

**THE HBCU WEALTH BUILDING INITIATIVE:**

# From Financial Wellness to Institutional Wealth Architecture

A Brief from UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building

# The Opportunity

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For nearly two centuries, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have served as pillars of opportunity in American society. Founded during an era when access to higher education—and the economic stability it could provide—was systematically denied to many, these institutions were created with a bold purpose: to cultivate talent, expand possibility, and strengthen the communities they serve.

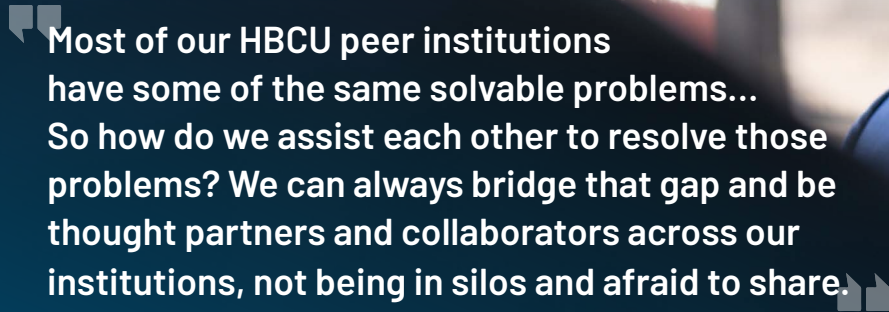
Over generations, HBCUs have done far more than educate students. They have developed leaders, strengthened regional economies, and sustained cultural and intellectual traditions that shape the nation.

Today, as the country continues to grapple with questions of economic mobility and generational wealth, HBCUs stand out as one of America's most powerful institutional assets. They sit at

the intersection of talent, trust, community leadership, and economic opportunity—uniquely positioned to translate educational achievement into lasting prosperity.

Even as educational opportunity has expanded across generations, the systems that convert achievement into durable wealth remain unevenly distributed. Access to capital markets, investment opportunities, and the mechanisms of intergenerational asset-building continue to shape who can transform opportunity into long-term economic stability.

Meeting this moment will require more than financial knowledge at the individual level. It will require institutions capable of aligning talent, capital, partnerships, and trust to support wealth creation at scale.



**Most of our HBCU peer institutions have some of the same solvable problems... So how do we assist each other to resolve those problems? We can always bridge that gap and be thought partners and collaborators across our institutions, not being in silos and afraid to share.**

**HBCU INSTITUTIONAL LEADER**

HBCUs are uniquely positioned to play that role.

Recognizing this potential, UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building—with catalytic support from The Prudential Foundation—launched the **HBCU Wealth Building Initiative**.

The initiative is grounded in a simple but powerful premise:

If HBCUs have long served as engines of educational mobility, they also possess the institutional assets necessary to shape the next frontier of wealth creation in America—aligning talent, partnerships, and community leadership to support economic agency and generational prosperity.

This brief and the underlying report, *The Power to Prosper: HBCUs, Wealth-Building, and the Next Chapter of Economic Equity*, highlight insights emerging from our network of HBCUs and introduces a framework for translating financial wellness into a broader institutional strategy for wealth-building.

Realizing this vision will require collective action. Institutions, philanthropy, industry, and public leaders must contribute not only ideas, but their treasure, time, talent, and testimony—the financial capital, intellectual partnership, leadership engagement, and public voice necessary to ensure that education leads not only to opportunity, but to lasting prosperity.



# Wealth, Freedom, and the Future of HBCUs

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Wealth is more than income. It is security, resilience, and the freedom to shape one's future. Wealth allows families to weather crises, invest in opportunity, and create pathways for the next generation.

For institutions, wealth provides durability and strategic independence.

For communities, it represents collective capacity and long-term power.

For the students, faculty, and staff connected to HBCUs, wealth represents something even more profound: the ability to transform educational achievement into enduring economic opportunity.

For generations, HBCUs have served as engines of educational mobility. These institutions have produced a disproportionate share of the nation's professionals, civic leaders, and innovators while educating many first-generation college students and learners from historically underserved communities.

Their impact extends far beyond the classroom. HBCUs function as anchor institutions—cultivating leadership pipelines, strengthening regional economies, and sustaining cultural and intellectual traditions that shape American society.

Across the country, conversations about wealth and economic mobility are gaining urgency. Access to capital markets, ownership opportunities, and investment systems continues to determine who can translate education into lasting prosperity. Ensuring that all Americans – no matter their race, background, or station – have pathways to wealth building has become a national imperative.



After centuries of intentional exclusion from wealth building systems and practices, wealth generation in Black communities is beginning to gain momentum. Black households have more wealth than ever before, and are increasing their participation in homeownership, investing and benefits programs. In some areas – like life insurance – Black Americans are beginning to outpace their counterparts.

Nevertheless, a significant gap persists that demands our attention:

**\$49,950**

**Increase in racial wealth gap between 2019 and 2022**

Urban Institute, 2025

**44%**

**Black homeownership rate, 32% less than the national average**

Brookings, 2024

**\$2,200**

**Median balance in Black household checking or savings accounts**

National Community Reinvestment Coalition, 2026

*(a fifth of their white counterparts)*

**4 in 10**

**Percentage of Black families who own stocks**

Pew Research Center, 2024

*(compared to two in three of White families)*

Within this landscape of both challenge and opportunity lies one of the nation's most powerful—and often underrecognized—assets: the HBCU network.

With more than 100 institutions educating nearly 300,000 students each year and generating over \$16.5 billion in economic impact, HBCUs represent a national platform for advancing inclusive prosperity.

**The evidence is clear: HBCUs contribute to economic mobility. A UNCF social mobility analysis conducted in 2021 found that 88 percent of HBCUs rank above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally in advancing students from low-income backgrounds into the middle class and beyond.**

With this foundation established, the HBCU With Building Initiative asks: *how these institutions can expand their role—moving beyond access to education to become architects of sustainable wealth for the communities they serve?*

# Launching the HBCU Wealth Building Initiative

To explore this opportunity, UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building launched the **HBCU Wealth Building Initiative** with support from The Prudential Foundation.

The initiative is grounded in a central question:

**How are HBCUs supporting wealth-building today – for their students, faculty, staff, alumni and surrounding communities – and what would it take to make those efforts systematic, measurable, and transformative?**

Across campuses, many institutions already provide programs that support financial well-being, including:

- financial education programs for students
- retirement benefits for faculty and staff
- counseling and debt management resources for students and alumni; and
- collaborative initiatives with financial partners that serve both institutional stakeholders and the broader community

These efforts reveal an important reality: the foundations of wealth-building already exist across many HBCU campuses. The challenge—and the opportunity—is to align these assets into a coordinated institutional strategy capable of supporting long-term financial resilience for students, employees, and surrounding communities.

Over twelve months, the project engaged institutional leaders, students, faculty, and staff across the HBCU ecosystem to lay the groundwork for future activation.

The research process included:

## **12-MEMBER ADVISORY BOARD**

of financial and higher-education leaders

## **93-QUESTION INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY**

administered to 12 public and private HBCUs

## **WEALTH-IN-NUMBERS SURVEY**

engaging 637 students, faculty and staff across 44 HBCUs

## **FOCUS GROUP CONVENED AT UNITE 2025**

bringing together 35 stakeholders across the HBCU network

Together, these perspectives provide one of the most comprehensive examinations of wealth-building practices across HBCUs to date.



# What We Learned

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## Five Insights from the Field

Across surveys, dialogue, and institutional engagement, five consistent themes emerged. These insights reveal both the strength of the current landscape and the opportunities for greater alignment and scale.

### 1 Existing Infrastructure, Untapped Potential

HBCUs already possess many of the foundational components of a wealth-building ecosystem—employee benefits programs, financial education initiatives, community partnerships, and trusted leadership networks.

Yet these efforts often operate independently across departments such as human resources, student affairs, financial aid, and advancement.

The opportunity is not to build entirely new programs, but to align existing assets through a coordinated institutional strategy for wealth-building, deepening exposure to pathways for financial literacy, participation in wealth building initiatives, and greater economic mobility.

### 2 Financial Well-Being Matters Across the Entire Campus Community

Financial pressure affects students, faculty, and staff alike.

Students navigate tuition costs, housing insecurity, and student loan debt. Faculty and staff face pressures related to family responsibilities, retirement readiness, and rising living costs.

Financial well-being is therefore not only a personal concern—it is a strategic institutional issue influencing student retention, employee stability, and long-term campus vitality.



### 3

## Awareness and Trust Shape Engagement

A key finding from the surveys was the gap between available financial resources and stakeholder awareness.

Even when programs exist, participation can remain limited if stakeholders perceive them as inaccessible or disconnected from their lived realities.

Peer-led initiatives, trusted messengers, and culturally grounded learning environments can significantly increase participation and impact.

### 4

## Financial Literacy Must Become Financial Practice

Participants consistently emphasized that financial capability develops through experience.

Students and employees expressed strong interest in experiential learning opportunities such as:

- simulated investing environments
- guided budgeting exercises
- structured financial planning programs

These “practice spaces” help bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior.

**My biggest barrier to building generational wealth would be the foundation I have started on. I come from a household with parents who had financial challenges and lacked in financial knowledge. I would say they knew how to survive but not live.**

**HBCU STUDENT**

### 5

## Wealth Must Be Defined Broadly

Across the HBCU community, wealth is understood in broader terms than traditional financial frameworks.

Participants connected wealth not only to financial assets but also to:

- educational opportunity
- institutional sustainability
- community investment
- intergenerational prosperity

This broader definition aligns wealth-building with the historic mission of HBCUs—advancing opportunity for individuals, families, and communities alike.



# Key Data Insights

The data reveal a powerful signal: the HBCU community recognizes the importance of wealth-building and is eager for institutions to play a more intentional role.

Across participating institutions:

**89% of students and 81% of faculty/staff** report financial stress

**44% of students** feel prepared for a \$1,000 emergency expense

**24% of students and 38% of employees** report satisfaction with their financial situation

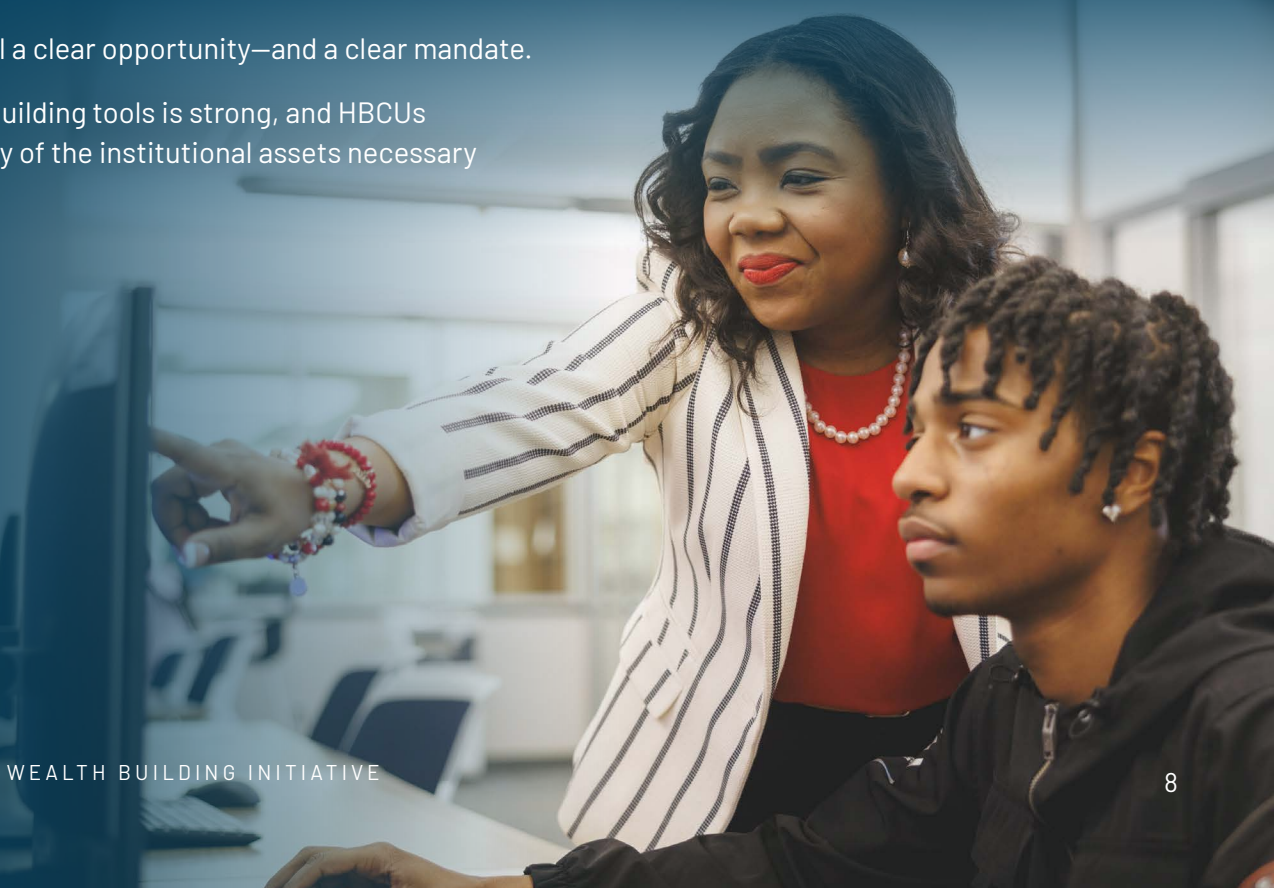
**85% of students and 84.7% of employees** consider generational wealth important

**100% of surveyed institutions** provide some form of financial wellness or benefits programming to their faculty, staff and students

**>25% of institutions** track outcomes of their wealth-building programs

These findings reveal a clear opportunity—and a clear mandate.

Demand for wealth-building tools is strong, and HBCUs already possess many of the institutional assets necessary to lead this work.



# The Path Forward

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## From Financial Wellness to Institutional Wealth Architecture

HBCUs possess many of the assets required to lead wealth-building efforts: trusted leadership, deep community relationships, talent pipelines, and mission-driven partnerships.

What is needed now is a coordinated institutional framework capable of aligning these assets into a sustained strategy for wealth creation.

In response, UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building developed the **HBCU Wealth Building Engagement Framework**.

The framework is grounded in a simple idea:

**Wealth-building is not a standalone program. It is an institutional ecosystem.**

When institutional policies, partnerships, learning opportunities, and data systems align, wealth-building becomes embedded in campus culture.

At its core, the framework positions wealth-building as a campus-wide design challenge and leadership responsibility.

The framework reframes wealth-building as a strategic institutional function—one that aligns campus policy, learning environments, partnerships, and data systems to support long-term financial resilience.

# THE HBCU WEALTH BUILDING ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

## PILLAR I: INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION

Wealth-building must be integrated into core institutional functions.

### KEY ACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Embedding financial wellness goals into strategic plans
- Aligning employee benefits with long-term wealth outcomes
- Integrating financial readiness into student success programs
- Establishing campus wealth councils to coordinate initiatives

## PILLAR II: COMMUNITY ACTIVATION

Financial empowerment is both cultural and technical.

### KEY STRATEGIES INCLUDE:

- Training Financial Health Ambassadors among students, faculty, and alumni
- Creating Applied Learning Labs where participants practice financial decision-making
- Building partnerships with local financial institutions and community organizations
- Launching storytelling campaigns that frame wealth-building as legacy rather than luxury

## PILLAR III: MEASUREMENT AND IMPACT

Institutional transformation requires measurement.

### KEY ACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Defining common metrics for financial participation and outcomes
- Equipping institutions with digital dashboards to track progress
- Linking wealth-building metrics to student success and workforce stability
- Creating a national HBCU learning community for collaboration and shared learning

## HBCUs and the Future of Civic Infrastructure

This work is also part of a broader reimagining of civic infrastructure in America.

Healthy societies rely on institutions capable of organizing knowledge, trust, and resources in service of the common good. For generations, HBCUs have stewarded this role—serving as anchors of leadership, culture, and community stability.

As the nation seeks new pathways to expand economic opportunity, HBCUs offer a powerful model of civic infrastructure that connects education, community trust, and economic mobility.

By aligning their institutional assets with wealth-building strategies, HBCUs can help shape a future in which educational achievement is consistently linked to ownership, investment, and generational prosperity.

**Make financial literacy a class & turn the class into a graduation requirement.**

HBCU STUDENT

# Why This Work Matters Now

Across the United States, there is growing recognition that educational attainment alone is not enough to secure long-term economic prosperity. While higher education remains one of the most powerful drivers of mobility, the systems that convert learning into ownership, investment, and generational wealth remain uneven and often disconnected from the institutions that educate future leaders.

As a result, a critical question has emerged for the future of higher education and economic mobility alike: **which institutions can help bridge the gap between opportunity and ownership?**

HBCUs are among the few institutions already positioned to do so.

The opportunity before us is significant—but realizing it will require collective action across sectors.

To **HBCUs**: Embed wealth-building into the core of institutional strategy.

To **partners, investors, and allies**: Bring your **treasure, time, talent, and testimony** to this work—your capital, expertise, leadership, and public voice.

Invest in institutions that have already proven their ability to expand opportunity. Partner in building the systems that translate educational mobility into lasting wealth.

To **national leaders**: Recognize HBCUs not only as institutions of learning, but as architects of inclusive prosperity and builders of generational wealth.

This initiative represents more than a research effort. It marks the beginning of a broader movement—one that aligns education, opportunity, and ownership in ways that strengthen individuals, institutions, and communities.

Together, we can ensure that every HBCU graduate leaves not only with a degree, but with the knowledge, networks, and opportunities necessary to build wealth that endures across generations.

In doing so, the institutions that have long expanded opportunity in America can also help lead the nation toward a more inclusive and prosperous future.

“I think we ought to find a commonality among the faculty, staff and students. And then build on that to provide different workshops, seminars or modes of implementation, follow up and, in subsequent years, reiterate to see the pattern of what's going on to determine how effectively our programs are working.”

**HBCU INSTITUTIONAL LEADER**



# Acknowledgements

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Benedict College	Lincoln University (PA)	Tennessee State University
Bowie State University	Livingstone College	Texas Southern University
Clark Atlanta University	Morehouse College	Tougaloo College
Delaware State University	Morris College	Tuskegee University
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Fisk University	Paine College	Virginia State University
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