump in and jump out this ain't DoubleDutch I need you to be here all the time helping to educate because it's just me and if I can't set you over in this room and invite students into this space [or] I take you into this residence hall and you have conversations with him nonpartisan Of course. If I can get you to help with this or even create material videos like HBCU driven initiated type videos...”*

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS



For third party organizations and candidates:

- Establish relationships with administrators and ask what the needs are on that particular campus. This seems to be the most effective solution and it was repeated again and again by all the administrators. These HBCU administrations care deeply for their students and want to make sure they can use their voices. So when creating programs it's imperative to get their input first.

ENGAGEMENT WITH CANDIDATES AND THIRD PARTY ORGANIZATIONS

Students felt the same exhaustion from the process as the administrators. They said that during election season, many organizations work hard to educate and mobilize students around issues and candidates seek to make their case for election. They said the problem is that HBCU campuses are often not engaged by the organizations until very late in the cycle, if at all. Also, when they are engaged it is usually from a superficial and even stereotypical understanding of their political leanings and point of view. One student explained, “Students are going to be more receptive to people that they know, rather than strangers coming to the campus to educate them on something that they may not already know about.”

This is the case for both third party organizations and candidates; and can make HBCU students feel overlooked or taken for granted. Some contributing factors included: not enough engagement from candidates and third party organizations to build rapport with student body, third party organization staff placed on HBCU campuses do not reflect the demographics of the campuses and creates a barrier between organizations and students, and local elected officials are not accessible to HBCU students outside of election seasons



PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

For third party organizations and candidates:

- Sustained engagement with the student body and active listening efforts to genuinely and adequately understand the views and concerns of students on HBCU campuses.
- Provide resources for students to aid third party organizations in their work to better understand the cultural context of voter engagement on HBCU campuses.
- Commit time during campaigns to adequately and actively engage HBCU students in their city, district, and state elections.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is clear that the presence of HBCUs, their students, faculty, and staff is pivotal to the growth of American democracy. With this insight brief, we hope to have shined a light on some of the issues they currently face, as well as prospective solutions to making their presence in this participatory democracy more attainable. After interviewing both students and administrators it's clear to us that the desire to be active participants is not only present but in fact vigorously sought-after. It is also apparent that the reasons behind any drop-off are systemic in nature and will take the efforts of outside organizations working with and through the HBCUs to overcome these barriers.





Campus Vote Project's HBCU Legacy Initiative aims to identify and address barriers to student voting on HBCU campuses, and Black student voting on predominantly white campuses, through various methods of research and the creation of new and innovative resources.



Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project works with universities, community colleges, faculty, students and election officials to reduce barriers to student voting and helps campuses institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote.



Fair Elections Center is a national, nonpartisan voting rights and election reform 501(c)(3) organization based in Washington, D.C. Our mission is to use litigation and advocacy to remove barriers to registration and voting, particularly those disenfranchising underrepresented and marginalized communities, and to improve election administration.