

FLOURISHING

Bolstering the Mental Health of Students at HBCUs and PBIs

SUPPLEMENT

RESEARCH DESIGNED BY AND FOR HBCUS



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Research Questions

This groundbreaking effort was designed to understand the mental health and well-being of HBCU and PBI students and their help-seeking behavior. To guide our research, we set forth these research questions:

- What is the state of mental health and well-being among Black students at HBCUs and PBIs?
- What is their utilization of mental health services and help-seeking behavior?
- What are possible explanations for variations in their utilization of mental health services and help-seeking behavior?
- How can the mental health and well-being of Black college students be further supported?

Research Design

Survey-Based Comparative Analysis

The research was designed as a comparison study among the following groups with statistical significance determined at $p \leq .05$ level.

- **HBCU/PBI sample of 2,504 Black students surveyed during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years.**

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. Student enrollment at these institutions range from less than 1,000 to more than 9,000 students. Most (11) are private institutions.

Nationwide, there are 102 HBCUs and 64 PBIs, located across 19 states. Forty-eight percent of these are private colleges or universities.

Recruitment was conducted via email. Before beginning the survey, students were presented with an informed consent page and had to agree to the terms of participation. They were also made aware of their eligibility to enter a drawing for a cash prize.

- **Healthy Minds Study (HMS) national sample of 76,406 students surveyed during the 2022-2023 academic year**, representing various racial identities at institutions of all types and sizes.
- **HMS subsample of 3,368 Black students at small PWIs (less than 10,000 students) surveyed during the 2022-2023 academic year.**

Researchers constructed sample probability weights to account for potential response bias, addressing differences between responders and non-responders and using enrollment data from institutions on gender distribution.

Healthy Minds Study Survey and the Black College Mental Health Module

The 2,504 students in the HBCU/PBI sample completed the three core modules of the Healthy Minds Study (HMS) survey as well as the Black College Mental Health Module.

HBCUs and PBIs need to understand the differences in mental health needs and help-seeking behaviors among students by gender and sexual orientation, in order to provide responsive mental health services and foster a campus community that affirms the intersectionality of Black college students' identities.

Created in partnership with the Healthy Minds Network, the Steve Fund, the UNCF Institute for Capacity Building and the UNCF Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, the Black College Mental Health (BCMh) Module specifically targets Black students at HBCUs and PBIs. Its purpose is to assess the students'

mental health and well-being, as well as their utilization of mental health services to support the improvement of mental health outcomes for Black college students nationwide and to contribute novel research to the field.

To develop the BCMh Module, research and institutional partners focused on mental health concerns at HBCUs and PBIs, identifying themes, constructs, risk factors and protective factors that reflect their student experiences to select and, as necessary, modify and create new validated survey measures.

The BCMh module was then assessed and tested by experts and survey methodologists to ensure that it accurately captured data that reflects the identified constructs and themes.

Survey Measures

Flourishing Scale. The Flourishing Scale is an 8-item summary measure of respondents' self-perceived success in key areas such as relationships, self-esteem and purpose.¹ Students rated their level of agreement with statements such as "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life." and "I am optimistic about my future." Summed scores range from 8 to 56 (with each item being scored 1-7). Higher scores indicate positive self-perception. A score of 48 or above indicates flourishing and positive mental health.

Loneliness. The HMS survey uses the UCLA 3-item Loneliness Scale, which asks students how often they feel they lack companionship, left out or isolated, with each item scored 1-3.² Summed scores range from 3-9, with a score of 6 or higher indicating a "high" level of loneliness.

Sense of Belonging. The HMS survey asks students questions about: having friends at school to share their thoughts and feelings with; having a group, community, or social circle where they feel they belong; and feeling they are part of their campus community.

Supportive Friendships. Assessed in BCMh Module by asking students whether they have friends at school with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings.

Identity Connectedness. Assessed in BCMh module by asking students if they felt a part of a group, community or social circle where they feel their identity is supported.

Mental Health: Multiple Symptoms. The HMS survey asks students to report "any" mental health problems while the UNCF BCMh module asks students to report one or more of the following: depression, anxiety, eating disorder, suicidal ideation and/or non-suicidal self-injury.

Depression. The Patient Health Questionnaire, a nine-item tool, was used to measure depression during the past two weeks.³ Each item was coded 0-3 and then summed to create a summary score ranging from 0-27. PHQ-9 scores of 10-19 indicate moderate depression and scores of 20-27 indicate severe depression. PHQ-9 has been shown to be a valid and reliable instrument in samples of Black populations.⁴⁻⁶

Anxiety. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale, a seven-item scale, was used to measure anxiety during the past two weeks.³ Each item was coded from 0 to 3 and then summed to create a summary score ranging from 0-21. GAD-7 scores of 10-14 indicate moderate anxiety and scores of 15-21 indicate severe anxiety. GAD-7 has been shown to be a valid and reliable instrument in samples of Black populations.⁴⁻⁶

Eating disorder risk. Measured using the U.S. version of the SCOFF questionnaire, a five-item screening tool designed to identify subjects likely to have an eating disorder.⁷ These items were coded dichotomously and then summed to produce a summary score ranging from 0-5.

Suicidality. Assessed by the question: "In the past year, did you ever seriously think about attempting suicide?" Suicide planning assessed by the follow-up question asking students whether they made a plan for attempting suicide or attempted suicide within the past year.

Factors Affecting Mental Health and Top Stressors. The BCMH module includes two sets of questions to assess factors negatively affecting students' mental health and sources of stress.

Impact on Mental Health. Students were asked to identify which of the following factors had most negatively impacted their mental health: academic stress, social and familial relationships, grief, sexual trauma, COVID-19, racism/racial stress, alcohol and other drugs, sexual orientation discrimination, gender discrimination, religious discrimination, other, or none of these.

Top Stressors. Students were asked to select up to three stressors they have faced since becoming a student at their school. The options included financial stress, balancing work and school, school work, family issues, finding a job, relationships, staying in school, extracurricular activities, applying for graduate school, or none of these.

Financial Stress. The HMS survey asks students to indicate whether their current financial situation is always, often, sometimes, rarely or never stressful.

Non-Clinical Help-Seeking. Assessed by asking students to report whether they have "received support for their mental or emotional health from any of the following sources," including but not limited to: friends, family members, faculty or staff members, a religious counselor or other religious contact, and support groups.

Unmet Needs. The survey measures untreated mental health on campus by identifying students who met the criteria for moderate to severe depression or anxiety but did not report receiving any therapy or medication in the past 12 months.

Campus Mental Health Prioritization. Agreement with the statement, "Student mental well-being is a priority at my school."

Openness About Mental Health. Agreement with the statement: "My campus fosters open and free discussions about mental health."

Belief in Helpfulness of Therapy. Agreement with the statement: "Therapy would be helpful for me if I experienced mental health concerns."

Knowledge of Mental Health Services. Agreement with the statement: “If I needed to seek help for my mental or emotional health, I would know where to go on my campus.”

Educator-Response Experiences. Perceptions of educator responses to mental health issues affecting academic performance were categorized on a scale ranging from unsupportive to very supportive.

Willingness to Speak with Faculty and Staff. Students were asked whether they would be willing to speak with an academic advisor, professor, student services staff member, or a dean of students about mental health concerns affecting their academic performance.

Stigma. Stigma includes both personal stigma, defined as one’s perception or beliefs about mental health, and perceived stigma, defined as one’s perception of how society views mental health and includes how people close to them view people faced with mental health challenges.⁸

In this study, personal stigma is measured by the percentage of respondents who positively endorse the statement: “I would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment.” Perceived stigma is measured by the percentage of respondents who positively endorse the statement: “Most people would think less of a person who has received mental health treatment.”

Black Women’s Mental Health: Superwoman Schema. We assessed five measures from the Giscombe Superwoman Schema Questionnaire (G-SWS-Q), originally a 35-item scale with five subscales using a 0-3 scale where 0 indicates “this is not true for me” and 3 indicates “this is true for me all the time” for the following items:

I try to present an image of strength.; My tears are a sign of weakness.; Asking for help is difficult for me.; No matter how hard I work, I feel like I should do more.; I put everyone’s needs before mine.

Listening Sessions

UNCF conducted two 90-minute listening sessions, one before and another after the administration of the HMS survey and BCMH module, to hear from 50 HBCU and PBI representatives, including students, faculty, administrators and clinicians.

The first listening session, hosted as a video conference, focused on understanding the mental health and well-being priorities of Black students at HBCUs and PBIs, taking a strengths-based approach that’s aligned with the historic significance of HBCUs in uplifting their students, families and communities.

The second listening session was held in person at UNITE, UNCF’s annual conference, held at Signia by Hilton, from July 28 to August 1, 2024 in Atlanta, Georgia. Research partners shared the study to discuss findings and integrate the group’s feedback, input and recommendations in the final report.

Literature Review

In discussing findings, researchers present the results of a literature review on the mental health of all students, with a particular focus on Black students at HBCUs, PBIs and PWIs, including cultural norms and emerging trends, highlighting key differences among groups tied to mental health outcomes, experiences, and behaviors.

The literature review examines multiple factors tied to Black college students’ mental health, including behavioral factors (e.g., stigma), environmental factors (e.g., school climate, location, size) and policy-level factors (e.g., state policies on mental health care access).

REPORT FINDINGS

HBCU/PBI Student Demographics

UNCF's HBCU/PBI sample consists of 2,504 students who responded to the combined HMS and BCMH survey during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. This sample aligns with key demographic traits of HBCU students nationwide based on 2022 data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

- **Racial/Ethnic Identity:** All (100%) identified as Black or African American, much more than the national average of 76%, as intended in the sampling methodology, to be able to target the experiences of Black college students at HBCUs and PBIs.
- **Gender.** The majority (62%) identified as women, which is consistent not only with the more than 60% of HMS respondents, but also with the expected distribution in our sample, as women outnumber men three to one at HBCUs.⁹ The UNCF cohort also included 63 students (2%) who identify as gender expansive, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer or nonconforming.
- **Age Group and Degree Program.** The majority (64%) in the UNCF sample reported being between 18-22 years old. While precise age breakdown statistics for HBCU students nationwide are not readily available, most data indicate a significant portion falls within the traditional undergraduate age range of 18-22.
- **First-Generation College Students.** The percentage of students representing first-generation college students in the UNCF sample of HBCU/PBI students (53%) is very consistent with the national average of HBCU students (52%), where first-generation is defined as having parents, neither of whom graduated from college.
- **Sexual Orientation.** Less clear, because we don't have comparative national averages, is to what extent the sexual orientation of the UNCF sample of students reflects that of HBCU students nationwide. Most students in the UNCF sample identified as heterosexual (73%) with 23% identifying as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual or pansexual).
- **International Students.** At 6%, there were twice as many international students represented in the UNCF sample of HBCU/PBI students than HBCU students nationwide, which is 3%.

Similarly, nearly three-fourths (74%) of students in the UNCF sample identified as undergraduates, closely aligning with the national average of students enrolled in associate or bachelor's programs at 78%.

TABLE 1 Student Demographics

	UNCF Sample HBCU/PBI Students (2,504)	HBCUs NATIONALLY†
RACE/ETHNICITY		
African American or Black	100%	76%
GENDER		
Woman	62%	64%
Man	36%	36%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	2%	UNKNOWN
AGE GROUP		
18-22	64%	UNKNOWN
23 and older	25%	
DEGREE/PROGRAM		
Undergraduate	74%	78%
Graduate (Master's)	10%	16%
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT	53%	52%
SEXUAL ORIENTATION		
Heterosexual	73%	UNKNOWN
LGBQ+	27%	UNKNOWN
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT	6%	3%

† Data sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics.

TABLE 2 Student Mental Health Status

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
MENTAL HEALTH FLOURISHING	36%*	38%*	45%
SENSE OF BELONGING	73%*	72%*	83%
HIGH LONELINESS	55%	58%	56%
Women	NP	NP	57%
Men	NP	NP	53%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	94%
LONELINESS INDICATOR	55%	58%	56%
Often feel lack of companionship	21%	24%*	21%
Often feel left out	24%	27%*	23% (2,128)
Often feel isolated	28%	32%*	28% (2,189)
KEEPING NEGATIVE FEELINGS TO THEMSELVES	83%*	86%*	74% (1,983)
Women	NP	NP	74%
Men	NP	NP	75%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	83%
SUPPORTIVE FRIENDSHIPS AT SCHOOL	NP	NP	60% (1,986)
IDENTITY CONNECTEDNESS AT SCHOOL	NP	NP	54% (1,893)
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES	62%	61%	59%
MODERATE TO SEVERE DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS	41%	41%	41% (2,148)
MODERATE ANXIETY	36%*	35%*	32% (2,145)
SEVERE ANXIETY	17%*	18%*	16% (2,145)

An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the .05 level for either the HMS all-student cohort or the Black students at PWIs HMC subcohort compared to the UNCF cohort. Unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents per survey item was not provided by researchers. Not Provided means these questions were asked only in the supplemental Black Student Mental health module and not the national HMS survey.

TABLE 2 Student Mental Health Status
CONT.

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
AT-RISK FOR AN EATING DISORDER	14%*	11%*	9% (2,147)
SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR IN THE PAST YEAR			
Ideation	14%	17%	17% (2,179)
Planning	6%	NP	8% (1,124)
Attempts	2%	NP	5% (1,120)
SUBSTANCE USE			
Cigarette use in past 30 days	8%*	5%	3%
Vape use in past 30 days	20%*	16%	16%
Alcohol consumption in past 12 months	49%*	41%	42%
TOP THREE STRESSORS			
Financial stress	NP	NP	55%
Balancing work and school	NP	NP	53%
School work	NP	NP	50%
OTHER FORMS OF STRESS			
Academic stress	NP	NP	51%
Family and social relationships	NP	NP	42%
Grief	NP	NP	26%
FINANCIAL STRESS FROM CURRENT FINANCIAL SITUATION			
Always stressful	18%*	26%	23%
Often stressful	25%	28%	28%
Never stressful	7%*	4%	3%
Feel financially secure	NP	29%*	40%

An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the .05 level for either the HMS all-student cohort or the Black students at PWIs HMC subcohort compared to the UNCF cohort. Unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents per survey item was not provided by researchers. Not Provided means these questions were asked only in the supplemental Black Student Mental health module and not the national HMS survey.

TABLE 3 Student Mental Health Service Utilization and Help-Seeking Behavior

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
TYPE OF CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES among students with one or more mental health problems			
Mental health treatment in past year	57%*	51%*	43%
Therapy sessions (one or more in past year)	36%*	36%*	28%
Prescription medication (one or more in past year)	29%*	21%*	16%
Number of therapy sessions			
1-3	19%*	22%	39%
4-6	13%*	15%	26%
7-9	8%	10%	14%
10+	26%*	26%*	21%
HELPFULNESS OF THERAPY EXPERIENCE among students who received therapy in past year			
Helpful or Very Helpful	NP	NP	66%
Not Helpful	NP	NP	9%
PROVIDER LOCATION among students who received therapy in past year			
Off-campus, including local community, student hometown and other	NP	NP	88%
Campus counseling center or health center	NP	NP	38%
Psychiatric emergency room, inpatient psychiatric hospital, or partial hospitalization program	NP	NP	9%

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TABLE 3 Student Mental Health Service Utilization and Help-Seeking Behavior
CONT.

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
NON-CLINICAL SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN PAST YEAR	69%*	62%	59%
Family	43%*	37%	35%
Friends	46%*	39%	35%
Significant others	34%*	24%	27%
None of these	28%	35%	37%
DIFFERENCES IN NON-CLINICAL SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH among HBCU/PBI students			
Women	NP	NP	62%
Men	NP	NP	53%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	87%
Heterosexual	NP	NP	56%
LGBQ+	NP	NP	68%
UNMET NEEDS (no mental health treatment in past year) among students with moderate- severe depression or anxiety	41%*	47%*	54%
Women	NP	NP	50%
Men	NP	NP	61%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	38%
Heterosexual	NP	NP	56%
LGBQ+	NP	NP	47%

An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the .05 level for either the HMS all-student cohort or the Black students at PWIs HMC subcohort compared to the UNCF cohort. Unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents per survey item was not provided by researchers. Not Provided means these questions were asked only in the supplemental Black Student Mental health module and not the national HMS survey.

TABLE 4 Possible Explanations for Variations in Student Utilization of Mental Health Services and Help-Seeking Behavior

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH CULTURE			
Agreed student mental well-being is a school priority	76%	73%*	78%
Agreed campus encourages free and open discussion about mental health	NP	NP	55%
BELIEF IN HELPFULNESS OF THERAPY	NP	NP	57%
KNOWLEDGE OF WHERE TO GO ON CAMPUS FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES	76%	78%	78%
Women	NP	NP	76%
Men	NP	NP	83%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	62%
SUPPORTIVE OR VERY SUPPORTIVE EXPERIENCE WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL among 23% of HBCU/PBI students who reported mental health problems affecting academic performance	NP	NP	92%
WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK WITH FACULTY/STAFF among HBCU/PBI students if they were to have mental health problems affecting academic performance			
Academic advisor	NP	NP	47%
Professor	NP	NP	45%
Student services staff member	NP	NP	25%
Dean of students or class dean	NP	NP	19%
REASONS FOR NOT SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES among students who had not sought services in past year			
No need for services	47%	NP	44%
No barriers	15%	NP	18%
Not enough time or haven't had the chance	26%	NP	26%
Prefer to deal with it on my own or with friends/family	22%*	NP	17%
Not sure where to go	15%	NP	14%

An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the .05 level for either the HMS all-student cohort or the Black students at PWIs HMC subcohort compared to the UNCF cohort. Unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents per survey item was not provided by researchers. Not Provided means these questions were asked only in the supplemental Black Student Mental health module and not the national HMS survey.

TABLE 4 Possible Explanations for Variations in Student Utilization
CONT. of Mental Health Services and Help-Seeking Behavior

	HMS NATIONAL SAMPLE COLLEGE STUDENTS (76,406)	HMS SUBSAMPLE BLACK STUDENTS AT PWIs (3,368)	UNCF SAMPLE HBCU/PBI STUDENTS (2,504)
REASONS FOR SEEKING FEWER MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES THAN INTENDED among student who had received services in past year			
Not enough time	24%	NP	25%
Financial reasons	28%	NP	25%
No barriers	15%	NP	18%
Not having a need	19%	NP	16%
Preferring to deal on their own or with from friends/family	18%	NP	12%
Difficulty finding an available appointment	19%	NP	12%
Not sure where to go	15%	NP	10%
REASONS FOR UNMET NEEDS (no mental health treatment in past year) among students with moderate-severe depression or anxiety			
No need for services	NP	NP	27%
Prefer to deal with it on my own or with friends/family	NP	NP	22%
PERCEIVED STIGMA TIED TO SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES	41%*	48%	52%
Women	NP	NP	52%
Men	NP	NP	51%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	72%
PERSONAL STIGMA TIED TO SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES	6%	6%	8%
Women	NP	NP	5%
Men	NP	NP	13%
Transgender and Gender Expansive	NP	NP	3%

An asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance at the .05 level for either the HMS all-student cohort or the Black students at PWIs HMC subcohort compared to the UNCF cohort. Unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents per survey item was not provided by researchers. Not Provided means these questions were asked only in the supplemental Black Student Mental health module and not the national HMS survey.

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