BUILDING BELONGING AND RESILIENCE ON HBCU CAMPUSES:

A Strengths-Based Toolkit



POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB

Lumina FOUNDATION

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is a collaboration between the Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL) and partners from Howard University, developed as part of the broader Building Resilient & Inclusive Communities of Knowledge (BRICK) project, supported by the Lumina Foundation. It centers the distinctive landscape of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) while speaking directly to the practitioners who do this work: students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators.

BRICK's broader mission is to help campuses recognize and interrupt the conditions that allow supremacist ideologies, conspiracy theories, and polarization to take root. Decades of research on radicalization and extremism point to a consistent upstream driver: a lack of belonging. When people feel isolated, disrespected, or like their identity and experiences are not valued by the community around them, they become more vulnerable to a wide range of negative outcomes, not only extremism, but also depression and anxiety, substance use, academic disengagement and dropout, and susceptibility to exploitative ideologies that promise identity, purpose, or community. A sense of belonging is a protective factor against all of these. By identifying where HBCUs can further strengthen practices that center students' cultures, values, and strengths, this resource builds the protective foundation of belonging that **BRICK**'s broader framework promotes.

Fostering genuine belonging is a shared challenge across higher education, and the evidence, strategies, and recommendations gathered through the **BRICK** project carry relevance across institutional contexts, including Historically White Institutions (HWIs), the most common comparison point in research on Black students' campus experience, and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), for which **BRICK** has developed a companion resource. Other Minority-Serving Institutions, including Predominantly Black Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and AANAPISIs, share many of the same dynamics even though they are not each named individually here.

At the same time, institutional context matters. This toolkit draws specifically on research conducted at HBCUs, though many of its recommendations are likely transferable to Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), which often share some of the same student demographics but differ from HBCUs in founding mission and history. Developed in collaboration with HBCU researchers, this resource is grounded in both evidence and lived institutional knowledge. It recognizes that HBCUs bring real and documented strengths to the work of belonging, while also facing real challenges that require shared responsibility and intentional action.

With that in mind, this resource aims to equip students, faculty, staff, and campus administrators with the tools, strategies, and frameworks needed to build healthier, more inclusive campus environments.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation, its officers, or employees.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This toolkit distills a systematic content analysis of belonging and inclusion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities into 11 evidence-based strengths-building areas and a set of audience-specific recommendations for students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators.

HBCUs possess longstanding strengths in fostering belonging, cultural affirmation, community engagement, and student success. These assets are a primary reason many students, faculty, and staff choose to study, live, and work at an HBCU. However, the benefits of these assets do not always reach everyone equally. Taking an asset-based approach grounded in Terrell Strayhorn's theory of sense of belonging and Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth model, and attentive throughout to intersectionality, this toolkit identifies ways to strengthen and extend the core assets of HBCUs so that all members of the HBCU community, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, or class, experience meaningful inclusion and support.

The analysis surfaced 11 interconnected strengths-building areas spanning institutional foundations (visible institutional commitment, strategic partnerships, future-oriented strategy and accountability), **campus environment** (safe spaces, diversity and inclusion training, community engagement), **learning and leadership** (social justice and equity-focused education, leadership development), and **identity and community** (cultural empowerment, cultural resilience, student organizations as inclusion infrastructure).

Toolkit at a Glance

74

Academic, news, and student affairs practitioner sources

2,075

Quotations

131

Codes



What This Toolkit Provides

- 11 evidence-based strengths-building areas
- Audience-specific recommendations for students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators
- Reflection questions for consideration throughout implementation
- Resources for implementation and continued learning

These strengths-building areas translate into concrete recommendations for each audience. Students are asked to build peer accountability networks and use digital tools strategically to counter online hate. Student leaders are asked to audit their organizations' traditions for patterns of exclusion and invest in inclusive leadership training. Faculty are asked to complete recurring, role-specific training and count mentoring as the academic labor it is. Staff are asked to build and share referral maps and make warm handoffs standard practice. Administrators are asked to move from symbolic to structural commitment, treating campus climate data with the same rigor applied to graduation rates.

Read together, the recommendations point to one central finding: belonging at HBCUs is shaped most by visible institutional commitment, the strengths of student organizations, the quality of everyday faculty and staff interaction, and the presence of credible safe spaces. None of these are new inventions but extensions of what HBCU communities already do well. The work ahead is not to build something new from scratch, but to widen the circle so that every student who arrives finds that tradition reaching toward them.

Who should use this toolkit? Students, student leaders, faculty, staff, administrators, campus climate teams, and institutional leaders committed to fostering belonging and inclusion.

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BELONGING AT HBCUS

Delivering campus belonging for students is now at the center of higher education's mandate. Belonging shapes whether students persist, whether they thrive, whether they leave knowing they were fully seen, and whether they remain engaged as alumni. For faculty, fostering belonging means having the support and stability to teach and mentor well over time. For staff, it means having the standing, training, and resources their work requires. For administrators, it means being able to lead with both accountability to the institution and care for the people inside it.

Belonging is not a new idea for HBCUs, which have always understood that students need more than access to a campus. They need connection. They need care. They need people, systems, and spaces that affirm and support them holistically. At the same time, HBCUs are not exempt from the challenges to belonging that exist across higher education and society. Scholarship on HBCUs continues to ask where students feel fully connected, where they feel unseen, and what it takes to make belonging real for everyone across the campus. This toolkit was built on research that highlights what HBCUs have long known about community, identity, and student success, while also creating space to examine where belonging is strong, where it is uneven, and where it must become more intentional.





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THE HBCU LANDSCAPE

HBCUs hold a distinctive place in the history of American higher education, established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to serve African Americans who were denied access to other institutions. However, HBCUs have never placed restrictions on enrollment based on race. They have always been open to students from all backgrounds, and they continue to disproportionately serve students from disenfranchised and marginalized communities across the country. In fact, HBCUs enroll significantly more low-income and first-generation students than traditional four-year colleges, with approximately 70% of HBCU students qualifying for the Pell Grant and nearly 40% representing the first members of their families to attend college (UNCF, 2021; The Century Foundation, 2022; Dahl et al., 2022). Non-Black students represent between 24% to 27% of students enrolled at HBCUs, with 9.8% of the student body representing white student enrollment, 6.8% Hispanic or Latino, 3.7% of students with unknown race/ethnicity, 2.7% of students with two or more races/ethnicities listed, and Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders each making up one percent or less of the student body (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2026). This represents an increase overall of non-Black students of more than 9% from 1976 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2026). Non-Black student academic and personal outcomes are largely positive, with graduates frequently reporting high levels of classroom engagement, valuable cross-cultural learning, and impactful changes in their racial and social perspectives (Arroyo et al., 2016; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Tyler, 2024).

Today, HBCUs represent just 3% of all U.S. higher education institutions, yet they enroll approximately 10% of all African American students, produce roughly 20% of all Black college graduates, and account for 25% of Black graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. These outcomes are not accidental. They are the product of something empirical research is only beginning to examine systematically. What makes these outcomes possible is a campus environment where Black students are not the exception, where faculty treat mentorship as a calling rather than an obligation, and where the curriculum reflects rather than erases the history and contributions of the multitude of identities in the room. Research shows that 83% of HBCU students report feeling a strong sense of belonging to their campus community, compared to 73% nationally and 72% among Black students at HWIs (Patterson et al., 2025). HBCU students also demonstrate significantly stronger mental health outcomes, with higher rates of flourishing and lower rates of anxiety, substance use disorders, and eating disorders than the national average of all college students.

HBCU stakeholders define inclusion not in narrow or procedural terms, but as belonging to a community, as feeling seen, heard, and valued. Belonging, in the HBCU context, is inseparable from support for student success (Jones et al., 2026).



Belonging is not a social luxury but a fundamental prerequisite for academic motivation, persistence, and eventual graduation (Strayhorn, 2018).



> Students at HBCUs do not experience belonging along a single, isolated axis of identity.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Amongst the challenges faced by higher education institutions broadly, HBCUs face a unique set of challenges of their own. Three challenges in particular shape the work of belonging and inclusion on HBCU campuses.

The first is the persistent reality of systemic underfunding. HBCUs have historically received less federal and state support than HWIs, and that gap continues to constrain what is possible (Cardona & Vilsack, 2023). An analysis by the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Agriculture found that 16 states underfunded their 1890 land-grant HBCUs by approximately $12.6 to $13 billion over a thirty-year period compared with their HWI land-grant counterparts. Faculty and staff at HBCUs consistently report "wearing multiple hats," managing responsibilities that would require several people at comparably resourced institutions. The desire to support students is almost always present; the capacity to sustain it over time is not. When offices are understaffed, inclusion work gets squeezed out. For example, when departments have less money to hire academic advisors, students are either left without guidance or are forced to look for it elsewhere (Smith, 2021). If they go to professors, the professors face a difficult tradeoff: spend more time meeting with students outside office hours at the expense of teaching and research responsibilities or forgo the mentorship that attracted them to teaching at an HBCU in the first place. This is not because institutions lack commitment but because they cannot do everything with the limited resources available (Escobar et al., 2021).

The second challenge lies in extending the HBCU culture of care to all students on their campuses. HBCUs have built community exceptionally well, and that community is primarily organized around a shared Black racial identity, which can be a genuine and powerful strength. But not all HBCU students are Black, and among those who identify as such, Blackness is not a monolith. HBCU students arrive from different nations, ethnicities, religions, class backgrounds, and regions. They hold different relationships between gender and sexuality. They navigate different degrees of ability and belonging. Such differences generate real intra-community tensions that a shared racial identity, however meaningful, does not automatically resolve. Every HBCU student carries multiple identities, some of which are not yet fully reflected in campus programming, policy, or the informal norms of student life (Njoku et al., 2017; Palmer & Young, 2023). HBCU stakeholders excel at fostering community broadly. This is evident in traditions such as homecoming, Black Greek Letter organizations, gospel choirs and step teams, and a faculty culture that treats mentorship as kinship rather than obligation, but efforts to address inclusion for specific identity groups, including LGBTQ+ students, international students, students with disabilities, multiracial students, students of varying religions, and students from different class backgrounds, remain more recent, more uneven, and less institutionalized (Jones et al., 2026). Closing this gap is not a departure from the HBCU mission, but its fulfillment.

The third challenge for HBCUs related to belonging is the current political environment. For HBCUs, attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) do not just look like closing an office or ending an initiative; they threaten the foundation of the institution itself, and such threats are both political and deeply personal. DEI initiatives across higher education are under coordinated legislative and rhetorical attacks, including state bans on DEI offices and funding, restrictions on race-conscious programming, and challenges to tenure and curriculum. HBCUs face the same pressure plus a distinct layer of challenges of their own, including bomb threats and other targeted hate incidents, scrutiny of their federal funding and accreditation, and rhetoric that questions the legitimacy of race-conscious institutions altogether. Faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators are navigating mounting pressures in real time, often without adequate institutional guidance or protection. This toolkit does not ignore present conditions. It offers grounded strategies drawn from the evidence precisely because the external environment makes internal clarity and commitment more important than ever.



> **“The goal of this toolkit is not to start from scratch, but to help campus communities strengthen, extend, and institutionally protect the foundation and achievements they have already built.”**

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

THE BRICK FOUNDATION

This toolkit is part of the Building Resilient & Inclusive Communities of Knowledge (BRICK) project, an initiative created to equip the higher education community—students, staff, faculty, and administrators—with tools and knowledge to address supremacist ideologies, misogyny, propaganda, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and polarization on college campuses. BRICK's core insight is that the conditions that make a campus vulnerable to hate and the conditions that make it resilient against hate are largely the same, regardless of institution type. Naming the risk factors is only half of that work; the other half is building the protective factors that keep students feeling connected, confident, and engaged in activities that give their lives meaning and purpose. Belonging is one of the most consistently documented protective factors in research on extremism (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). This resource focuses upstream on the asset HBCUs are already positioned to cultivate better than almost any other institution type in American higher education: a deep and durable sense of belonging.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH THEORIES

The framework builds upon two complementary bodies of scholarship. First, we utilize Terrell Strayhorn's theory of a sense of belonging in higher education, which argues that belonging is not a social luxury but a fundamental prerequisite for academic motivation, persistence, and eventual graduation (Strayhorn, 2018).

Second, we integrate Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth model, which actively challenges deficit narratives by recognizing the aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital that students of color bring with them to campus (Yosso, 2005). Together, these frameworks shift our core investigative question from what is missing to what already exists and how we can build upon it.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality serves as a core analytical commitment throughout this entire project. Students at HBCUs do not experience belonging along a single, isolated axis of identity. Instead, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and social class constantly interact to shape how individuals move through campus life. This toolkit honors the complexity of student identity rather than treating the student population as a monolithic group. Students bring multiple identities into their classrooms and onto their campuses, requiring faculty, staff, and administrators to support students along intersecting identities; for example, an LGBTQ+ affinity group on an HBCU campus will have to address the unique experience of LGBTQ+ students of color as distinct from the experiences of international students (Patton, 2011) HBCUs and PBIs will constantly be confronted by a demand for nuance and layered understanding of identity when supporting their students.

HOW THIS TOOLKIT IS ORGANIZED

The toolkit is organized in four parts. First, we describe the conceptual foundations and evidence base that inform it. Second, we present 11 strengths-building areas that emerged from analysis of core literature. Third, we translate those findings into audience-specific recommendations for students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators. Finally, an appendix provides methodology, source details, and reflection questions to support implementation.

AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH

This toolkit is grounded in the assets that HBCU communities have already built and in measures that practitioners and community members have already called for and proposed. It adopts an asset-based approach to understanding belonging and inclusion at HBCUs. Rather than measuring HBCUs against the patterns or standards of HWIs, our framework centers what HBCUs already do well. We focus directly on the cultural traditions, community practices, and institutional relationships that have long anchored Black student success, exploring how HBCUs can expand existing strengths to reach every student equitably. The foundation for such work was laid by the people who built HBCU institutions, the faculty who stayed when better-paying options were available, the staff who became de facto counselors and advocates, and the students who built organizations and communities when formal structures fell short. The goal of this toolkit is not to start from scratch, but to help campus communities strengthen, extend, and institutionally protect the foundation and achievements they have already built, and to centralize the resources for community building and inclusion that already exist.

A strengths-based framing, however, does not mean closing our eyes to gaps. The research is specific about where work remains, and we take those findings seriously. The toolkit translates the evidence into concrete, audience-specific recommendations for the five groups who shape campus life at every institution: students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators. When these groups act simultaneously and in coordination, when belonging becomes everyone's responsibility, and not just that of the inclusion office, the culture of care that HBCUs have cultivated becomes more durable, more equitable, and more capable of reaching every student who passes through their doors.

What follows is organized first around the 11 core areas of strength identified in the literature, and then by audience, with each section grounded in the evidence, written for the people doing the work, and closed with concrete recommendations. This is a toolkit built for use.

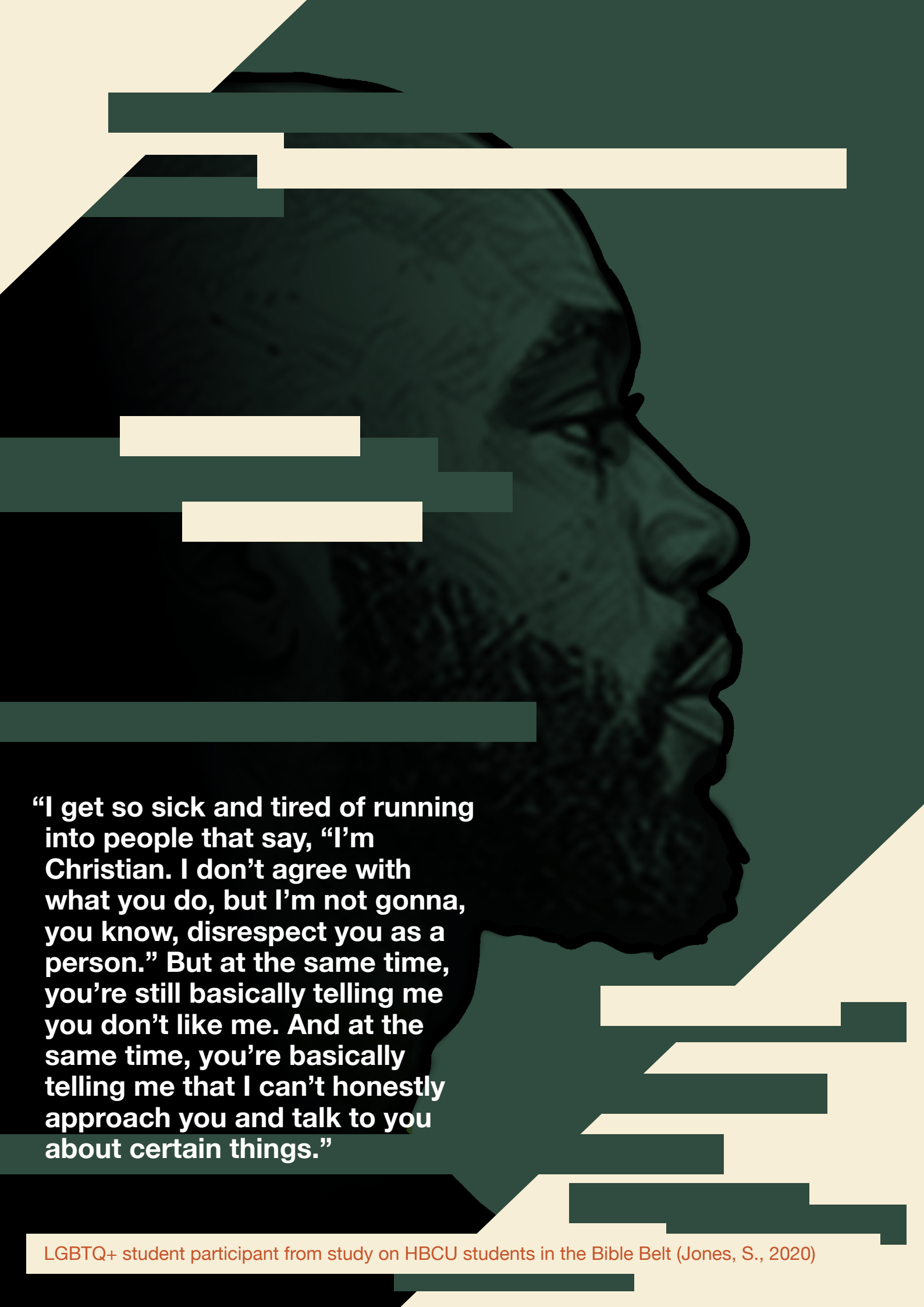
FINDINGS: KEY STRENGTHS-BUILDING AREAS

The 11 strengths-building areas below emerged inductively from the most frequently and consistently coded themes across the literature. HBCUs demonstrate these strengths-building areas across four interconnected domains: institutional foundations, campus environment, learning and leadership, and identity and community. Together, they represent the conditions that support belonging, inclusion, resilience, and student success on HBCU campuses.

Although discussed separately, all areas are highly interconnected. Progress in one area often reinforces progress in others. For example, strong student organizations help create safe spaces, while visible institutional commitment strengthens community engagement and leadership development. The 11 areas are listed below in Table 1.

THE 11 STRENGTHS-BUILDING AREAS AT A GLANCE

Institutional Foundations	Campus Environment	Learning and Leadership	Identity and Community
Visible Institutional Commitment	Safe Spaces (Physical, Social, and Digital)	Social Justice and Equity-Focused Education	Cultural Empowerment
Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations	Diversity and Inclusion Training	Leadership Development	Cultural Resilience
Future-Oriented Strategy and Accountability	Community Engagement		Student Organizations as Inclusion Infrastructure



“I get so sick and tired of running into people that say, “I’m Christian. I don’t agree with what you do, but I’m not gonna, you know, disrespect you as a person.” But at the same time, you’re still basically telling me you don’t like me. And at the same time, you’re basically telling me that I can’t honestly approach you and talk to you about certain things.”

LGBTQ+ student participant from study on HBCU students in the Bible Belt (Jones, S., 2020)

ELEVEN CORE AREAS OF STRENGTHS-BUILDING AT HBCUS

1. Visible Institutional Commitment

When university leadership names specific policies, allocates real resources, and responds to incidents with concrete public statements, the cumulative message is that the institution genuinely sees its members. At one campus, a president who mandated Safe Zone training for all staff, personally attended every Pride event, and established an active cross-institutional inclusion council produced measurably better outcomes than peer institutions that left inclusion work entirely to students (Jones et al., 2026). Conversely, students point to administrative silence, inaction, and inconsistency as distinct forms of harm. Students need institutions to speak up for all marginalized groups on campus.

The composition of faculty and staff is itself a form of institutional commitment. When inclusion and belonging extend to every employee and administrator on campus, the entire institution builds the collective trust and resilience needed to navigate systemic challenges and sustain meaningful change. If certain marginalized identities are underrepresented amongst university employees, that absence itself becomes a visible signal to students about who the institution values and protects.

2. Safe Spaces: Physical, Social, and Digital

Safe spaces are environments where students can be fully themselves without having to translate or shield their identities. What counts as safety varies by identity and context, but the pattern is consistent: students who feel secure in specific, dedicated spaces are far more likely to participate in broader campus life. Safe spaces and community engagement appear together at exceptionally high rates across the data. Safe spaces can be created with intention, a declaration, and a bottom-up approach to generating community commitments from participants.

Components of safe spaces include establishing norms about being respectful of other students, being mindful of who is speaking and for how long, being open to discussion even when the topic is challenging or emotionally fraught, acknowledging that the conversations had in these spaces are confidential and private, encouraging the use of “I” statements and speaking from personal experience (rather than broad, sweeping, universal declarations), teaching students how to engage in active listening, and training faculty and staff in how to facilitate dialogue within these safe spaces (Doornbosch et al., 2025).

3. Social Justice and Equity-Focused Education

Education that centers justice, equity, access, and inclusion is one of the most consistently documented sources of belonging and academic engagement at HBCUs. It is important to strengthen the curriculum intersectionality that exists and deliberately incorporate LGBTQ+, international, multiracial, and religiously diverse student experiences into frameworks that have traditionally centered the Black American experience. Non-academic spaces also matter: Black Greek Letter Organizations, interfaith groups, and LGBTQ+ centers all function as documented hubs for equity-focused learning.

This work unfolds inside the broader political pressures described above; retreating from inclusive education to avoid political pushback ultimately leaves the most vulnerable populations unprotected.

4. Community Engagement

Community engagement refers to the opportunities students have to engage in activism or service learning related to preventing or responding to hate and discrimination, as well as the everyday positive interactions with peers and faculty that are foundational to belonging for students with marginalized identities. Community engagement on HBCU or PBI campuses might take the form of joining or creating a student affinity group, organizing an event or activity on campus, inviting a speaker to present to the campus community, hosting a screening or a watch party, inviting students to celebrate a niche interest as a group, or a host of other activities meant to connect students to each other and make students feel like part of something bigger than themselves.

Community engagement is only sustainable when backed by institutional infrastructure. Leaving it as an emotional burden on individual students is not a solution. Faculty who design and teach justice-centered curricula, administrators who fund and publicly defend those programs, and student organizations that sustain equity-focused learning outside the classroom all make community engagement possible.

5. Diversity and Inclusion Training

Students from marginalized groups consistently describe the difference between a faculty member who can hold space for difficult conversations and one who cannot as one of the most consequential factors in whether they feel they belong on campus. Faculty members, for their part, frequently report wanting guidance on those same conversations but not knowing where to find it. The result is predictable: students leave interactions feeling disrespected and humiliated, and faculty are left without the tools or guidance they need to repair the relationship or rectify the situation.

Professional development works best when it is recurring, role-specific, and framed as growth rather than punishment. The most significant professional development training gaps relate to the intersectional needs of LGBTQ+ students, Muslim women, international students, multiracial students, and secular or atheist students.

When students confront discrimination among classmates and create organic opportunities to teach them, the effect is often deeper and more lasting than any top-down messaging.



“Some other international students and I, especially those from non-English speaking countries face marginalization and discrimination in class. When it comes to group projects and presentations, they do not want to be in the same group with us and if we end up being in the same group, they do not like to add our opinion to the group work”.

International HBCU student from study on international challenges at HBCUs (Olaoye, 2020)



“However, there remains a significant gap between the support they provide to students and the support they receive from universities, particularly in the form of advising, funding, and physical spaces.”

“[My campus LGBTQ+ student group] just made me feel more comfortable. Like I know I have a safe place to come back to where I always had a safe space to fall, even if I have to fall flat on my face, I always had that place where I’m not going to be judged...and that’s very reassuring for me”.

-Student participant from Byrd (2020)’s study on LGBTQ+ student experiences at HBCUs

6. Student Organizations as Inclusion Infrastructure

Student-led organizations are the most reliable, first source of safety, community, and identity affirmation for students with marginalized identities. Regardless of how much institutional support develops, student organizations offer something formal structures cannot: community built by and for the people who need it most. Student-led organizations' association with designated safe spaces is one of the strongest correlations in the data. Organizations serving LGBTQ+, international, Muslim, and Latinx students are documented across multiple campuses, and play an irreplaceable role in student experiences of belonging. However, there remains a significant gap between the support they provide to students and the support they receive from universities, particularly in the form of advising, funding, and physical spaces. Closing that gap is one of the highest-leverage opportunities in this toolkit.

7. Cultural Empowerment

Pride in Black identity, history, and tradition is the affirming backbone of HBCU life and a powerful protective factor against external threats. The same type of intentional, affirmational approach should be extended intersectionally to other identities. A Black LGBTQ+ student, a Black Muslim woman, or a Black international student should each find that campus traditions embrace their full identity rather than requiring them to leave parts of themselves at the door.

This principle extends to non-Black students as well: cultural empowerment for HBCU communities is not exclusively about Black identity, but about ensuring every identity represented on campus is affirmed with the same intentionality.

8. Cultural Resilience

HBCUs have a documented and distinctive strength in faculty cultural resilience, expressed in a tradition of sharing personal histories, encouraging civic engagement, treating students with genuine dignity, and functioning as mentors long after graduation. Faculty have a documented tradition of showing up for students in ways that go well beyond their formal job description, including treating students with a level of dignity that many have not encountered elsewhere. Students describe the personal and relationship-based approach of faculty at HBCUs as transformative, especially those who came from schools where their racial identity was treated as a problem rather than an asset.

Protecting this genuine institutional strength requires protecting the faculty who carry it. They disproportionately shoulder heavy service and mentoring loads with little formal recognition. The burden often falls most heavily on women faculty, who are documented across multiple HBCU campuses as taking on more of this invisible labor than their male colleagues, often without it ever showing up in a tenure file or affecting pay.

Unrecognized faculty mentoring is a sustainability problem and addressing it will depend on what an institution can afford. Direct compensation is one option, but it is not always realistic at HBCUs operating with historically constrained budgets. Where new money is not available, institutions can still reward mentoring structurally: counting it explicitly in tenure, promotion, and annual review criteria; reducing other service obligations, such as committee assignments and administrative tasks, for faculty who mentor heavily, so the labor is redistributed rather than piled on top of an already full load; building formal mentoring programs that spread the responsibility across more of the faculty instead of concentrating it on the same few; and recognizing mentoring publicly, through awards, course releases, or protected time, so it functions as a credential rather than an invisible expectation.

9. Leadership Development

The HBCU tradition of developing student leaders is a genuine source of identity and belonging. When leadership development opportunities do not reach all students equally—particularly LGBTQ+ students, international students, and women navigating systemic gender bias—the gap between the institution's stated mission and a student's actual experience creates a tension that undermines student belonging. Training faculty and administrators in how to support leadership development for students with intersectional identities on HBCU and PBI campuses can directly address this gap. Recommended approaches include empowering faculty to address bias directly within their departments, training faculty, staff, and administrators in the specific needs of students with intersecting marginalized identities and embedding advocacy skills into student programming.

10. Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations

Inclusion work rarely succeeds in isolation. The strongest HBCU campuses build partnerships in two directions: internally, by formalizing collaboration between administrative offices and student-led organizations rather than top-down program design without student leadership; and externally, through relationships with organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, the National Black Justice Coalition, Interfaith America, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, regional HBCU consortia, and local civil rights groups. Both forms of partnership work best when taken beyond lip service and woven into long-term institutional strategy. Cross-campus collaborations binding together students from different HBCU or PBI communities can create particularly strong student bonds, which can be invaluable in the aftermath of a hate incident or bias action targeting a particular college campus.

11. Future-Oriented Strategy and Accountability

Belonging cannot be improved if it is not measured. Institutions should treat campus climate data with the same seriousness applied to retention and graduation rates, through biennial climate surveys, bias incident reporting with transparent aggregate data, and mid-semester classroom climate checks. Systematic data collection does more than inform administrative decisions; it builds a shared institutional knowledge base that strengthens the campus community over time. When students, faculty, and staff can see that their experiences are being tracked, taken seriously, and acted upon, it contributes to a culture of accountability that is itself a foundation for resilience. Where such feedback loops exist, administrators can make evidence-based decisions, and communities can grow stronger from what they learn. Without them, institutions are waiting for a crisis rather than building the knowledge and relationships needed to weather one.

The sections that follow translate each area into concrete actions organized by audience: students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators. The most powerful interventions happen when stakeholders act simultaneously across multiple levels of the institution.

WHO CAN ADVANCE EACH STRENGTH AREA?

Most strengths-building areas above cannot be achieved by one stakeholder acting alone. Some, like visible institutional commitment and future-oriented strategy and accountability, depend on administrators with the authority to set policy and allocate resources. Leadership development, too, depends heavily on top-down investment and structured opportunity, even though students and student leaders are its most immediate beneficiaries. Student organizations as inclusion infrastructure, by contrast, are driven primarily by students and student leaders, with staff and faculty playing a supporting role. Most areas, including safe spaces, cultural empowerment, and community engagement, are shared work that takes a different shape depending on who is doing it.

A few areas span multiple stakeholders because they require coordinated effort. Visible Institutional Commitment, Strategic Partnerships, Future-Oriented Strategy, and Leadership Development sit primarily with administrators since they require institutional authority and sustained investment that students and faculty alone do not control, even though students and student leaders are essential partners in putting them into practice. The table below names the stakeholder(s) best positioned to lead each area, and the audience sections that follow translate that lead role into specific recommendations.

LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT OF 11 CORE AREAS, BY STAKEHOLDER

Audience	Areas They Lead	Areas They Support
Students	Cultural Empowerment	• Student Organizations as Inclusion Infrastructure • Safe Spaces
Student Leaders	Student Organizations as Inclusion Infrastructure	• Cultural Empowerment • Safe Spaces: Physical, Social, and Digital • Leadership Development
Faculty	• Social Justice and Equity-Focused Education • Cultural Resilience	• Cultural Empowerment • Diversity and Inclusion Training
Staff	• Diversity and Inclusion Training • Safe Spaces: Physical, Social, and Digital	• Community Engagement • Cultural Resilience
Administrators	• Visible Institutional Commitment • Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations • Future-Oriented Strategy and Accountability • Leadership Development	• Community Engagement • Safe Spaces: Physical, Social, and Digital



“While peer mobilization is a genuine expression of student power, it should never be treated as a substitute for official institutional action.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE HBCU COMMUNITY

The 11 strengths-building areas identified above take different shapes depending on who is putting them into practice. The sections below translate each area into role-specific recommendations for students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators, organized by each group's role and access to resources. No single role carries this work alone, but each one carries a piece of it. The recommendations at the end of each section are a starting point for conversation, not the finish line.

Appendix B offers reflection questions to guide implementation.

FOR STUDENTS

Students are the most active builders of belonging. Their organizations, peer networks, and informal support systems function as the primary safety infrastructure on campuses where formal institutional systems are still catching up. But that labor is heavy, and it must be structurally supported, not taken for granted. Student organizations are particularly important for students with marginalized identities at HBCUs. Groups serving LGBTQ+, international, Muslim, and Latinx students are not just social clubs but also environmental supports that preserve mental health and serve as a place of learning about self-identity outside of the classroom. The strong overlap between student organizations and the creation of safe spaces confirms that what students build together has a direct impact on overall campus climate. Students also show consistent leadership in addressing peer-to-peer discrimination. They teach classmates about their own identities, organize collective responses to bias incidents, and build digital networks for mutual aid and safety. When LGBTQ+ students on one campus received hostile mail, the student body organized a hashtag campaign to share real-time safety updates—a reminder that students will build their own systems when institutional ones fall short. While peer mobilization is a genuine expression of student power, it should never be treated as a substitute for official institutional action. Student organizations need institutional backing such as dependable funding, dedicated advisors, and physical meeting spaces. The need is more urgent than ever. Many student organizations that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic have not returned, leaving significant gaps in the peer support infrastructure on which students have historically relied. Rebuilding a robust peer support infrastructure requires active institutional investment, not simply an open-door policy. Organizing work should outlast any single graduating class, and administrative support is what makes it possible.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

- **Build peer accountability networks.** Develop norms within your communities for addressing bias and discrimination among peers directly—including subtler forms like microaggressions and casual carelessness, not just overt hostility. Peer-to-peer education is most effective when it is organic and relational, but it needs institutional backing to be sustainable.
- **Use digital tools strategically.** Create and maintain digital networks for mutual aid, safety information, and community organization. These spaces have historically filled gaps when institutional systems lag.
- **Address online discrimination and hate.** Document online hate and report the pattern, not just the post. Immediately screenshot harassment, hate speech, or doxxing attempts since posts are often deleted quickly. Report through both the platform and your institution's bias incident process and encourage peers experiencing the same thing to report too, so the institution can see a pattern rather than an isolated incident. Students should avoid directly engaging with the content when there is a risk to personal safety.
- **Advocate for what you need.** Communicate clearly to faculty, administrators, and staff about what you need. Self-advocacy works alongside, not instead of, institutional training—naming what you need is what helps faculty, staff, and administrators know where to direct training. The following questions about your everyday experience as a student can help identify the type of specific information you can use to advocate for yourself and your communities. If you are in the Chess Club, do you know whether your group has any funding or official recognition? If a friend in your group chat suddenly goes quiet or seems off, do you check in, or wait for someone else to reach them? If you saw something hostile posted about a classmate online, would you know how to help them document and report it? If something at your school is not working for you, do you know who to bring that to? The most effective advocacy names specific needs, not just general support.

FOR STUDENT LEADERS

Student government officers, club presidents, resident assistants, peer mentors, orientation leaders, and Greek life leadership occupy a uniquely influential position on campus. The recommendations ask students in leadership positions, as well as those who exercise informal leadership, to make building an inclusive campus part of their leadership.

In many ways, student leaders shape the daily experience of belonging more than any single administrative policy. They are the gatekeepers of campus culture.

When student leaders use their platforms to center belonging—including auditing organization traditions, building cross-identity programming, and amplifying the voices of those least heard—the effects ripple across the whole campus. When they replicate exclusionary behavior, they amplify systemic harm.

We focus here on Black Greek Letter Organizations because they hold significant social influence and have the most documented patterns of both deep belonging and intense exclusion in the research; the same audit applies to any selective student organization. The spread of highly selective intake cultures from Greek life into honor societies and other student groups poses a real threat to retention. When belonging depends on being chosen by an in-group, students already marginalized by sexuality, gender expression, nationality, or economic class face compounded exclusion. Student leaders are best positioned to disrupt exclusionary patterns from within their own organizations.

Student leaders need investment in their leadership development that goes beyond ceremonial recognition. Practical training, dedicated mentorship, and resources build their capacity to lead inclusively. There is a need for more collaborative, horizontal leadership structures that center student needs instead of replicating traditional societal hierarchies.



"They feel like our big sisters that have helped out a lot just with navigating the campus…just everything that you would need a big sister to do, they kind of do that for you".

—HBCU student in HBCU campus climate study (Jones et al., 2026)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT LEADERS

- **Audit your organization's traditions.** Review intake processes, membership criteria, and programming for patterns of exclusion. If belonging within your organization requires being chosen by an in-group, that is worth examining and changing.
- **Build cross-identity programming.** Create events and initiatives that bring together students across different identity groups. Does your organization create any intentional touchpoints with students outside your usual membership—joint events, shared programming, open invitations—or does it operate as a closed loop? If you are the president of the Caribbean Students' Union or Chess Club, how does your group recruit new members, and who is represented in your club in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc.? If you organize through a group chat, who has access to it, and who is left out? Belonging is strongest when it is not siloed.
- **Invest in inclusive leadership training.** As a student leader for your organization—whether it's the Debate Team, a club sport, or a Greek Letter organization—you have an opportunity to shape the culture your organization creates for its members. Seek out professional development that builds your capacity to lead across difference, and advocate for your institution to provide it consistently.
- **Use your platform to disrupt, not replicate.** When exclusionary norms show up in your organizations, address them directly. Student leaders are better positioned than anyone to change culture from within. If you lead the Debate Team, who decides which members get coached for top tournaments, and does that pattern track anything beyond skill? If you lead the Engineering Society, whose ideas get credited in meetings, and whose get talked over? If you lead a cultural or affinity organization, who is missing from your events, and would they say they felt welcome if you asked them directly?
- **Address online discrimination and hate.** Set norms for your organization's online spaces. Establish clear expectations for how your group chats, social media accounts, and online communities respond to hate speech, harassment, and disinformation aimed at members. Decide in advance who moderates, what gets removed, and when an incident gets escalated to the institution, rather than improvising in the moment.

FOR FACULTY

The immense power of faculty interactions to positively shape student experiences of belonging can conversely lead to pain and harm when training and skill in creating classroom inclusion is lacking. Professional support, rather than individual blame, is most needed. Incidents such as deliberate deadnaming, outing students during lectures, and expressing anti-gay bias in the classroom create toxic learning environments that undermine student belonging and well-being. Well-meant faculty-administered dress codes frequently penalize transgender and gender-nonconforming students, sometimes with grade consequences. Accent-based bias significantly limits international student participation.

Faculty members themselves report a need for and lack of guidance. Faculty would benefit most from recurring, role-specific professional development, not one-time compliance training, which is often less effective. Faculty also need clear administrative backing when they address bias in their classrooms, and formal recognition that inclusive mentoring and advising is real academic labor that should count toward promotion and tenure.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACULTY

- **Complete recurring, role-specific training.** One-time diversity training is not sufficient. Advocate for and participate in ongoing professional development specific to your role, particularly related to LGBTQ+ students, women, international students, and multiracial students.
- **Build inclusive policies into your classroom from the start.** Establish clear expectations around names, pronouns, dress, and participation at the beginning of each term. Do not wait for an incident to create policy.
- **Count mentoring as the academic labor it is.** Document your mentoring and advising contributions and advocate for their formal recognition in promotion and tenure processes. Support changes to evaluation criteria that currently render such work invisible.
- **Address bias in your department, not just your classroom.** Inclusive teaching is necessary but not sufficient. If you teach organic chemistry, does your syllabus name what happens when a student needs accommodation, or do students have to ask and hope? If you advise theses, does the time you spend mentoring first-generation students show up anywhere in your tenure file? If a colleague makes a dismissive comment about a student's background, do you say something in the moment or only afterward in private? Faculty are also responsible for establishing the cultures of their departments, hiring committees, and professional networks.
- **Address online discrimination and hate.** Treat online harassment connected to your classroom as your responsibility. When a classroom discussion, assignment, or your own public scholarship becomes a target for online harassment, treat it as a continuation of the learning environment rather than a separate problem outside your role. Connect affected students to campus reporting resources and document the incident for your department.

FOR STAFF

“In the process of serving our students, sometimes we neglect our staff... and there’s only so long that passion is the driving and staying force. I’ve seen people not leave physically, but just leave in presence, leave in investment because they’ve been tired or overlooked. In some ways, giving and doing, but not necessarily always getting the gratitude, the acknowledgement, and as well as the raises that they deserve.”

-Participant comments on staff workload and training in HBCU campus climate study (Jones et al., 2026)

Student affairs professionals, residence life coordinators, financial aid advisors, health services staff, campus safety officers, dining staff, and facilities workers are the daily face of the university. They are the people students encounter most, especially in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. Cumulatively, those daily interactions profoundly shape belonging.

The systemic underfunding of HBCUs decreases institutional capacity to fully staff critical offices and provide services, leaving the few dedicated staff available with the burden of navigating under-resourced systems with little support. Staff at HBCUs routinely manage multiple demanding roles with limited resources and little professional recognition. A staff member who wants to help a student report a bias incident may not have a referral map. One who wants to support an international student may never receive relevant training.

When residence life staff place trans women in male residential halls, or financial aid advisors are unaware of funding resources available to undocumented students, these kinds of failures often reflect an institutional absence of clear protocols, training, and accountability.

What staff need are clear referral maps, identity-specific training that is kept current, and the authority to make warm handoffs rather than sending students from office to office. A student who bounces between departments without any personal follow-up often experiences institutional rejection. The simple act of walking someone to their destination or sending a quick follow-up email to close the loop is a powerful belonging intervention.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF

- **Build and share a referral map.** Every staff member should have immediate access to a clear, current guide to campus resources: who to contact, how to reach them, and what to say. If one does not exist, build it collaboratively and distribute it broadly.
- **Make warm handoffs standard practice.** When referring a student to another office or resource, make personal contact wherever possible. Follow up. A brief check-in afterward costs little and tells the student someone was looking out for their outcome, not just processing a request.
- **Pursue identity-specific training.** Generic inclusion training is not sufficient for the range of student identities staff encounter daily. Advocate for training that addresses the specific populations your office serves and ensure it is updated regularly.
- **Examine your own assumptions.** Take stock of your own blind spots and biases toward marginalized student groups, commit to learning about their lived experiences, and be a vocal advocate with colleagues and supervisors on their behalf. This is as much a personal practice as an institutional one.
- **Document patterns and escalate them.** When students bring similar concerns repeatedly, that is data. Share it with supervisors and colleagues. Advocate for systemic responses, not just individual interventions. If you work in financial aid, do you know where to send a student who discloses they are undocumented, or would you have to guess? If three students mention the same problem to you in a month, does that observation go anywhere, or does it stay with you?
- **Address online discrimination and hate.** Create one clear, publicized path for reporting online harassment. Students facing online harassment, doxxing, or coordinated hate campaigns often do not know whether that falls under Title IX, campus safety, or IT, and end up reporting nowhere. Build a single point of contact for digital incidents and make sure campus safety and counseling staff treat online harassment with the same seriousness as an in-person incident.

FOR ADMINISTRATORS

"I don't want to be tolerated. I want to be accepted. I want to be respected. Not because the rules tell you to, but because it's morally correct to respect me as a human being."

LGBTQ+ student, study of LGBTQ+ experiences at the Atlanta University Center (de la Cruz et al., 2022)

Presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, and trustees set the structural conditions under which everyone in the HBCU community operates. Visible, durable, and accountable administrative commitment transforms campus climate in ways nothing else can.

Administrators are not indifferent to student belonging; however, administrative responses are often perceived as performative rather than structural. Students notice the mismatch when institutions celebrate queer identity during Pride month while refusing to implement gender-inclusive housing, or post welcome messages for international students while providing no halal dining options, or release statements on anti-Black bias without examining their own hiring practices. Administrators also shape the work environment for faculty and staff.

Women faculty face a distinct set of conditions documented across multiple campuses within and outside of the HBCU system: systemic sexism in tenure, promotion, pay, and professional recognition, compounded by disproportionately heavy service loads. Many describe a code of silence that creates hesitation to speak out for fear of being seen as disloyal. While much of this dynamic plays out among colleagues, hiring committees, and department chairs, administrators shape the structures—reporting channels, tenure processes, and hiring practices—in which it either persists or is addressed.

Faculty experiencing sexism are often the same faculty doing the heaviest lifting for students, while receiving the least institutional support.

Effective administrative leadership is a game changer. Research on LGBTQ+ inclusion at HBCUs confirms that visible and sustained commitment from campus leadership, particularly presidents, is one of the most important factors in whether LGBTQ+ students feel safe and supported on campus. At campuses where leadership has mandated Safe Zone trainings, established dedicated resource centers, and engaged directly with LGBTQ+ student communities, students describe transformative differences in their sense of belonging and confidence in their identity that goes beyond symbolic impact. When leadership commits concretely, staff feel authorized to act, students believe change is possible, and inclusion infrastructure gets funded and sustained.

HBCUs have long faced declining federal funding, smaller endowments, and historical underfunding from state and federal governments. Many recommendations in the sections that follow require no new budget. But some do, and the data is uncompromising on this point: the choice to withhold resources is itself a statement about what the institution values.

What administrators need to do is lead with concrete initiatives rather than aspirational statements, treat campus climate data with the same rigor applied to graduation rates, and invest in the offices doing this work as if they are central to the institution's mission—because they are, and students already know it.

Research on LGBTQ+ inclusion at HBCUs confirms that visible and sustained commitment from campus leadership, particularly presidents, is one of the most important factors in whether LGBTQ+ students feel safe and supported on campus.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

- **Move from symbolic to structural commitment.** Statements and celebrations matter, but they are not a substitute for policy, budget, and accountability. Every public commitment should be matched by a named structural action.
- **Treat campus climate data as seriously as graduation data.** Implement biennial climate surveys, transparent bias incident reporting, and mid-semester classroom climate checks. Review the results with the same rigor applied to retention and completion metrics.
- **Resource the offices supporting student belonging.** Inclusion offices, LGBTQ+ centers, multicultural affairs, and international student services are not supplementary; they are central to student success. Fund them accordingly.
- **Address online discrimination and hate.** Fund solutions for coordinated online hate as a security line item, not just a communications problem. HBCUs have experienced coordinated harassment campaigns and threats delivered through digital channels as well as in person. Resource collaboration between campus safety and IT on incident management, establish a rapid communication protocol for when an incident becomes public, and fund mental health support for the students and staff most often targeted.
- **Mandate training for all personnel.** Safe Zone training, identity-specific professional development, and inclusive practices training should be required for all faculty and staff, not optional for the interested few.
- **Build partnerships that last.** The following questions apply across every level of administration, not just diversity offices. If you are a dean, does your unit's budget reflect the same urgency as your public statements? If you sit in cabinet meetings, is campus climate data on the agenda as often as enrollment data? Formalize relationships with organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, the National Black Justice Coalition, Interfaith America, and regional HBCU consortia. Integrate them into your strategic plan, not just your press releases.



“Visible, durable, and accountable administrative commitment transforms campus climate in ways nothing else can.”



IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Immediate Actions (0–6 Months)

- Review existing campus climate data
- Meet with student organizations and campus stakeholders
- Assess current reporting pathways and referral systems
- Identify gaps in training and professional development

Intermediate Actions (6–18 Months)

- Conduct or expand campus climate assessments
- Formalize partnerships with external organizations
- Establish accountability measures and reporting structures
- Expand support for offices responsible for inclusion and belonging initiatives

Long-Term Actions (18+ Months)

- Integrate belonging and climate metrics into institutional planning
- Evaluate the effectiveness of policies and interventions
- Sustain investment in inclusion infrastructure
- Build long-term systems for assessment, accountability, and continuous improvement

LIMITATIONS AND CLOSING REFLECTIONS

This toolkit is a starting point, not a final word. Naming its limits openly is part of treating the underlying research honestly, and part of inviting the people who use this toolkit to test, adapt, and extend it rather than apply it as a fixed script. Three limitations should travel with this work wherever it is used.

- **The existing dataset over-represents some identities and under-represents others.** The underlying analysis draws heavily on literature examining LGBTQ+ experiences, international student experiences, faith and spirituality on campus, and responses to external threats such as hate incidents and bomb threats. Comparatively less scholarship was available on students navigating disability, undocumented status, first-generation identity, and mental health experiences within HBCU contexts. As a result, some recommendations are more fully developed for certain populations than others. Future research should intentionally expand the evidence base in these areas.
- **HBCUs are not monolithic institutions.** HBCUs differ considerably in size, geography, mission, governance structure, religious affiliation, and available resources. A strategy that works well at a large public HBCU may not transfer directly to a small private institution. Readers should view the recommendations presented here as adaptable starting points rather than universal solutions.
- **The dataset is weighted toward student voice.** This toolkit was intentionally grounded in student experiences because students are often the most direct beneficiaries of belonging and inclusion initiatives. Fewer sources focused on alumni, trustees, community partners, and governing boards. Future work that centers their perspectives may identify additional opportunities and challenges not fully captured here.





USING THIS TOOLKIT RESPONSIBLY

Four practices help keep this toolkit useful rather than prescriptive:

- Pair it with local listening. Climate surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations on your own campus will surface gaps and strengths a national analysis cannot see.
- Revisit it as conditions change. The political environment surrounding diversity and inclusion work is shifting quickly, and a recommendation that fits this year's constraints may need to be reframed next year.
- Treat the 11 strengths-building areas as interlocking, not as a sequence. Progress in one area, such as student organizations, tends to reinforce progress in others, such as safe spaces and cultural resilience. Campuses should expect to work on several areas at once rather than wait to finish one before starting another.
- Treat this toolkit as a living resource. Campus climate evolves over time, and belonging work requires ongoing assessment, reflection, and adaptation. Institutions are encouraged to revisit, revise, and build upon these recommendations as new evidence emerges.





CLOSING REFLECTION

What the data supports, with unusual clarity for a content analysis this broad, is that belonging at HBCUs is shaped most by visible institutional commitment, the strength of student organizations, the quality of everyday faculty and staff interaction, and the presence of credible safe spaces. All of these areas are extensions of what HBCU communities already do well.

The work in front of every campus that picks up this toolkit is not to build something new from scratch. It is to keep widening the circle so that every student who arrives, regardless of identity, background, or historical participation in the HBCU story, finds the rich tradition of HBCUs reaching toward them.

“Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”

— bell hooks

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING



The organizations, frameworks, and source materials below are starting points, not an exhaustive list. Many are already in use at partner institutions and can be adapted locally.

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AI Disclosure Statement - Generative artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with editing and formatting, including tasks such as copyediting, grammatical correction, and structural formatting. These tools were not used to generate, substantively draft, or otherwise produce the analysis, findings, or conclusions presented herein, which reflect the original work and judgment of the authors. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of this report.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND COALITIONS

- Human Rights Campaign (HRC) HBCU Program. LGBTQ+ inclusion training, a climate index, and peer convenings designed for HBCU campuses.
- National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC) HBCU LGBTQ Equality Initiative. Trainings, policy templates, and student leadership programming centered on Black LGBTQ+ inclusion.
- Interfaith America (formerly IFYC). Interfaith literacy curricula, campus climate assessments, and student leadership training.
- African Americans for Humanism. Serves Black secular students on and off campus, including those navigating the assumption that Blackness and Christianity are inseparable.
- Black Nonbeliever Inc. Serves Black atheist and secular students, offering community for those who experience religious exclusion alongside questions of racial authenticity.
- NAFSA: Association of International Educators. International student services, standards, and professional development.
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). Sexual assault response, a national hotline, and training for campus responders.
- United Negro College Fund (UNCF), National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), and Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF). HBCU consortium resources and convenings.
- UNCF Tikkun Olam Initiative. Black-Jewish dialogue and partnership programming.

FRAMEWORKS AND TOOLS

- Safe Zone Trainings. LGBTQ+ competency training, locally adapted for HBCU contexts.
- Inclusive Pedagogy Resources. Materials from Association of College and University Educators (ACUE), American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), ACPA–College Student Educators International, and NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- Restorative Practice and Dialogue Frameworks. Including the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network for peer-facilitated, cross-identity dialogue.
- Trauma-Informed Campus Response Frameworks. For use following bomb threats or hate-motivated incidents.
- Climate Survey Instruments. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS), Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), and locally developed instruments paired with qualitative listening sessions.
- Creating Safe Spaces. Ferlazzo, L. (2025, October 14). Practical Tips for Creating a Safe and Supportive Space for Students. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-practical-tips-for-creating-a-safe-and-supportive-space-for-students/2025/10). Field-tested facilitation norms such as turn-taking, confidentiality, “I” statements, and active listening, for standing up the safe spaces described under Strengths-building Area 2.

SUPPORT NETWORKS

- The Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective (BEAM). A culturally responsive mental health resource built around Black emotional wellness, useful both as a referral point for students and as a model for campus mental health programming.

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APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The insights presented throughout this toolkit stem from a systematic review of 74 academic and popular sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, national survey datasets, and practitioner literature, analyzed alongside two informant interviews. We selected sources based on their direct relevance to belonging, inclusion, and campus climate within HBCUs as well as peer institutions that primarily serve students of color. We analyzed all sources using a qualitative thematic content analysis approach, which yielded 2,075 coded quotations across 131 distinct codes. We organized codes into two primary dimensions: solutions in place, and suggested solutions. The first category, solutions in place, captured the belonging-supportive practices that researchers have already documented on HBCU campuses. The second category, suggested solutions, compiled specific recommendations proposed by researchers, practitioners, and campus community members themselves. This dual structure allowed our analysis to remain asset-based by keeping the policies and practices that work at the forefront while identifying where additional institutional investment is most urgently needed.

The 11 strengths-building areas outlined in the findings section emerged inductively from the most frequently and consistently coded themes across the literature. We then developed our audience-specific recommendations by mapping coded quotations directly to the stakeholders—students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators—who are most responsible for taking action within each theme.

RESEARCH PROCESS AT A GLANCE

- **74 sources reviewed**
- **2,075 quotations analyzed**
- **131 codes identified**
- **Two analytic categories:**
  1. **Solutions in place**
  2. **Suggested solutions**

SELECTED SOURCES FROM THE UNDERLYING ANALYSIS

The source corpus totals 74 documents, alongside the two informant interviews listed below, coded into 2,075 quotations across 131 codes.

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KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

- Interview Transcript **(Dr. Robert Palmer)**
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APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The list below adds to the implementation-reflection questions referenced at the end of each audience section. Use them as a starting point for discussion, planning, and accountability within your campus community.

- **Which recommendation could be implemented immediately?**
- **Which recommendation requires collaboration with others?**
- **Which recommendation requires institutional resources or policy change?**
- **How will progress be measured?**
- **What evidence would demonstrate improvement?**
- **Who should be responsible for leading this work?**
- **Who can support you or collaborate with you?**
- **What are cultural aspects in your sphere on campus that affirm belonging effectively and that we can celebrate and build upon?**



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