

STABLE LEADERSHIP:

The Foundation of HBCU Success

REPORT PREPARED BY AJA JOHNSON, SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER,
EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP, UNCF INSTITUTE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

If HBCUs are to sustain
their missions, they must
also sustain their leaders.



UNCF

A mind is a terrible
thing to waste®

Introduction

In today's shifting educational landscape, leadership sustainability has emerged as a key determinant of the institutional success of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

This is a critical topic because HBCUs have long been pillars of access, equity, opportunity and legacy in the Black community, making their survival and transformation of vital importance to all communities and the nation.

HBCUs face countless modern challenges, including shifting enrollment trends, chronic underfunding, growing competition and increasing pressure to innovate while honoring centuries-old legacies. At the heart of these pressures lies a recurring issue that too often goes unaddressed: short presidential tenure.

This body of work explores why presidential tenure at HBCUs is far more than a staffing concern; it's central for institutional resilience, transformation and growth. Frequent turnover doesn't just disrupt operations—it weakens long-term strategic planning, stalls critical fundraising efforts, erodes stakeholder trust and fractures the momentum needed for progress.

This is more than an analysis. It is a call to action.

To thrive, HBCUs need enduring, consistent presidential leadership. Achieving this requires reimagining leadership pipelines, rethinking support systems and recommitting to the retention of visionary and innovative leaders.



Why Sustained Leadership Matters

Presidential tenure is not only a reflection of personal leadership, it is a critical determinant of institutional health, reputation and sustainability.

At the UNCF Institute for Capacity Building, our Executive Leadership team closely examines the link between presidential continuity and long-term institutional success.

The lessons learned from this substantial body of work are clear: without sustained leadership, institutional transformation becomes harder to accomplish.

The pressures faced today by HBCUs—indeed, all of higher education—are intense and only growing. Institutions are called to expand access, improve outcomes, compete for students and resources and respond to shifting political and economic landscapes, all while serving as cultural stewards and community anchors. In this environment, maintaining consistent, visionary leadership is not a luxury but a necessity.

Leadership instability sends damaging ripple effects across campus communities.

Faculty and staff often face uncertainty in their roles, abrupt changes in direction and delayed programmatic support. Students can feel the impact in academic offerings, inconsistent advising, financial aid policy shifts and overall morale. For many, this instability can directly impact their ability to graduate.

Focusing on presidential tenure isn't about pointing out deficits, but rather about showcasing opportunities to create conditions for purposeful, impactful change to occur.

If we want HBCUs to not only survive but thrive, we must treat leadership sustainability as a strategic necessity.



Concerns Over HBCU Leadership Turnover Are Not New

Over a decade ago, Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough, former president of Dillard University, Philander Smith University, and Talladega College (interim), [raised the alarm in a 2014 report](#). Today, the problematic trend persists.

According to the American Council on Education's [2023 American College President report](#), the **average college president serves 5.9 years**—a figure that has slowly declined since 2006.

Our internal analysis of two- and four-year public and private HBCUs shows that **HBCU presidents serve an average of 4.22 years (50.6 months). Private HBCU presidents average 4.42 years (53 months), while public HBCU presidents average 4 years (48 months).**

So, although tenure is slightly longer at private institutions, the difference is not statistically significant.

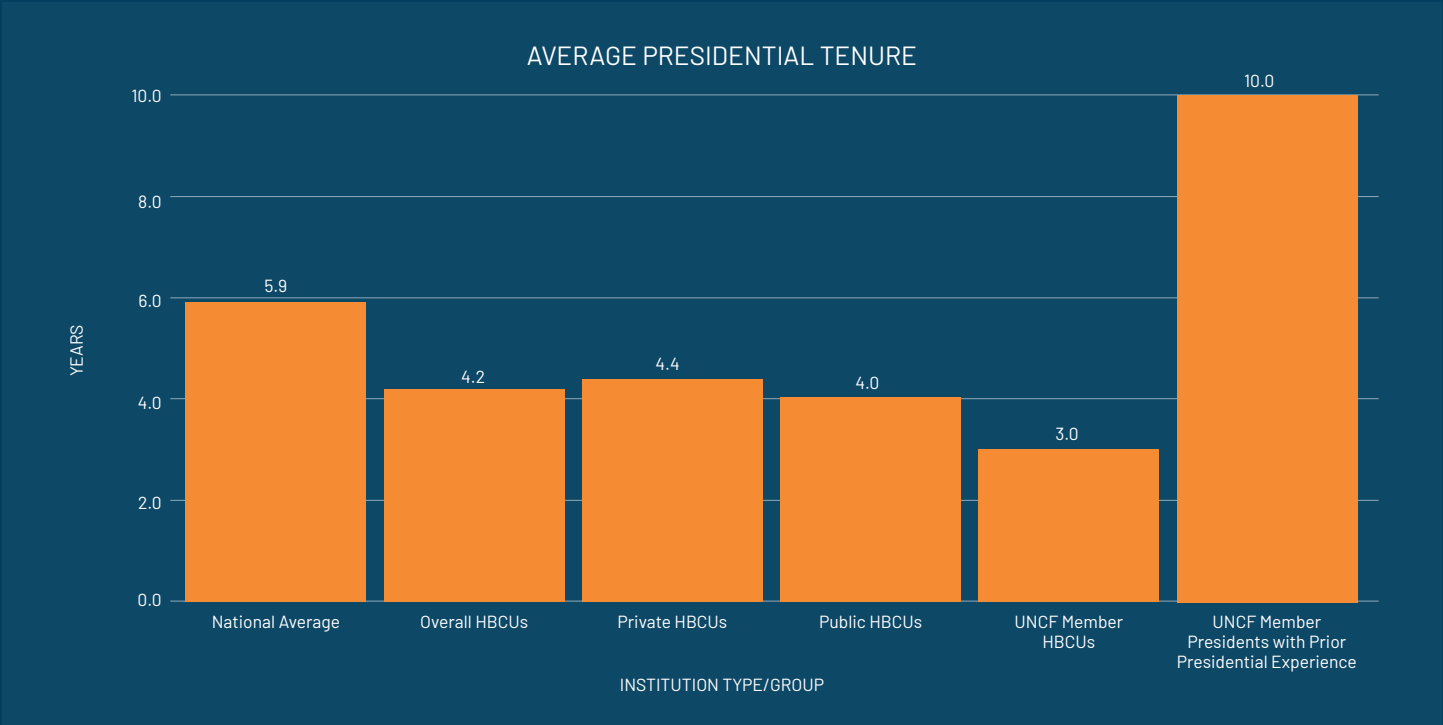
Notably, presidential tenure at both private and public HBCUs remains substantially shorter—approximately **25% and 32% below the national average**, underscoring the persistent leadership instability facing the HBCU sector.

Based on our internal data, presidential tenure **across UNCF's 37 member institutions** is even shorter, averaging **3 years (39 months).**

However, it is important to note that, of the **37 presidents, the tenure of the 11 who bring prior presidential experience averages 10 years (120 months).** Of those **11 presidents, 10 have served in their current role at their UNCF member institution for an average of 8 years (96 months).**

This variation highlights that there are pockets of stability, whether through prior experience or longer institutional tenure, that play a critical role in ensuring continuity, strategic vision and institutional stability at HBCUs.

While a handful of presidents have served for a decade or longer, many others leave after only a few years. These discrepancies reflect deeper structural realities: institutional instability, fraught governance relationships and external pressures that directly shape the length and success of presidencies.



The average tenure for private HBCU presidents is influenced by several long-serving presidents currently in office, whose extended leadership tenures elevate the overall private-sector average.

Perspectives from Our Experts

To gain invaluable insights into these challenges, we spoke with three HBCU presidents—one still in office—whose combined tenures span more than 50 years of executive leadership across public and private HBCUs.

These individuals were selected for their firsthand experience navigating the unique complexities of an HBCU presidency, offering a deeply informed perspective on what strengthens or hinders leadership sustainability. Their insights highlight factors that shape the future of the HBCU presidency and what must change to ensure stable, thriving executive leadership.

The State of the Presidency

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough, now Executive Vice President for Research and Member Engagement at UNCF, described the current moment as “a perilous place in terms of leadership.”

He pointed to state-level overreach at public HBCUs, where governors and system leaders often replace boards or interfere with presidential searches, as observed recently at Tennessee State University and Florida A&M University.

“You can still get good leadership there,” Kimbrough noted, “but their hands are tied.”

At private HBCUs, the challenges differ but remain acute. While boards enjoy more autonomy in hiring, Kimbrough warned that many lack the expertise to select leaders prepared for today’s demands. Boards are composed of “good people who mean well, but really don’t have a clue of what’s going on,” he said. This misalignment contributes to short tenures, stalled progress and, in some cases, lasting institutional harm.



Dr. Brenda Allen, President of Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, underscored the consequences of declining tenure and its differential impact tied to gender. “In general, [presidential] tenure has gone from about seven years to five years. And then at HBCUs, that’s like four years. And if it’s HBCUs and it’s Black women, it’s like two years.”

When considering presidential continuity and institutional health, it’s important to reflect on leadership tenure in relation to the academic cycle, particularly the graduating class, as it typically takes about three years for a new initiative to take root and show tangible institutional results.

For Allen, the concern goes far beyond statistics; it’s about what colleges lose when leadership is constantly in flux.



"One of the best ways to actually reach goals year after year is that you have some continuity in who's doing that," she explained. "It helps to bring continuity in relationships, so people get to know the president, the school and the direction."

Allen highlighted, "The average strategic plan is a five-year plan, which you don't even get to fully implement until probably your second year. So, you barely get it started before you get fired, or they hire somebody else who then starts the process all over again."

Post-COVID, expectations of HBCU presidents have expanded: social media, viral moments and heightened visibility have all added new layers to an already demanding role.

Dr. Ernest C. McNealey, former President of Allen University, reflected on this shift: "I think part of it has to do with more attention now to the seeming side of the job, the social media-type presence. Of course, there is also the doing side."

With more than 20 years as president of both Allen University and Stillman College, McNealey credited long tenure to careful planning but cautioned against superficial selection processes: "Quite a number of jobs are being filled by individuals who present well, have high profiles and maybe not quite as strong on the doing side."

Kimbrough echoed this point: "The role of the HBCU president has become multifaceted, requiring not only academic leadership but also fundraising prowess, community engagement and navigation of increasingly complex political and financial landscapes."

Potential Roadblocks to Success

Boards of trustees are pivotal in shaping presidential success—or failure. Without proper training, cohesion and alignment, boards can undermine presidential leadership and cause greater instability.

"There is a combative relationship sometimes between board members and presidents," noted **Allen**. "It becomes the main reason why we have such instability."

Kimbrough was more direct: "The pain point for everybody is governance: how boards select presidents, support presidents. This level of turnover and instability hurts the brand."

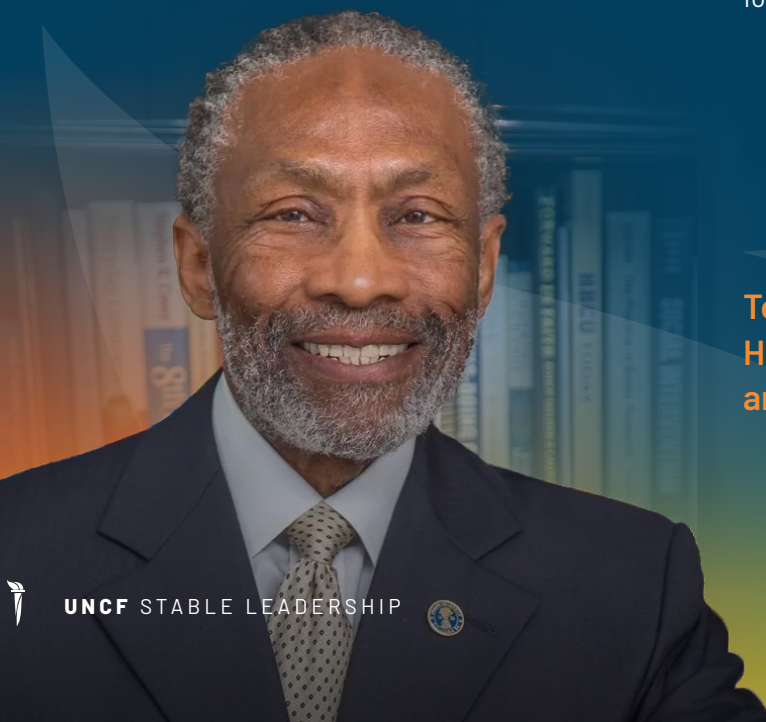
McNealey emphasized the same point: "They ultimately have the ability to look at their institutions, to look at where they might see difficulties and where they might like to be in five years. The [presidential] search should be shaped by that."

He warned boards against being swayed by charisma or "razzle-dazzle." Instead, he advised: "Pick a president for where you are and where you'd like to be."

The challenges facing HBCU leadership are significant, complex and deeply structural. Governance struggles, external pressures and evolving expectations all contribute to shorter tenures and diminished institutional momentum. Awareness of these barriers is critical but insufficient on its own.

Next, we explore the solutions, strategies and initiatives designed to strengthen presidential tenure, empower boards and support enduring leadership that ensures thriving HBCUs for generations to come.

To move from instability to sustainability, HBCUs must embrace strategies that extend and strengthen presidential leadership.



Our Path Forward

UNCF's Executive Leadership team is committed to strengthening leadership stability and effectiveness at HBCUs. By supporting presidents, cabinets and boards through collaborative development, reflective practice and aligned leadership, we strive to promote sustainable leadership that ensures institutions not only survive but thrive.

Through partnerships with programs such as the Higher Education Leadership Foundation at Wiley University (H.E.L.F.), the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the HBCU Executive Leadership Institute (HBCU ELI) at Clark Atlanta University, UNCF connects presidents and boards to structured mentorship, professional development and sector-wide collaboration.

Four Strategic Areas of Focus

1. Improve Presidential Searches

Presidential searches must be strengthened from the outset. While many institutions use well-known search firms, the composition of search committees often fails to provide a group that understands the presidency and is able to successfully determine which candidate is the best fit for the institution.

The initial focus must be to provide HBCU boards with a better understanding of the search process, as well as training in both the selection of committees and, ultimately, presidents. A strong consideration must be given to including sitting or former presidents as members of search committees.

2. Strengthen Onboarding, Mentorship and Succession

Positioning new HBCU presidents for long-term success requires more than orientation. A robust onboarding and mentorship model should intentionally connect new leaders to the broader HBCU network, linking them with critical resources, strategic partnerships and peer institutions.

Effective onboarding must also build capacity in financial management, institutional expectations and strategic planning so presidents can lead with clarity, confidence and collaboration.



Our Path Forward

3. Reimagine and Strengthen Board Governance

Effective governance starts with empowered and informed board chairs. We propose intentional engagement strategies that position board chairs as essential allies in reinforcing presidential success and aligning institutional priorities.

Sustaining tenure and driving institutional progress requires a collective effort: stronger collaboration between presidents, board members and support organizations, such as: UNCF, Thurgood Marshall College Fund and TM² Executive Search Firm. This approach can strengthen communication, clarify roles and ensure shared accountability across the sector.

4. Advance Research on HBCU Leadership and Presidential Tenure

There is a critical need for deeper, sector-specific research that examines the nuances of HBCU presidential leadership.

We recommend additional research on how the length of presidential tenure, whether long-standing or frequently transitioning, correlates, for instance, with institutional resources, financial partnerships, accreditation health, campus morale and transformational success.

A historical perspective on leadership shifts can shed light on patterns of stability, turnover and their long-term impact on institutional growth and sustainability. Expanding this research will equip institutions, boards and policymakers with the insights needed to support sustainable leadership pathways and strengthen HBCUs.

HBCUs continue to be symbols of longstanding hope and resilience. Sustained support for their leadership is essential to these institutions' success and to preserving their legacy.

If HBCUs are to sustain their mission, they must also sustain their leaders.

FEATURED PRESIDENTS *(in Report Order)*

Dr. Beverly W. Hogan
President Emerita, Tougaloo College

Dr. Ronnie Hopkins
President & CEO, Voorhees University

Dr. Charlie Nelms
Chancellor Emeritus, Indiana University East, the University of Michigan-Flint, and North Carolina Central University

Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough
Former President Philander Smith University
Dillard University, and Talladega College (interim)

Dr. Brenda Allen
President, Lincoln University (Pennsylvania)

Dr. Ernest C. McNealey
Former President & CEO, Allen University

Dr. Roslyn Clark Artis
President & CEO, Benedict College

Dr. Glenell M. Lee-Pruitt
President & CEO, Jarvis Christian University

For more information on Executive Leadership at the UNCF Institute for Capacity Building, contact Aja Johnson, Senior Program Manager, Executive Leadership, at aja.johnson@uncf.org.



1805 7th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001



229 Peachtree Street NE
Suite 2350
Atlanta, GA 30303

*Suggested Citation: Johnson, Aja. 2026. Stable Leadership: The Foundation of HBCU Success.
UNCF Institute for Capacity Building.*

UNCFICB.ORG

Designed by Mighty Engine.