

FLOURISHING

Bolstering the Mental Health of
Students at HBCUs and PBI

RESEARCH FINDINGS, DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was funded by UNCF (United Negro College Fund) to gather critical data from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) to address significant research gaps in mental health at these institutions. Our overall goal is that the collected data serves dual purposes: sharing evidence-based practices and developing targeted programming to support student well-being. We intend to utilize this data accordingly and encourage others to build upon this foundation for similar initiatives.

The study reports findings from research conducted at sixteen Historically Black Colleges and Universities and two Predominantly Black Institutions. The term “HBCU” is used in this report to represent findings from research at all eighteen participating institutions.

We express our sincere gratitude to the Healthy Minds Study team, selected for their expertise in comprehensive mental health assessment and data analysis. Their methodological rigor and analytical capabilities proved essential to this project's success.

We also extend our appreciation to the Steve Fund, the nation's leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. Their support to UNCF and the Healthy Minds team in refining this research has made a significant contribution to its impact and relevance.

For the research report prepared by the Healthy Minds Network, refer to: Patterson, A., Voichoski, E., Fucinari, J., Smith, V. (2025) *Community, Culture, and Care: A Cross-Institutional Analysis of Mental Health Among HBCU and PBI Students*. Institute for Capacity Building, United Negro College Fund.

For further information on research design, please see the [supplement](#) to this report.

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Leadership Message

Since the founding of the first HBCU 188 years ago, HBCUs have demonstrated remarkable leadership in developing environments, values and practices that help students of all types thrive and achieve their postsecondary aspirations. That's because HBCUs have been designed – intentionally – to embrace young men and women who have faced their fair share of adversity, including generational poverty, community trauma and systemic marginalization.

What is at the center of that design? Welcoming students into campus communities where their cultures and identities are reflected and celebrated, where they can truly feel they belong – allowing each student to reach their full potential and become the leaders we all need them to be.

For generations, HBCUs have improved the social, emotional, physical and mental well-being of the students they serve.

In our unique role in higher education, UNCF is committed to better understanding the experience of students attending HBCUs; this report on the state of mental health at HBCUs is a continuation of that tradition. By applying rigorous research practices and learning from our network of HBCUs, we have identified new insights for those seeking to improve how these storied institutions can further support the well-being of their students.

This collaborative effort exemplified the power of combining UNCF's deep understanding of the HBCU ecosystem and our students with the Healthy Minds Network's extensive research expertise in the field of postsecondary mental health. The Healthy Minds Network's willingness to lean into this effort, adapting their established methodologies to address the unique needs of HBCU students, demonstrates their commitment to inclusive and comprehensive mental health research.

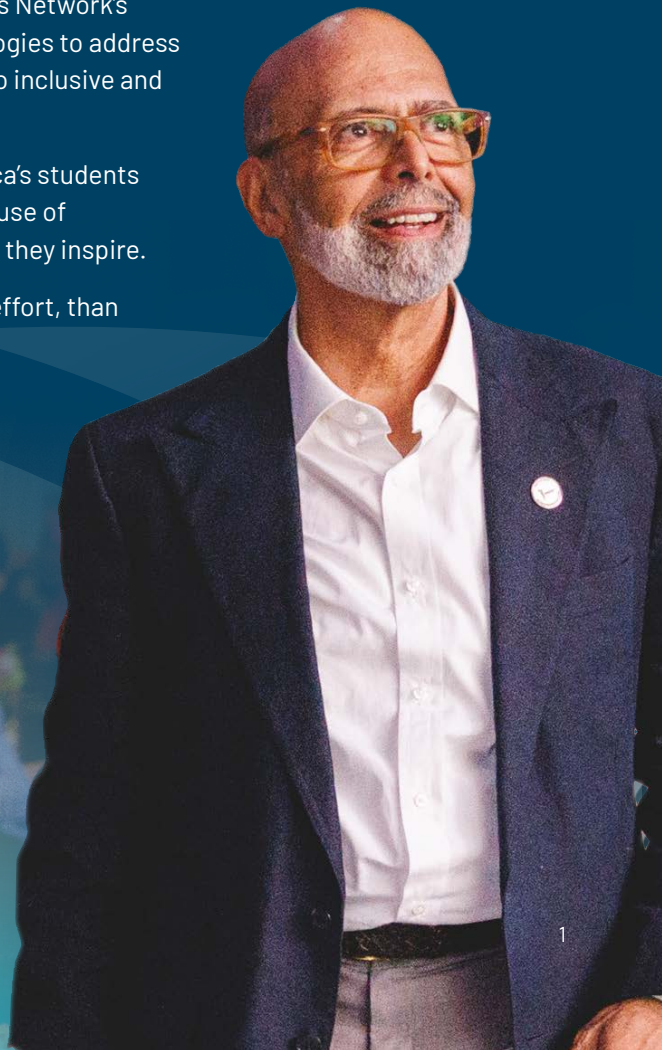
We strongly encourage everyone who is invested in the future of America's students and their mental health to carefully review this report, and join in the cause of advancing the codification, sharing and furthering of the best practices they inspire.

We can't think of a more important topic, nor a more sincerely-needed effort, than helping to ensure all our students flourish.

In partnership,



DR. MICHAEL L. LOMAX
UNCF President and CEO



RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Mental Health Imperative for Postsecondary Student Success

Since their beginning, HBCUs have played a pivotal and irreplaceable role in the empowerment and forward progress of Black Americans. And their work continues.

Not only have they provided opportunities for higher education and upward mobility, but they have also served as community-builders, offering safe havens for the preservation and advancement of culture, identity formation and self-actualization in the midst of an often antagonistic larger society.

The impact in all of these roles is clear and indisputable, evidenced most starkly in the success and well-being of their graduates, who are more likely to thrive in life—physically, socially and financially with purpose and as a part of an embracing community—compared to Black graduates of non-HBCU institutions.

Because of their outsized role, HBCUs are uniquely positioned to not only offer an excellent education that continues to provide upward economic mobility and a strong launchpad for their future success, but also play a central role in positively impacting the social, emotional and mental health of the students and communities they serve.

The contribution of HBCUs to the academic and economic success of Black students is well-documented. Much less research, however, is available on the role that HBCUs and PBIs play in the mental health and well-being of Black college students, particularly in the current climate.

To better understand and address the mental health challenges faced

by today's college students nationwide, and specifically students at HBCUs and PBIs, it is crucial to contextualize their experiences within a broader landscape.

Over the last decade, reporting of mental health challenges among postsecondary students in the United States has soared. According to the 2023 Healthy Minds Study, the percentage of students reporting depression, problematic anxiety, and suicidal ideation had increased by 95%, 64%, and 40% respectively compared to 2014 figures.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant mental-health inflection point for students at all levels of education and we are just at the beginning of understanding how big of a long-term impact the pandemic has had on student well-being.¹

Black students were not immune to the nationwide crisis in mental health care that worsened during the pandemic. According to one study conducted during the pandemic, more than 50% of Black students met the criteria for one or more mental health concerns in the 2020-21 academic year.²



Trend data on Black student mental health from 2013 to 2021 indicates a 45% increase in depression and a 170% increase in anxiety.² While these figures illuminated the state of mental health among Black college students nationwide, they fall short in providing insights into the unique challenges and experiences of HBCU students and the measurable impact HBCU institutions have on student outcomes.

To address this challenge, UNCF partnered with the Healthy Minds Network and The Steve Fund to establish the principles for a nationwide assessment of the mental health of students on Black college campuses, assessing the state of their mental health and well-being and their utilization of mental health services.

Since the HMS began in 2007, more than 850,000 students at 600+ colleges and universities have administered the three-part web-based HMS Survey, covering Student Demographics, Mental Health Status and Mental Health Service Utilization and Help-Seeking.

The UNCF, Healthy Minds and Steve Fund teams collaborated to supplement the standard Healthy Minds Study with a Black College Mental Health Module, identifying themes, constructs, risk factors and protective factors that provide additional insight on the Black college student experience.

Over the course of the Spring 2023 and Fall 2023 semesters, 2,504 Black students at HBCUs and PBIs were administered the standard Healthy Minds Study (HMS) survey as well as the Black College Mental Health Module. These students collectively represented 16 HBCUs and two PBIs from ten states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas. These results were then compared with students taking the HMS survey at participating institutions across the nation.



Throughout this report, evidence from the Healthy Minds Study demonstrates that Black students at HBCUs have more positive mental health outcomes compared to both Black students at predominantly white institutions and a national sample of students of all races at colleges and universities across the country.

This overarching trend is evident across several indicators integral to the field of mental health, such as flourishing, depression and anxiety, loneliness, sense of belonging, and more, all discussed at length in later sections. In light of these results, it is important for HBCUs and PBIs to celebrate their successes while recognizing their students still have mental health needs that are not yet being met.

The findings in this report highlight the ways in which HBCUs are achieving positive mental health outcomes for their students despite this under-investment, and provide a roadmap for improving mental health outcomes not only at HBCUs and PBIs, but across higher education as a whole.



LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS REPORT
and the state of mental health and
HBCUs at the **2025 UNITE Summit**.

Key Takeaways

1 **HBCU students are flourishing mentally at significantly higher rates, on average, than peer college students nationally.** Comparatively, they are less anxious, less at-risk for eating disorders, less likely to use substances and less likely to keep feelings to themselves. They also have a greater sense of belonging.

These mental-health outcomes could be explained by a combination of the individual resilience of HBCU students as well as the unique offerings, supports and environments HBCUs provide for their students.

2 **HBCUs students reported mental health challenges related to financial burden and other factors.** HBCU students reported widespread, persistent and sometimes overwhelming financial stress. HBCU students with self-identified mental health challenges reported higher rates of unmet needs compared to their peers.

Compared to the samples in this study, HBCU students also reported higher rates of perceived negative mental health stigma among people close to them.

3 **HBCU students are more likely to believe that their institution and its faculty and staff prioritize their mental health.** More than half of HBCU respondents reported that their institution fosters free and open discussions about mental health

Given that almost all HBCU students who sought support from an educator reported it to be a positive experience, HBCUs and PBIs could focus on encouraging more students to connect with faculty and school staff.

4 **HBCU students seeking mental health support often rely upon nonclinical and off-campus providers.** Their peers on non-HBCU campuses are more likely to use on-campus supports. HBCUs can also address the two most common barriers to seeking mental-health support identified by HBCU students—time and money.

HBCU Student Mental Health Status

Black students at HBCUs generally reported higher rates of mental health and well-being than the national HMS sample of students and the sample of Black students at small PWIs. Notably, several indicators of this finding were statistically significant, which means they were unlikely due to chance or random factors.

HBCU students are flourishing more.

Consistent with a growing focus on assessing overall mental health and well-being rather than mental-health challenges, we assessed to what extent students reported they were “flourishing” based on their respective scores on the Flourishing Scale.

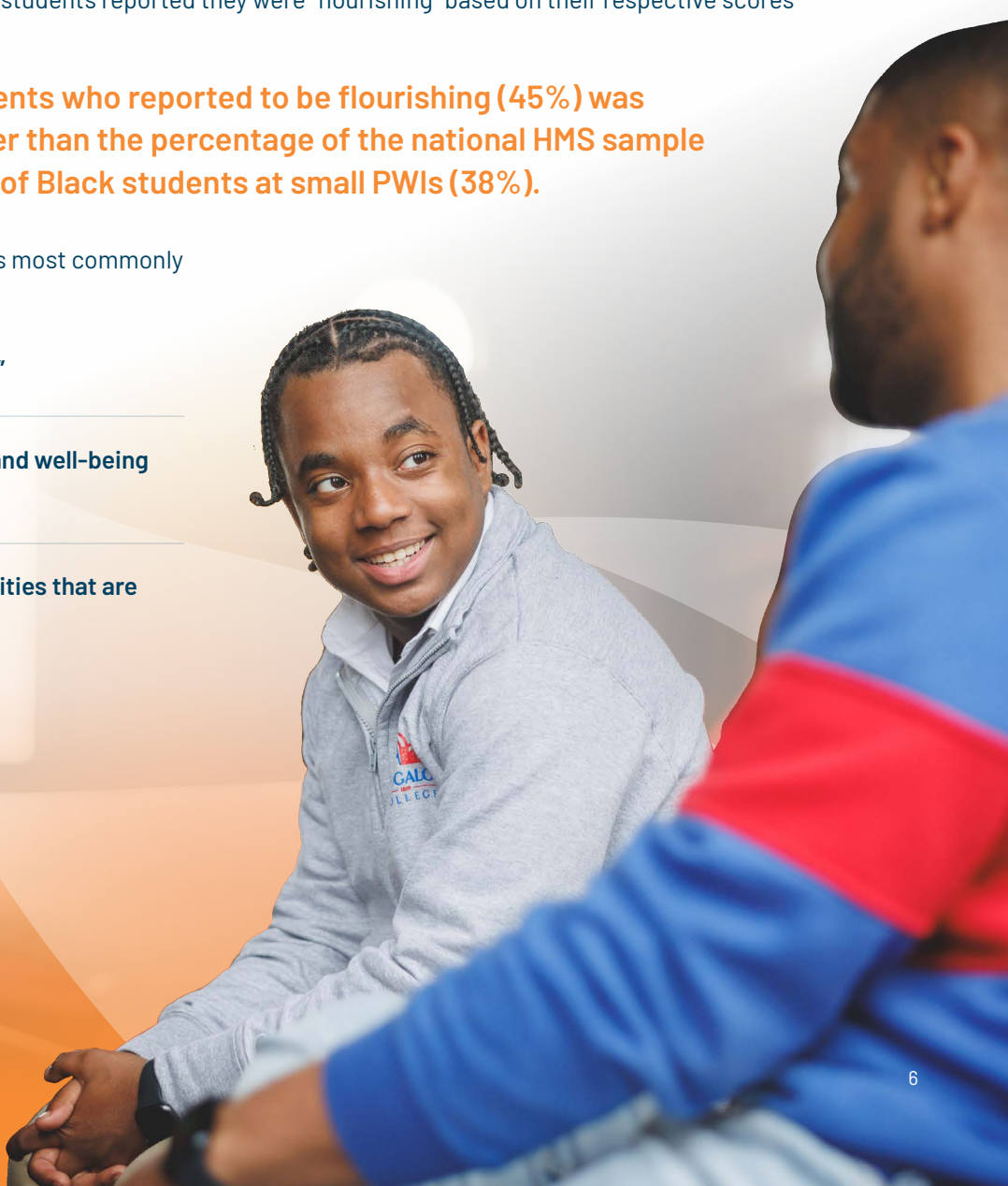
The percentage of HBCU students who reported to be flourishing (45%) was statistically significantly higher than the percentage of the national HMS sample of students (36%) and sample of Black students at small PWIs (38%).

On the Flourishing Scale, HBCU students most commonly endorsed the following:

“I am a good person and live a good life.”

“I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.”

“I am confident and capable in the activities that are important to me.”



HBCU students report a greater sense of belonging.

A statistically significantly greater percentage of HBCU students reported a sense of belonging at their school (83%) than the percentages of the national HMS sample of students and the sample of Black students at small PWIs, which were respectively 73% and 72%, based on any level of agreement with the statement: "I see myself as part of the campus community."

HBCU students are more likely to report a greater sense of belonging compared to students at PWIs.

HBCU students experience less loneliness.

The UNCF sample reported lower levels of high loneliness (56%) compared to the national HMS subsample of Black students at PWIs (58%).

An examination of Loneliness Scale items show statistically significant findings with HBCU students reporting lower levels of loneliness indicated by often feeling a lack of companionship (21%), left out (23%), and isolated from others (28%), compared to the sample of Black students at small PWIs, which were, respectively, 24%, 27% and 32%.



HBCU students are less likely to keep negative feelings to themselves.

Separate from the Loneliness Scale findings, but worth noting, is a statistically significant finding: HBCU students reported they tend to keep their feelings to themselves when feeling sad or down at much lower rates (74%) than either the national HMS sample of students (83%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (86%).

Items surveyed in the Black College Mental Health module provide additional insight into the mental health status of HBCU students.

Almost two-thirds of students (60%) in the HBCU sample agreed with the statement: "I have friends at school with whom I can share my thoughts and feelings."

More than half of the HBCU sample (54%) agreed with the statement: "I have a group, community, or social circle where I feel connected to and supported in my identity."

HBCU students experience less anxiety, substance abuse and risk for eating disorders.

Consistent with indicators of flourishing and sense of belonging, a lower percentage of HBCU students (59%) reported one or more mental health issues (specifically, depression, anxiety, eating disorder, suicidal ideation, and non-suicidal self-injury) than the national HMS sample of students (62%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (61%) who were asked if they had "any" mental health problems.

There were statistically significant findings on additional metrics of mental-health issues that further indicate greater mental health and well-being among HBCU students:

- **Less Anxiety.** A lower percentage of HBCU students reported moderate and severe anxiety (32% and 16%) compared to the national HMS sample of students (36% and 17%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (35% and 18%).
- **Less At-Risk for Eating Disorders.** Among the HBCU students, 9% scored within the at-risk range of eating disorders, which is lower than the percentages observed in the national HMS sample of students (14%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (11%).
- **Less Substance Use.** HBCU students also reported lower rates of substance use, including cigarette and vape use, in the past 30 days and alcohol consumption over the past 12 months (3%, 16% and 42% respectively) compared to the national HMS sample of students (8%, 20% and 49% respectively).

There were no statistically significant differences in the percentages of students who reported depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, suicide planning and suicide attempts among the three comparison samples.



HBCU student financial stress significantly impacts mental health.

When asked to identify the top three stressors since going to college, HBCU students reported: financial stress (55%), balancing work and school (53%) and school work (50%).



A statistically significantly higher percentage of HBCU students reported it as "always stressful" (23%) compared to the national HMS sample of students (18%). Conversely, a lower percentage of HBCU students described their financial situation as "never stressful" (3%) compared to the national HMS sample of students (7%).

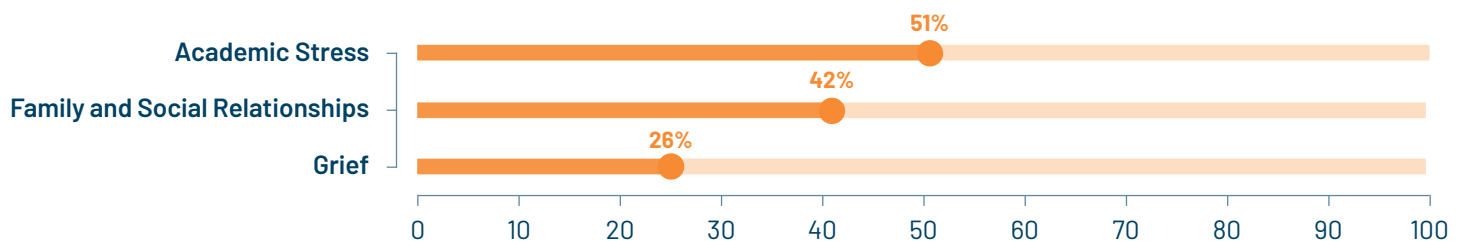
There is a stark contrast in mental health outcomes between those HBCU students who are "always stressed" compared with those who are "never stressed" about their current financial situation. Among the students who are "always stressed," 78% experience one or more mental health problems (depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and/or non-suicidal self-injury); among the students who are "never stressed," only 26% experience one or more mental health challenges.

In addition, there are concerning levels of suicidality among financially-stressed HBCU students. More than a quarter of the students (28%) reporting high levels of financial stress reported experiencing suicidal ideation in the past year compared to 12% among students with low levels of financial stress.

As one might expect, flourishing or "positive mental health" is negatively correlated with financial stress. Among students who report they are "never stressful" about their financial situation, 55% meet the flourishing criteria while only 33% of those who report feeling "always stressful," meet the criteria.

HBCU student mental health is impacted by multiple factors.

When HBCU students were asked what had most negatively impacted their mental health in the past six months, the top three responses they reported were:



HBCU Student Mental Health Service Help-Seeking Behavior

HBCU students receive lower rates of mental-health treatment.

Among students with one or more mental health problems, HBCU students (43%) reported lower rates of mental health treatment in the past year compared to the national HMS sample of students (57%) and Black students at PWIs (51%), with the differences being statistically significant.

Consistent with this, reports of both therapy sessions and prescription medications of one or more in the past year were lower among HBCU students, with therapy use at 28% compared to 36% in the national HMS sample of students and 36% among Black students at PWIs, and medication use at 16% compared to 29% in the national HMS sample of students and 21% among Black students at small PWIs.

The data revealed an overall trend toward fewer therapy sessions among HBCU students who reported attending therapy sessions compared to the students in the other samples.

When asked about the number of sessions attended, a lower percentage of HBCU students reported attending 10 or more sessions (15%) compared to the national HMS sample of students (26%) and Black students at small PWIs (26%). Conversely, a higher percentage of HBCU students reported attending only 1-3 sessions (27%) compared to the national HMS sample of students (19%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (22%). These differences were statistically significant.

The majority of HBCU/PBI students who experienced counseling in the past year reported finding it helpful or very helpful (66%).



HBCU students rely on off-campus mental-health providers.

Among HBCU students who had gone to a therapy session within the past year, most (88%) reported the provider was not located on-campus with 22% selecting to go off-campus and another 66% selecting to go to a provider in another location, including their hometown.

Additionally, 9% reported their provider location was a psychiatric emergency room, inpatient psychiatric hospital or partial hospitalization program.

Only 38% of HBCU students reported their provider location was on campus, for instance, from their campus counseling or health center.

Some HBCU students do not proactively seek mental-health support.

More than half (59%) of HBCU students report sources of non-clinical mental health support with family, friends and significant others most commonly reported (respectively, 35%, 35% and 27%); however, this was lower than the national HMS sample of students (69%) for whom the most commonly reported sources of non-clinical mental health support were friends (46%), family (43%), followed by significant others (34%). All these differences were statistically significant.

We note that there is a large percentage of students in both groups (37% of HBCU students and 28% of the national HMS sample) who reported “none of these” in response to sources of non-clinical mental health support, and this difference was also statistically significant.



HBCU students experience high level of unmet mental-health needs.

While it may be expected that the utilization of mental health services among HBCU students would be lower than their peers in the other samples since they reported a lower need for mental health services, there is another observed difference tied to unmet mental health needs that is also statistically significant.

Among HBCU students there was a greater percentage of students with unmet mental health needs (54%)—defined as exhibiting moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression and reporting no mental health treatment (therapy or medication) within the past year— compared to both the national HMS sample of students (41%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (47%).

HBCUs students experiencing anxiety and depression receive less treatment than their PWI counterparts.

More than half of HBCU students (57%) believed therapy would be helpful for them if they were having mental-health concerns.

HBCU campuses express support for mental health.

Agreement with the statement that student mental well-being is a school priority was higher among HBCU students (78%) compared to both the national HMS sample (76%) and the sample of Black students at small PWIs (73%); however, the difference was only statistically significant between HBCU students and Black students at PWIs.

Among HBCU students, a majority (55%) felt their campus fosters free and open discussions about mental health.



HBCU educators sought after to address mental-health needs.

Among 23% of students from the HBCU sample who reported speaking with an educator about mental health challenges affecting academic performance, almost all (92%) reported that the response was either supportive or very supportive.

Nearly half also reported their willingness to speak with an academic advisor (47%) or a professor from one of their classes (45%) should they have mental health challenges affecting their academic performance. A quarter (25%) reported they would be willing to speak with a student services staff member and about a fifth (19%) reported they would be willing to speak with a dean of students or class dean (19%).

HBCU help-seeking behavior reveals a range of insights to increase support.

The majority of students in the HBCU sample, the national HMS sample, and the HMS sample of Black students at small PWIs all agreed with they would know where to go on their campus if they needed to seek help for their mental or emotional health, respectively 78%, 76%, and 78% with no statistically significant differences.

We looked at survey findings that could shed light on variations in utilization of mental health services and help-seeking behavior among the three cohorts of college students.

Among HBCU students who had not sought mental health services in the past year:

- The majority either reported not having a need for services (44%) or, if they did, experiencing no barriers (18%).
- **The most identified challenges to access among those seeking services include not having enough time (17%) and being unsure where to go (14%).**
- Less than 10% reported concerns related to privacy (6%), providers not understanding them (6%), fear of mistreatment due to their identity (3%), or difficulty finding an available appointment (2%).
- The only statistically significant difference between groups was the preference to handle mental health challenges on their own or with support from friends and family, with HBCU students (17%) less likely to cite this as a reason to not seek mental health services than the national sample of HMS students (22%).

For HBCU students who had received treatment in the past year, the top reasons for receiving fewer services than intended were:

- Not having enough time and financial reasons (both 25%).
- Not having a need for services (16%).
- Preference to handle mental health challenges on their own or with support from friends and family and difficulty finding an available appointment (both 12%).

Notably, the “no barriers” response was cited more often (18%) than either not having a need for services and preference for handling challenges on their own or with friends/family and appointment availability in explaining why they received fewer mental health services than intended.

Among students with moderate to severe depression or anxiety, reasons for their unmet needs, over a quarter (27%) selected “no need for services” and 22% “prefer to deal with issues on my own or with support from family/friends” as reasons why they did not seek mental health treatment in the past year.



HBCU students contend with negative stigma surrounding mental health that may affect their help-seeking behavior.

Compared to the national HMS sample of students (41%) and sample of Black students at small PWIs (48%), a greater percentage of HBCU students (52%) reported perceived negative stigma, defined as one's perception of how society views mental health, including how people close to them view people faced with mental health challenges.

This was indicated in the surveys by students agreeing with the statement: "Most people would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment."

The differences in perceived stigma were statistically significant between the national HMS sample of students and HBCU students.

In contrast, personal stigma, defined as one's perception or beliefs about mental health and indicated in the survey by students agreeing with the statement, "I would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment," showed no statistical differences among the groups.



Discussion of Report Findings

Whether you assess mental health and well-being using emerging metrics that emphasize positive mental health outcomes,^{3,4} such as flourishing and belongingness, or more conventional metrics that focus on mental health challenges, including anxiety, eating disorders and substance abuse, this comparative analysis reveals that Black college students at HBCUs and PBIs are, on average, experiencing less mental health challenges than Black students at PWIs and the national HMS sample of college students.

What could possibly explain these statistically significant differences between HBCU students and college students nationwide?

Why are HBCU students thriving? Because of the HBCU Effect®.

In searching for explanations of these significant differences in mental health among college students, we look beyond individual traits of mental and emotional resilience to a possible HBCU Effect.⁵

UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute has defined the HBCU Effect as the positive impact Black colleges and universities have on the socioeconomic mobility of their students and alumni. This research focuses on an array of what HBCUs uniquely provide, from financial aid for students to culturally-relevant educational experiences and opportunities to become a part of a community based on Black culture, history, identities and opportunities.

Less has been discussed about this HBCU Effect in terms of its potential positive and enduring impact on Black student mental health.

My HBCU cultivates a strong sense of identity and culture of achievement.

HBCU Student
Listening Session Participant



DISCUSSION OF REPORT FINDINGS

HBCU students could be experiencing less mental health challenges than their peers because their schools cultivate an environment that affirms and uplifts Black students' racial identity as separate studies have shown a strong sense of one's racial identity supports mental resilience.^{6,7}

Supporting this explanation is this study's statistically significant finding that more HBCU students than their Black peers at PWIs agreed their schools prioritize mental well-being.

This is noteworthy because the perception of schools as pro-mental health could influence the mental-health help-seeking behavior and experience of students.

A 2024 study found that students with more favorable ratings of their school's mental-health culture were more likely to seek help for mental-health needs, and when they did, they were more likely to describe the responses of faculty and staff as supportive.⁸

Another indication of the HBCU Effect at work is that, compared to both sets of peers, HBCU students also reported lower levels of feeling a lack of companionship,

isolation from others or being left out and a less-likelihood to keep negative feelings to themselves.

We recognize that these forms of greater resilience against loneliness, as with a greater sense of belongingness, can contribute to as well as signify greater mental health and well-being outcomes.

Findings suggest that the HBCU Effect in mental health could be driven by key factors unique to HBCUs. HBCU students in this study consistently reported that their institutions prioritize mental well-being, which likely influences their higher engagement in help-seeking behaviors compared to peers at PWIs. Studies support that the perception of institutional support for mental health directly impacts students' willingness to seek help.⁸

Additionally, HBCU students reported lower levels of loneliness and isolation, suggesting that these institutions foster a sense of belonging that positively impacts mental health outcomes. These findings highlight how culturally relevant support, strong community, and visible prioritization of well-being contribute to better mental health among Black students.



Why are HBCU students thriving?

Because of who they are.

An argument could be made that the significant differences in mental health outcomes for Black college students stem from their individual traits. According to this argument, HBCU students arrive on campus already possessing greater mental health and resilience, having navigated socio-economic barriers and challenges just to matriculate.

For instance, more than half report being first-generation college students, which means they did not have the benefit of a college graduate in their immediate family to help guide them. Yet they were able to apply, get in and remain engaged in undergraduate studies—unlike 64% of their Black college-age peers and 59% white college-age peers nationally who did not enroll in college in 2022.^{9,10}

HBCUs are best equipped to support and develop the spirit of the young Black generation.

HBCU Alum
Listening Session Participant

Along these lines, HBCU students' overall greater resilience could have developed from experiences growing up in marginalized communities that must contend with generational poverty, inadequate schooling, community trauma and systemic racism.

These collective traits and experiences of Black college students in America, however, can only go so far in explaining these reports of their greater mental health among HBCU students, because we don't see similar mental health outcomes for PWI Black college students.



Although HBCU students report mental health challenges at lower rates, they still face challenges that affect their mental health and emotional well-being.

A clearer understanding of their challenges and help-seeking behavior affords all colleges and universities, but especially HBCUs and PBIs, insights and opportunities to further support their Black students to ensure they can flourish.

HBCU student financial stress is widespread, persistent and overwhelming.

When HBCU students were asked to identify the top three stressors since becoming a college student, they consistently ranked financial stress high, like most college students across the country. According to a past study, seven out of ten college students reported experiencing stress related to finances and a national database showing the majority are managing school obligations while working full or part-time jobs.¹¹

While financial stress is common among college students, HBCU students in this study experience financial stress statistically significantly more than the national HMS sample of students.

Black students—whether at HBCU, PBIs or PWIs—reported similar levels of financial stress; this is not surprising based on what has already been documented about Black college students across institutions:

- Among the students supported by Federal Pell Grants for higher education in 2015-2016, which are based on demonstrated financial need, 59% are Black students while only 34% are white students.^{12,13}
- Black college students experience more loan debt-related stress than their white peers owing, on average, \$5,000 to \$10,000 more than their white peers.^{14,15}
- Nearly 59% of all Black students were first-generation college students in 2023 compared to 36% of their white peers, underscoring the possibility of greater financial burdens to themselves and their families.¹⁶

The reason these findings tied to financial stress matter is because of the well-documented connection between financial stress and college student mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety in addition to poor academic outcomes, is clear.¹⁷

In one study, for instance, more than three quarters of college students who attempted suicide cited financial stress as a contributing reason. Others have reported on the correlation of financial stress with negative emotions, including guilt, fatigue, sadness and feeling tense, anxious and nervous.¹⁸

In this study, similar variations were observed. Students who reported they are always or often stressed about their current financial situation, also reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorder risk, suicidal ideation and suicide attempt compared to students who are sometimes, rarely, or never stressed about their financial situation.

More than three quarters of always-financially-stressed students, moreover, experienced one or more mental health challenges where only just over a quarter of never-financially-stressed students did. Over half of the students who reported never being financially stressed also met the flourishing criteria.

We also note another possible HBCU Effect.

Though less than half of the students from the HBCU sample reported feeling financially secure, this is statistically significantly higher than the less than third of Black students at PWIs who reported the same. This may suggest that HBCU students in particular receive better support in addressing financial stress compared to Black students at PWIs, though further research is needed to explore these differences.

This report's findings underscore there's much more all colleges and universities can do to alleviate the financial stress of their students, especially Black students who experience it at higher rates, to support their mental health.

This could include a wide array of strategies, from increasing access to financial resources to implementing targeted programs that alleviate financial stress without taxing students' academic responsibilities.

Implementing, for example, tailored financial literacy initiatives, such as workshops or peer mentorship programs, could help students better manage their finances while supporting their mental health.¹⁹

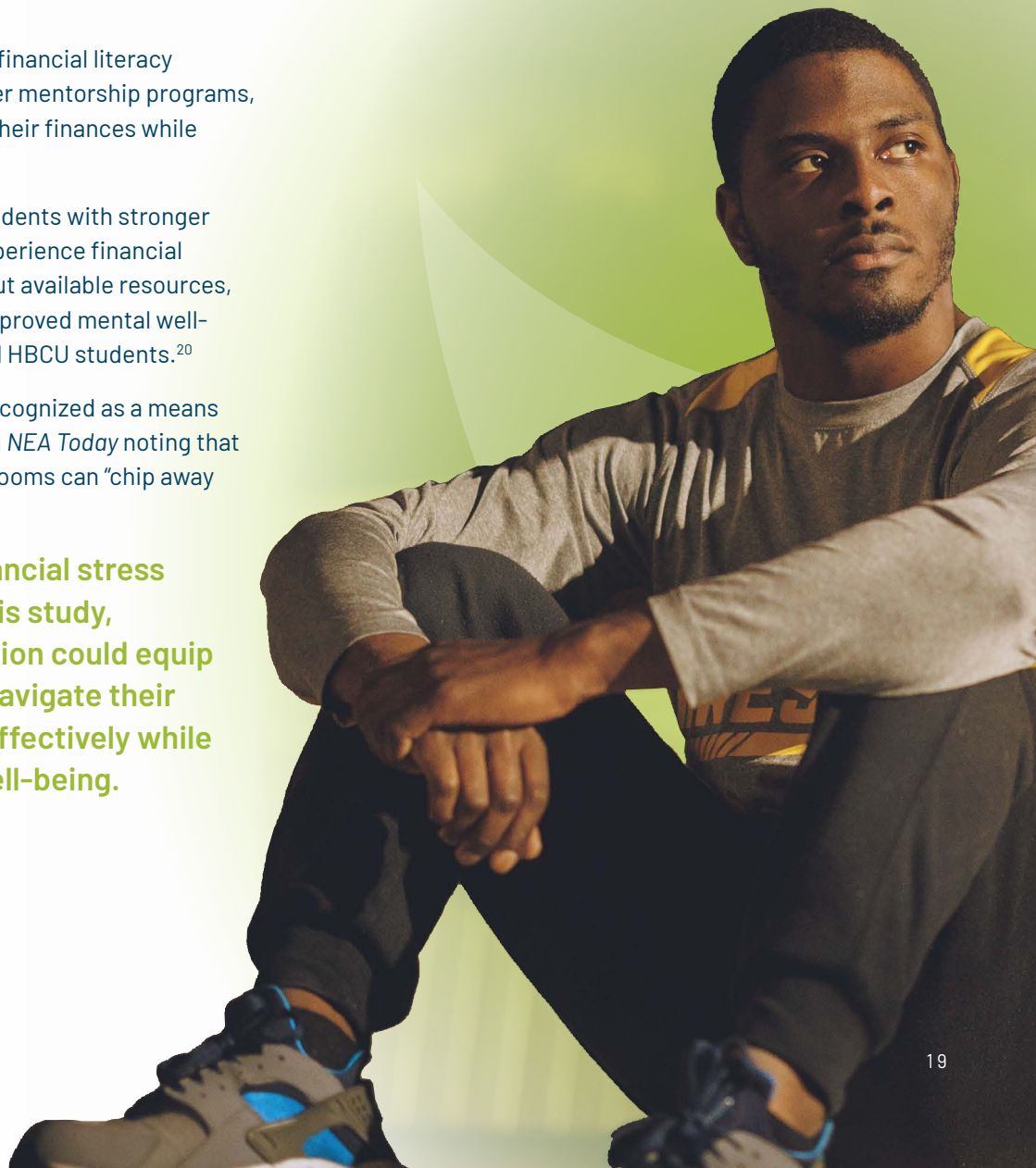
Research has demonstrated that students with stronger financial literacy are less likely to experience financial difficulties and more likely to seek out available resources, a pattern that could contribute to improved mental well-being among the financially stressed HBCU students.²⁰

Financial education has also been recognized as a means to address systemic disparities, with *NEA Today* noting that personal finance education in classrooms can "chip away at racial wealth gaps."²⁰

Given the prevalence of financial stress among HBCU students in this study, prioritizing financial education could equip students with the tools to navigate their financial challenges more effectively while fostering greater mental well-being.

How do we make our institutions talk about this?

HBCU Student
Listening Session Participant



HBCU student cries for help may be harder to hear.

While it makes sense that HBCU students who reported less need for mental-health services would also report lower rates of mental-health treatment, the statistically significant observed difference tied to Black college students' unmet mental-health needs gives us pause.

More of our students experiencing moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression are reporting not receiving therapy or medication, compared to both the national HMS sample of students or their Black peers at PWIs. Why does this concern us and how can we address it?

Untreated mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety, are often associated with poor academic outcomes, including lower GPA and higher dropout rates.²¹

In addition, students with moderate or severe depressive or anxiety symptoms have a higher prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts compared to students with no or minimal symptoms of depression or anxiety.²²

By better understanding mental-health perceptions and help-seeking behavior among Black college students generally, but with unmet needs especially, can we ensure our colleges and universities can further support their resilience and well-being.



DISCUSSION OF REPORT FINDINGS

Among Black college students with unmet needs, over a quarter reported they did not need services or preferred to deal with issues on their own.

A student's perception of not needing mental-health services, or at least avail themselves to campus mental-health support and deal with it on their own, could be tied to stigma, which is commonly identified as a barrier affecting people's willingness to seek mental health support among Black adults of all ages²³ and HBCU students in particular.²⁴ Stigma is also associated with depression, anxiety and suicidality among Black college students.²⁵⁻²⁸

Compared to the national sample and Black students at PWIs, a significantly greater percentage of HBCU students reported perceived stigma, defined as one's perception of how society views mental health, including how people close to them view people faced with mental health challenges.

More studies are needed to discern to what extent a perceived lack of need for services may be tied to perceived stigma of having mental-health needs (thought of as less than by others). Colleges and universities, especially those serving Black students, can and must structure, offer

and promote their mental health services with a possible connection in mind to remove this potential barrier to seeking and receiving services.

This can be particularly difficult to HBCUs that face ongoing challenges unique to Black colleges and universities, including fewer resources than PWIs resulting from chronic underfunding, smaller endowments and other effects of historical inequitable policies. All of which impair the capacity to provide mental health treatment.

Schools don't take the time to check up on students until something tragic happens. They should do a better job giving treatment to those who need it.

HBCU Student
Listening Session Participant

A 2023 report by Active Minds and UNCF outlined eight strategies currently being implemented on HBCU campuses to further support their students' mental health and well-being to maximize their resources to meet students where they are.²⁹

1. Develop systems-level campus strategies.
2. Build and leverage partnerships.
3. Increase access to mental health supports.
4. Promote campus mental health resources effectively.
5. Center student voices.
6. Create a culture of caring between students and faculty/staff.
7. Educate campus community members.
8. Assess campus needs.

Many student and faculty participants of listening sessions, conducted as part of this study, also reiterated centering student voices as an alternative to one-on-one counseling sessions. This includes focusing on expanding efforts around peer educators and “low-pressure” peer support groups as well as student organizations and their mental health-related initiatives.

This strategy is supported by research that confirms social support as a critical and effective method for promoting mental health within Black communities.^{30,31} Compared to individual therapy, research also indicates peer support groups are similarly effective in reducing mental health outcomes.³² Black students have shown preference towards engaging in group therapy led by a clinician in comparison to individual therapy or counseling.³³



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Future Research

This study provides significant insights into Black college students' mental-health perceptions and help-seeking behaviors with a particular focus on comparing experiences at HBCUs with Black peers at PWIs as well as a broader national sample. Like any study, however, this research is not without limitations.

Constraints such as sample size, institutional variability and incomplete demographic data restrict the generalizability and depth of analyses. Addressing these limitations in future research could clarify findings and strengthen overall understanding of mental health outcomes for Black college students, further informing strategies to improve these outcomes.

We invite a review of our findings so that we can share them widely and build upon this work in future studies and campus strategies. The following recommendations highlight key areas for improvement in research and practice:

- **Expand the use of the Black College Mental Health module.**

Future research should aim to replicate and expand the use of the Black College Mental Health module in larger studies across a broader range of institutions, including HBCUs, PBIs and PWIs.

Prioritizing larger, more diverse sample sizes will address limitations related to sample size and institutional variability, enabling more robust statistical analyses. Broader implementation of this survey would enhance generalizability by providing richer comparisons across diverse institutional contexts and allowing for deeper insights into Black college students' mental health perceptions and support systems.

- **Collect and analyze comprehensive demographic data.**

Future studies should prioritize comprehensive demographic data collection across all survey items, ensuring adequate representation of key subgroups, such as gender, age and other intersectional identities.

While this study included some demographic breakdowns, for instance by gender, not all survey items accounted for these intragroup differences, limiting the depth of demographic analyses. Improved demographic completeness would enhance statistical power, facilitate more thorough subgroup analyses and allow for more generalizable findings.

This approach would also strengthen the ability to assess mental-health disparities and provide a more inclusive understanding of mental health needs at HBCUs and PBIs.

- **Explore intersecting factors that impact mental health.**

Given the diversity within student populations, future research should explore the impact of overlapping factors (e.g., gender, age and socioeconomic status) on mental-health experiences.

Understanding how these intersecting factors influence mental health perceptions and needs would allow researchers and institutions to better address the unique challenges faced by different student groups, leading to more tailored and even more effective support systems.

- **Conduct follow-up longitudinal studies.**

To capture trends over time and assess the impact of mental-health interventions, future studies should consider longitudinal designs. These efforts would help validate and extend the findings of this study so researchers could track changes in mental-health perceptions, support systems and institutional practices across multiple periods. Longitudinal research could also provide insights into the effectiveness of interventions implemented informing future strategies for improving mental health outcomes at HBCUs and PBIs.

Critically, as the field pursues research that further investigates the state of mental health at HBCUs, it must also galvanize action to reinforce what is working on these campuses while supporting new policies, practices, and innovations that help institutions respond to the ever-evolving mental health needs of students. Together we can ensure HBCUs continue to serve as spaces where all students - no matter their background or station - flourish.

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For further information on research questions, research design, and tables associated tables and endnotes, please see the [supplement](#) to this report.



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