LeveL UP

Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, **Unapologetically.**

IT'S TIME TO GET REAL:

A Playbook to Demand Black Learner Excellence

Our Nation Has Long Underserved **Black Learners** In **Higher Education.**

The effects of this concerning reality are abundantly clear: Black student enrollment has disproportionately declined in recent decades, and racial disparities in college outcomes persist. During the past 20 years, the American higher education system has lost an estimated 600,000 Black learners. As the college-going gap widens, we must act now on behalf of Black learners. Otherwise, thousands of Black learners will continue to be excluded from the benefits of earning a valuable credential beyond high school. As a result, our communities and economies will suffer the effects of fewer residents with greater education. Improving Black student enrollment requires that we reaffirm the value proposition of postsecondary education for Black learners. When given equitable access to continued educational opportunities, Black students achieve upward economic mobility and academic and career success, and they contribute to meeting diverse workforce and economic needs.

This playbook is a call to action for key players—postsecondary institutions, state policymakers, federal policymakers, and community and business leaders—to uphold practices and policies that reinforce the value proposition of higher education for Black learners and dismantle the structures that function as barriers to Black learner success. It is a tool for all to use in their respective realms while elevating Black student voices. Each stakeholder group plays an important role in increasing postsecondary access and outcomes for Black learners.

To ensure the playbook serves as an actionable resource, it provides recommendations for each stakeholder group. Key players will gain an understanding of critical issues based on the research presented, acquire the tools needed to support Black learners, and begin to identify what steps they might take after viewing spotlighted examples.

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State policymakers have law-making and budget authority to bolster accountability, affordability, transparency, and consumer protection, and they subsidize institutions where most Black learners enroll.

Federal policymakers have authority and funding to address affordability, strengthen data and delivery systems, oversee accreditation, and incentivize states and institutions to bolster foundational policies and target support to Black learners.

BLACK LEARNER EXCELLENCE

Higher Education Institutions are on the front lines serving Black learners with campus policies and practices that promote access and success, including a focus on increasing transparency, improving the value proposition, and cultivating a sense of belonging.
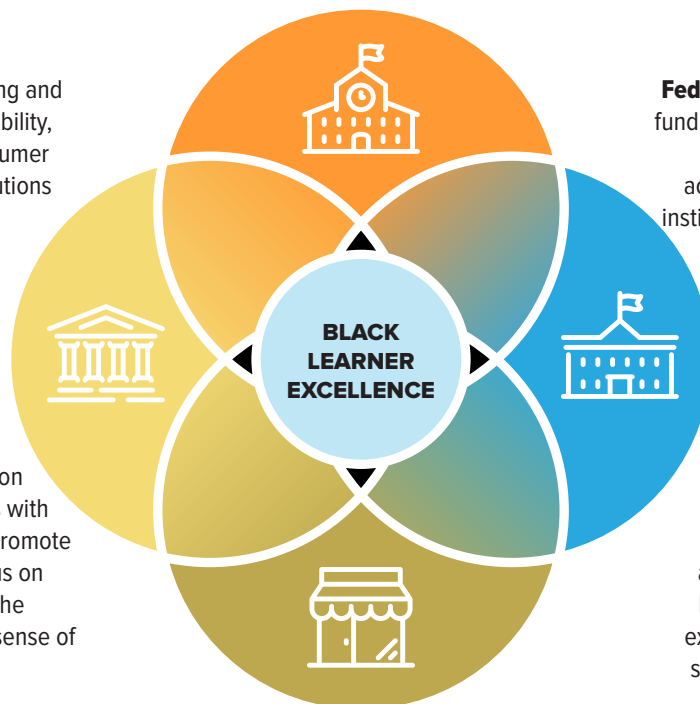
Community and business leaders are invaluable partners to advocate for Black learner excellence, provide work experiences, connect learners to human services, and foster community through mentorship.

A National Imperative: Addressing Black Student Enrollment. (2022). HCM Strategists.

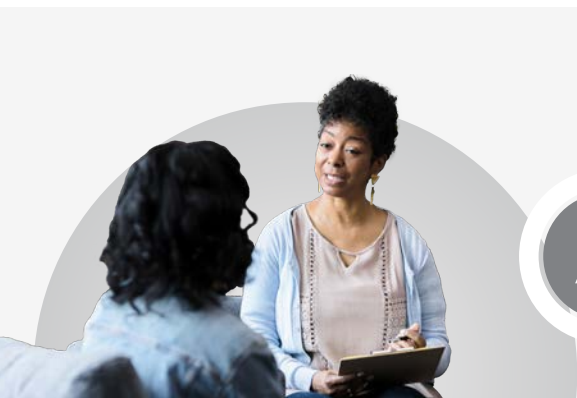## In order to **LEVEL UP,** key leaders are compelled to **GET REAL** with:

(R) REAL Transparency and True Affordability

We must focus not only on increasing need-based aid, but also on making more visible the bottom-line cost students will pay, based on a realistic assessment of what students can reasonably afford.

(E) Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership

At each level—federal, state, system, and institutional—we must create mechanisms to support Black learners and ensure shared accountability for their success in and beyond their postsecondary experiences.

(A) Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging

Institutions and systems must proactively consider the disproportionate challenges facing Black learners inside and outside the classroom by developing supports and connecting them to community resources. This will afford opportunities to provide robust advising, support to access pathways to high-wage and high-demand jobs, and assistance to address critical issues in an environment that fosters respect and a sense of belonging.

(L) Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

Teaching practices should center students' lived experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs as grounding for learning.

The playbook focuses on four priority areas, identified in the 2023 report Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically (LEVEL UP).

HOW TO USE THIS PLAYBOOK

Together, these four commitment areas drive Black learner excellence and contribute to a more equitable higher education system. Key players can use the guidance offered in this playbook to promote and reinforce shared ownership for advancing Black learner enrollment and success. The recommendations are meant to be flexible so those able and willing to help can find areas where they can be most effective.

To get the most from this playbook, users should:

▸ Review the section for your stakeholder group to understand the research, suggested strategies, spotlights from the field, and additional resources. Recognizing that Black learners are not monolithic, the recommendations aim to support their unique and diverse needs.

▸ Select realistic, yet aspirational, strategies that are appropriate for your context and identify a general action plan.

▸ Consider key partnerships needed for implementation. The responsibility to LEVEL UP and Get REAL is not on one entity. It involves us all and requires us to show up in collaborative efforts that elevate and empower Black learners.

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HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Commitment to Black Learner Excellence

Higher education institutions must commit to concrete strategies to make postsecondary education more accessible and relevant to the lived experiences of Black learners and create stronger pathways to economic mobility.

The missions of our nation's higher education institutions, particularly publicly-funded colleges and universities, compel them to provide broad educational access to students who have historically been excluded from higher education. These institutions have massive potential to impact the enrollment and success of Black learners. They offer training and credentials that contribute to the learners' economic mobility while building a more diverse skilled workforce. Higher education institutions have the authority to develop campus policies and practices that promote Black learner success, produce high-quality data that increase transparency and ensure the value proposition for Black learners, and cultivate a sense of belonging for Black learners.

This LEVEL UP Playbook calls on institutional leaders to acknowledge where they may be falling short for Black learners and to unapologetically take the steps needed to advance Black learner enrollment and success.

The data present a clear and compelling call to action for institutions to recruit and support more Black learners. Although Black learners comprise 14% of high school graduates, they account for just 7% of enrollments among public four-year institutions and 11% among community colleges. Black learners have completion rates 24 percentage points below their white peers.[1] We can and must change these outcomes for Black learners.

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[1] Bransberger, P. et al. Knocking at the College Door. Projections of High School Graduates. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). (2020). Indicator 23 Postsecondary Graduation Rates. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023).
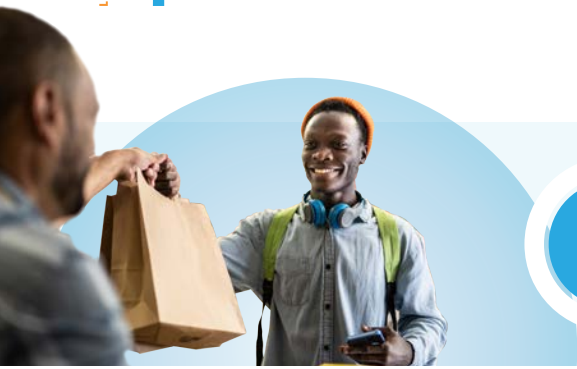
REAL Transparency and True Affordability

(R)

We must focus not only on increasing need-based aid, but also on making more visible the bottom-line cost students will pay, based on a realistic assessment of what students can reasonably afford.

Institutions can help build the value proposition for Black learners with improved transparency on the potential benefits from earning a credential and the ultimate return on investment.[2] Addressing affordability is also critical to Black learners' success, because they are more likely to be from low-income backgrounds; 72% of Black learners receive federal Pell Grant funds, compared with 34% of white students.[3] Institutions can commit to real transparency and true affordability by examining affordability gaps for Black learners, employing strategic financial aid packaging practices, supporting students' basic needs, and messaging value and affordability with honesty and clarity.

To provide real transparency and true affordability, institutional leaders should:

☐ Target institutional aid as need-based grants offered to students who would benefit the most from additional grant aid.

Institutions are spending billions of dollars on institutional aid each year. The most effective way to spend these resources is to target them to the lowest-income students who would benefit most, because need-based aid is correlated with improved persistence and completion.[4] Black learners are overrepresented among low-income students, so they would benefit from more targeted grant aid.[5]

☐ Create a commitment of affordability or promise program for students from low-income backgrounds.

Research affirms positive impacts on enrollment from clear messages on affordability.[6] Some institutions leverage federal, state, and/or private funding to offer clear and early messaging about tuition-free education for certain students. This commitment can be leveraged and communicated specifically to Black learners to alleviate their affordability concerns.

☐ Develop and promote creative solutions to address students' basic needs (such as housing and food) and unexpected financial emergencies.[7]

Federal data demonstrate stark levels of food insecurity among Black learners. Nearly 35% of Black learners report food insecurity, compared with 18% of white students.[8] Colleges should measure needs, cultivate a campuswide referral network, and guide navigation to resources.[9] In addition, a small amount of emergency aid can have a positive impact on retention.[10]

☐ Ensure financial aid award letters and other consumer information materials are clear and concise.

Students benefit from clear, jargon-free information on financial aid eligibility and processes. Award letters should outline all costs, clarify which sources require repayment, and detail the amount owed after aid is received.[11]

[2] The Postsecondary Value Commission offers a framework and diagnostic tool to help institutions measure, address, and articulate economic return, wealth parity, and more. [3] Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2019). [4] Multiple research studies on the federal Pell Grant and state-need based grants (e.g., in MD, OH, and WA) demonstrate the positive impacts of need-based aid. Although fewer studies focus on institutional aid, the impact of additional financial support for students from low-income families is clear. Benson, G. Impact of Need-Based Financial Aid on College Completion: An Event History Analysis. Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). (2019). [5] Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2019). [6] Dynarski, S. et al. Closing the Gap: The Effect of Targeted, Tuition Free Promise on College Choices of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students. National Bureau of Economic Research. (2018). [7] Spiers, K. et al. How Do U.S. Colleges and Universities Help Students Address Basic Needs? A National Inventory of Resources for Food and Housing Insecurity. American Education Research Association (AERA), V 52. (2022). [8] New Federal Data Confirm that College Students Face Significant - and Unacceptable - Basic Needs Insecurity. The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice. (2023). [9] Addressing Students' Basic Needs: Food and Housing Insecurity on Campus. EAB. (2018). [10] Sloane, P. Study Shows Small Emergency Grants Can Help College Students Stay in School. The74. (2022). [11] No Clear Winners: Consumer Testing of Financial Aid Award Letters. National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). (2012)

Offer individualized financial aid counseling and digital financial literacy resources.[12]

Black learners borrow at higher rates and are more likely to struggle with repayment than other students.[13] Institutions can help connect Black learners to free resources and Black financial experts to help students learn financial literacy skills and avoid debt accumulation.[14]

Institutions can develop inspirational messaging targeted to Black learners that includes interactive tools that allow exploring of economic returns.

Data should include both wages and overall wealth for Black alumni by program of study.

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Real Transparency and True Affordability, Black learners will:

▶ Have early awareness of the potential value of earning a credential, anticipated return on investment, true costs, and available financial support.

▶ Gain knowledge of outcomes and experiences of other Black learners to inform enrollment-related decisions.

▶ Receive a clear, customized financial aid award that fills financial gaps.

▶ Expand financial literacy skills and receive personalized student financial counseling.

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AFFORDABILITY SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **Compton College** takes a data-driven, student-informed, comprehensive approach to basic needs. Black learners comprise 24% of the college's student body.[15] Compton's basic needs efforts include partnering with a community development organization to address housing, streamlining processes to access resources, and hiring a basic needs director.

▶ **University of Maryland, Baltimore County** has focused on increasing enrollment of Black learners for decades and offers targeted scholarships. Black learners account for 24% of the institution's enrollment.[16]

▶ **The University of Texas System** created a data dashboard on educational and career outcomes for specific student groups. SeekUT was one of the first systems in higher education to launch an online resource to provide salary and debt statistics of actual students by degree major, providing transparency and helping students make informed decisions about their educational careers.[17]

[12] Mow reader, R. Five Programs that Teach Students Financial Literacy. Inside Higher Ed. (2023). [13] Addo, F. R & Darity Jr., W. To Tackle the Black Student Debt Crisis, Target the Racial Wealth Gap. EdTrust. (2020). [14] Broderick, T. Financial Literacy Resources for Black Students. Affordable Colleges. (2023). [15] Compton College Regional Report. (2023). [16] Compton College Regional Report. (2023). [17] A Free Online Tool for College and Career Planning. University of Texas System. (2023).

E — Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership

At each level—federal, state, system, and institutional—we must create mechanisms to support Black learners and ensure shared accountability for their success in and beyond their postsecondary experiences.

Higher education leadership needs to move from aspiration to action to realize true success for Black learners. Leaders must focus on Black learners as part of strategic planning, develop robust partnerships, and engage advocates with a spirit of sharing, growing, and remaining dissatisfied until results are achieved and sustained.

Postsecondary completion gaps persist between Black learners and students from other racial groups. The current graduation rate of Black, full-time students attending four-year institutions is 40%, compared with 64% for white, full-time students.[18] Among two-year institutions, Black learners complete at a rate of 23%; for white students, the rate is 32%. Equity gaps—including those within enrollment, persistence, and completion—require intentional, data-driven, and action-oriented leadership that addresses Black learner needs specifically.

To ensure success through shared ownership, institutional leaders should:

☐ **Establish partnerships with other postsecondary institutions, as well as with community organizations, to create a supportive learning community.**

Collaborative partnerships help institutions tackle new and long-standing challenges and can help build trust with Black learners. Community partnerships involving Black learners expand the reach of institutions and boost civic engagement, retention, and career readiness.[19]

☐ **Systematically monitor outcomes data, experiences, and programming impacts for Black learners.**

Publishing outcomes by race and ethnicity improves transparency to support decision-making among Black learners. Additionally, institutions can use data to target research-based and culturally relevant interventions for students who may be struggling.[20]

☐ **Engage alumni to support Black learners through outreach and mentoring, scholarships, and career exposure activities.**

Coordinated Black alumni engagement can amplify advocacy, support recruitment, enhance community service, and establish leadership pipelines.[21]

☐ **Ensure Black learner outcomes are integrated into priorities and strategic planning related to enrollment and success goals.**

Incorporating improved outcomes for Black learners in strategic planning helps institutions with commitment, accountability, and sustainability.[22] Institutions should seek legal counsel on the relevance of Supreme Court decisions to avoid over-interpretation regarding policies and practices.

☐ **Involve trustees as advocates for Black learner success.**

Board members and trustees can impact institutions' success and take an active role in seeking improved outcomes for Black learners.[23]

[19] McKay, S. Critical Engagement: Deepening Partnerships for Justice. American Sociological Association, V 50. (2022). Cultivating Regional Professional Learning Communities: A Facilitator's Guide to Supporting Student-Focused Partnerships. Achieving the Dream. (2023). [20] Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education. American Council on Education (ACE). (2020). [21] Six Pillars of Impact. Black Alumni Collective. (2023). [22] Leveraging the Strategic Planning Process to Promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Work. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). Collaborative for Educational Technologies (WCET) Frontiers. (2023).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership, Black learners will:

▶ Observe and experience authentic leadership committed to Black learner success.

▶ Receive direct support from the campus-wide community, alumni, trustees, business leaders, and community representatives.

▶ Benefit from targeted interventions because of institutions monitoring their success.

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SHARED OWNERSHIP SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **California State University** created a strategic workgroup charged with developing recommendations to advance the university system as a nationwide leader in Black student outreach, recruitment, enrollment, and success. This work provided strategic direction and integrated Black student success with the established Graduation Initiative 2025 goals.[24]

▶ **The North Carolina Community College system** has established the REACH (Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education) collaborative in which 24 colleges will set equity goals, identify needs, select pathways, provide college-wide training, and receive technical assistance.[25]

▶ **Washington & Lee** established a philanthropic effort for Black alumni to support students, organized career panels, and created affinity groups. The class of 1994 committed to a $1 million endowment.[26]

▶ **Northwestern University** conducted a holistic review of Black learner outcomes and experiences and analyzed key data-driven themes to inform actions. After reviewing recommendations and incorporating student feedback, three top priorities were identified. A steering committee was then formed to lead implementation.[27]

[23] How Can College Trustees Oversee Equitable Student Success? Higher Ed Dive. (2022). [24] Advancing Black Student Success and Elevating Black Excellence: The Chancellor's Strategic Workgroup on Black Student Success Report. California State University. (2022). [25] REACH Collaborative. NC Community Colleges Creating Success. (2021). [26] Alumni Engagement. Washington & Lee. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [27] The African American/Black Student Experience Taskforce Report. Northwestern University. (2016).

Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging

A

Institutions and systems must proactively consider the disproportionate challenges facing Black learners inside and outside the classroom by developing supports and connecting them to community resources. This will afford opportunities to provide robust advising, support to access pathways to high-wage and high-demand jobs, and assistance to address critical issues in an environment that fosters respect and a sense of belonging.

Beyond the classroom, institutions provide vital support to ensure Black learners grow and thrive in an inclusive, welcoming, and supportive environment. Comprehensive evidence-based practices and interventions promote students' academic and social-emotional growth and create a sense of belonging.

Black learners deserve to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion on college campuses, which ultimately results in greater student outcomes. Institutions have a responsibility to foster welcoming environments and create safe spaces for all students on campus.

STUDENT VOICE

Black learners have the right to attend college without feelings of discrimination.

A recent Gallup report reveals that 21% of Black learners enrolled at a postsecondary institution feel discriminated against "frequently" or "occasionally" in their program, in comparison to only 15% of all other students.[28] The likelihood of feeling discriminated against increases as the racial diversity of the student body decreases. The lack of a welcoming environment and feelings of discrimination and microaggression only inhibit student progress and success. Institutions must be intentional in creating and promoting positive environments for Black learners.

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[28] Balancing Act: The Tradeoffs and Challenges Facing Black Students in Higher Education. Lumina Foundation. (2023).

To develop academic and social supports that create a sense of belonging, institutional leaders should:

☐ Establish multiple methods to support re-enrollment of former Black learners.

Adult Black learners may have previously attended higher education and faced barriers to completion that could not be resolved. By using datasets of former students and/or using data analytics to reach community members with some college credits, institutions can offer customized messaging and enrollment support.[29]

☐ Consider innovative recruitment practices from states that for many years have banned consideration of race in admission decisions, in light of recent court rulings.

Institutions must ensure outreach materials resonate with Black learners. Strategies include collaborating with community partners, engaging with prospective Black learners on a personal level, and using a holistic review of students' backgrounds and experiences in lieu of standardized tests.[30]

☐ Establish a strong presence in diverse high schools and those with low college-going rates and develop middle school and high school partnerships as part of a strategic outreach plan to increase Black learner enrollment.

Institutions can also offer college visitation and summer bridge programs, which have been shown to have a positive impact on enrollment, persistence, and completion.[31]

☐ Offer personalized support services and peer mentoring, especially to Black learners who may be struggling academically.

Programs that mentor Black learners as they transition to college have demonstrated positive impacts.[32]

☐ Create opportunities for Black learners to build community, including for first-generation students, parenting students, LGBTQ+ students, and Veterans.

Using data, institutions can identify intersectionality and critical risk factors affecting student success and offer targeted support. Interventions targeted to first-year Black learners that aim to increase their sense of belonging have improved persistence rates.[33]

☐ Establish partnerships with faith-based and community organizations serving adults and youth to support Black learners inside and outside the classroom.

Institutions can also create train the trainer community partnerships to equip others with transparent information about affordability, campus services, and more.

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[29] Smith, J. 7 Strategies for Recruiting Adult Learners and NonTraditional Students. OHO Interactive. (2021). Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the 'NonTraditional No More' Project. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). (2012). [30] Burke, M. University of California Seeks to Share Expertise after Decades without Affirmative Action. EdSource. (2023). [31] Douglas, D. & Attewell, P. The Bridge and the Troll Underneath: Summer Bridge Programs and Degree Completion. American Journal of Education, V 121. (2014). Four Ways to Increase Diversity in Your Recruitment Efforts. Go To College Fairs. (2023). [32] Booker, K. & Brevard Jr., E. Why Mentoring Matters: African American Students and the Transition to College. Penn State Innovative Scholarship on Academic Advising. (2017). [33] Harackiewicz, J. M. & Priniski, S. J. Improving Student Outcomes in Higher Education: The Science of Targeted Intervention. National Library of Medicine. (2018).

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Academic and Social Supports, Black learners will:

▶ Become inspired to pursue postsecondary education, understand the steps to enroll, and receive support with processes.

▶ Forge relationships with peers and mentors.

▶ Feel welcomed, supported, and a part of a community.

▶ Engage with campus and community services, remain enrolled, and complete their program.

SUPPORT SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **California community colleges** hold *Black Student Success Week* with small group discussions, virtual activities, on-campus events, and an advocacy day. Colleges offer activities throughout the year designed to support Black learners.[34]

▶ **Hudson Valley Community College** is working with faith leaders to recruit students. The college held a summit, spoke to congregations, and tracked resulting enrollments.[35]

▶ **CUNY ACE (Accelerate, Complete and Engage)** is a comprehensive support program for low-income students pursuing bachelor degrees. The program combines financial assistance for tuition, transportation, and books with academic and career counseling. The first cohort experienced a four-year graduation rate 16 percentage points higher than a comparison group.[36]

▶ **Southern University-Shreveport**'s program encourages minority males to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields in which they are underrepresented. Members are provided with scholarships and stipends for tuition, books, housing and meal plans, professional development activities, mentorship, and academic support services.[37]

▶ **The Men of Color Health Awareness project** recruits men of color into health and research fields.[38]

▶ **The Rochester Institute of Technology's Men of Color Honor and Ambition program** provides personal, academic, cultural, social, professional, and leadership development to undergraduate males to positively impact academic success, increase retention, and develop successful leaders.[39]

34 Black Student Success Week. California Community Colleges. (2023). 35 St. Amour, M. Looking Abroad and to Faith Groups. Inside Higher Ed. (2020). 36 Accelerate, Complete and Engage (ACE). City University of New York (CUNY). (Retrieved November 1, 2023). 37 The Williams Center for Undergraduate Student Achievement. Southern University, Shreveport, Louisiana. (Retrieved November 1, 2023). 38 Outreach Strategies to Recruit Low-Income African American Men to Participate in Health Promotion Programs and Research: Lessons from the Men of Color Health Awareness (MOCHA) Project. American Journal of Men's Health, V 12(5). (2018). 39 Men of Color, Honor and Ambition (MOCHA). Rochester Institute of Technology. (Retrieved November 1, 2023).

L Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

Teaching practices should center students' lived experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs as grounding for learning.

Black learners' experiences in the classroom are critical to their learning, motivation, and ultimate success. They must be able to deeply engage with the content, develop a dialogue with classmates and faculty, see themselves reflected in the content/curricula, and self-reflect on their own progress.

Faculty diversity and representation have an impact on Black learner outcomes. Research shows that higher rates of faculty diversity correlate with higher graduation rates for underrepresented students.[40] Similarly, a recent study found that Black learners enrolled in STEM courses are more likely to persist after their first year when the courses are taught by Black instructors.[41] Institutions are urged to diversify their faculty. This will, in turn, enable more diverse curricula and faculty representation that more closely aligns with Black learner communities.

To strengthen learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners, institutional leaders should:

☐ **Review hiring, recruitment, and retention practices to diversify faculty, staff, and administration.**

Although Black learners represent 12.5% of undergraduate students across all postsecondary institutions, only 6%[43] of full-time faculty members are Black.

☐ **Continuously train faculty on culturally relevant pedagogical practices.**

Institutions should also refresh curricula and assess inclusive classroom practices for Black learners.[44]

☐ **Offer paid internships and experiential learning opportunities through classes.**

Students that participate in career-connected learning not only have improved completion outcomes, but also experience longer-term civic engagement and career advancement.[45]

☐ **Form a student advisory review board offering Black learners pay and/or credit to enable them to inform strategies and implementation.**

These opportunities not only allow Black learners to authentically inform policy and practice but gain professional experience.

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[40] Stout, R. et al. The Relationship Between Faculty Diversity and Graduation Rates in Higher Education. Intercultural Education, V 29(3). (2018). [41] Price, J. The Effect of Instructor Race and Gender on Student Persistence in STEM Fields. The Economics of Education Review, V 29(6). (2010). [42] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys, 1976 and 1980. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment Survey" (IPEDS-EF:90); and IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2021. [43] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2020 through Spring 2022. [44] Kachhani, S. et al. 5 Principles as Pathways to Inclusive Teaching. Inside Higher Education. (2020). [45] Gavillet, R. Experiential learning and its impact on college students. Texas Education Review, V 7. (2018).

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a Result of Learner-Centered Teaching Practices, Black learners will:

▶ Feel valued and acknowledged in the classroom setting.

▶ Contribute to campus-wide culture and classroom practices.

▶ Understand the leadership and faculty commitment to the success of Black learners.

▶ Engage with faculty and local organizations to deepen learning, grow academically, and increase skill development.

TEACHING SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **SUNY DEISJ Fellows** is a new faculty development program. The fellows will provide content expertise and faculty mentoring to inform the new diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice (DEISJ) requirement in general education courses.[46]

▶ As part of its strategic planning, the **University of Michigan** created a Collegiate Postdoctoral Fellowship Program to recruit faculty with a demonstrated commitment to diversity.

▶ **Washington State University's Tri-Cities** Equity Academy helps faculty remediate equity gaps in their courses and develop practices to better serve Black learners and other underrepresented students in their classrooms.
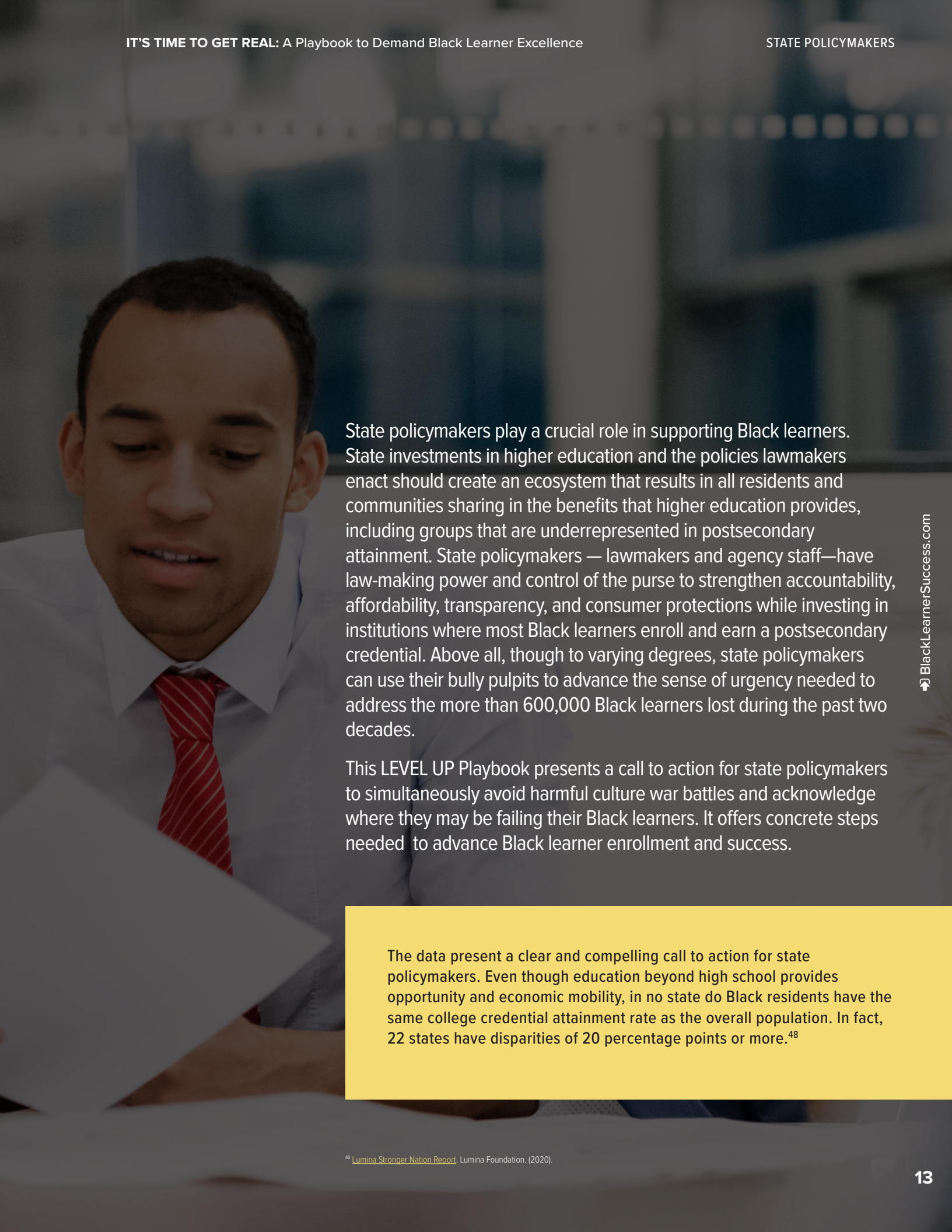
▶ North Carolina State University developed a common framework and resources for faculty designed to provide an inclusive educational experience for Black learners and other underrepresented students. The framework notes "the demonstrated skill of faculty to practice cultural competence in the classroom is a critical aspect of student retention, success and connectedness to the material."[47]

46 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice Fellows. State University of New York (SUNY). (2023). 47 NC State Launches Cultural Competence Training for Faculty. North Carolina State University. (2019).

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STATE POLICYMAKERS
Commitment to
Black Learner Excellence

State policymakers must commit to a supportive policy environment to ensure postsecondary education is accessible and affordable for Black learners.

State policymakers play a crucial role in supporting Black learners. State investments in higher education and the policies lawmakers enact should create an ecosystem that results in all residents and communities sharing in the benefits that higher education provides, including groups that are underrepresented in postsecondary attainment. State policymakers — lawmakers and agency staff—have law-making power and control of the purse to strengthen accountability, affordability, transparency, and consumer protections while investing in institutions where most Black learners enroll and earn a postsecondary credential. Above all, though to varying degrees, state policymakers can use their bully pulpits to advance the sense of urgency needed to address the more than 600,000 Black learners lost during the past two decades.

This LEVEL UP Playbook presents a call to action for state policymakers to simultaneously avoid harmful culture war battles and acknowledge where they may be failing their Black learners. It offers concrete steps needed to advance Black learner enrollment and success.

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The data present a clear and compelling call to action for state policymakers. Even though education beyond high school provides opportunity and economic mobility, in no state do Black residents have the same college credential attainment rate as the overall population. In fact, 22 states have disparities of 20 percentage points or more.[48]

48 Lumina Stronger Nation Report. Lumina Foundation. (2020).
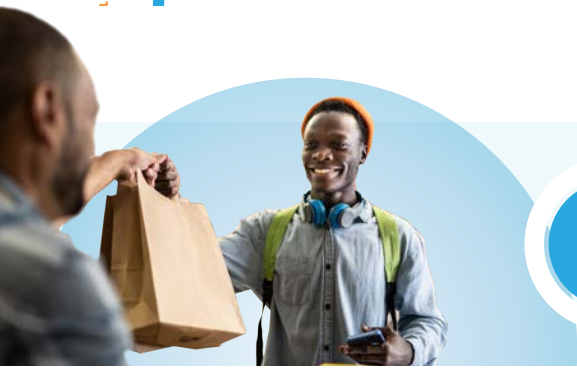
R REAL Transparency and True Affordability

We must focus not only on increasing need-based aid, but also on making more visible the bottom-line cost students will pay, based on a realistic assessment of what students can reasonably afford.

States that strategically align all aspects of postsecondary finance are more likely to target funding where it is needed, support efforts that meet state goals, avoid duplication, maximize efficiency, and reward the success of Black learners. State policymakers play a critical role in investing in student financial aid and in supporting public institutions through fiscal appropriations and the interplay with tuition policy. States' higher education finance decisions have significant implications for equitable student access and outcomes.

State disinvestments in higher education drive tuition increases at public institutions and escalate student debt.[49] And, while federal-and state-funded financial aid can offset the price students pay, they face costs beyond tuition and gaps in financing their education. Black learners face disparities in affordability, such as in the net price they pay as a share of their median income. The net price of attending a four-year college requires 25% of income for Black families in 36 of 38 states with measurable data, compared with 16 states for white students.[50] State policymakers must commit to reasonable tuition policies, well-supported institutions, and flexible financial aid programs that support nontuition costs to ensure more Black learners have equitable access to higher education and economic mobility.

STUDENT VOICE

Black learners need support to complete financial aid applications.

National survey data reveal that a lack of information and concerns about debt, affordability, or eligibility are among the reasons Black high school seniors did not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).[51] A growing number of states are promoting FAFSA completion by setting high school graduation requirements and/or supporting increased awareness. To reach these goals, states must work to streamline this process and provide more resources for students completing the form.
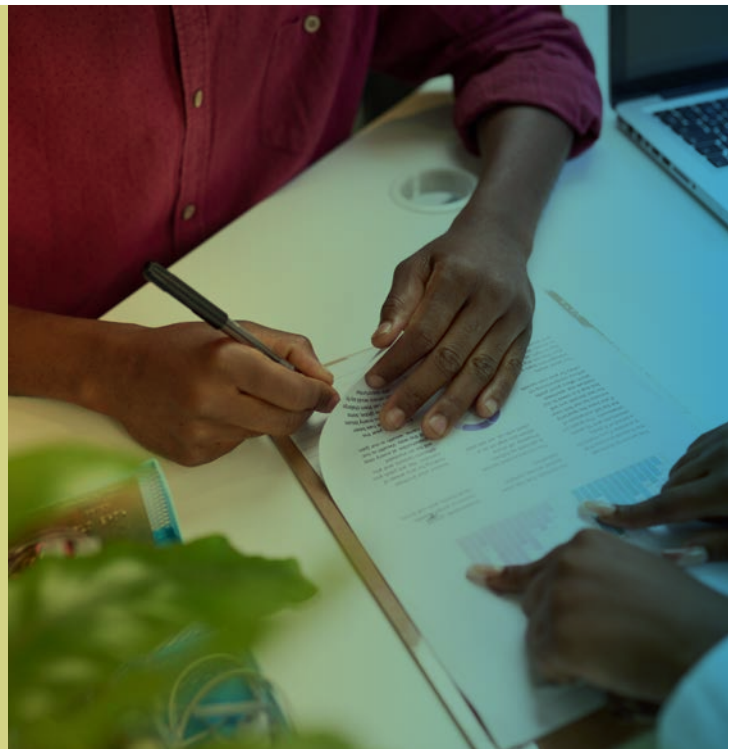
[49] Basaldua, F. Connecting Disinvestment in Public Higher Education, Rising Tuition and Student Debt. American Sociological Association, V 51(2). (2023). [50] Mitchell, M. Rising Costs Making It Hard for Students, Particularly of Color, to Afford College. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). (2019). [51] Bahr, S. et al. Stats in Brief: Why Didn't Students Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)? Institute for Education Statistics (IES). (2018).

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To provide real transparency and true affordability, state policymakers should:

☐ **Develop or refine state funding formulas to explicitly pay public institutions more for the enrollment, retention, and completion of underserved learners, including Black learners.**[52]

State policymakers should also provide clear and consistent financial incentives and funds for capacity-building for institutions that serve the most Black learners as well as increased support for institutions to improve outcomes over time.

☐ **Protect the authority to manage tuition increases at the state level, particularly at institutions where most Black learners enroll.**

Reductions in state funding and corresponding tuition increases correlate to lower enrollments, especially among students of color.[53]

☐ **Expand access for Black learners from low-wealth backgrounds by investing in need-based grants.**

This type of aid is positively correlated with improved retention and completion.[54]

☐ **Leverage federal policies, funding, and programs to expand the reach of state-funded affordability efforts, such as free college programs.**

Universal free tuition or promise programs allow for simple messages to students about the affordability of college. These initiatives are gaining popularity in states, and free college programs positively impact college enrollment, persistence, and degree completion.[55]

☐ **Create or scale up programs to reduce food and housing insecurities and child care costs for Black learners.**

Black learners are more likely to express concerns about meeting basic needs and are more likely to be parenting students.[56] Tremendous momentum exists across the nation to provide state-level support to address students' food and housing insecurities.[57]

☐ **Increase awareness about the value of formal learning beyond high school and ways to address affordability challenges. State policymakers should also support students with completion of the FAFSA.**

A growing number of states require or encourage completion of the form for high school graduation.[58]

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[52] Higher Ed Budgets for the Post COVID Era: Now's Our Chance to Do This Right. Lumina Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2020). New Analysis Finds You Get What You Pay For: Higher Education Funding Impacts Student Success. State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). (2021). [53] Mitchell, M. Rising Costs Making It Hard for Students, Particularly of Color, to Afford College. Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). (2019). [54] Long, B. & Castleman, B. Looking Beyond Enrollment: The Causal Effect of Need-Based Grants on College Access, Persistence, and Graduation. (2013). [55] Bell, E. Estimating the Spillover Effects of the Tennessee Promise: Exploring Changes in Tuition, Fees, and Enrollment. Journal of Student Financial Aid, V 50. (2021). [56] Olaniyan, M. et al. Two Pandemics: Racial Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity Among College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice. (2023). [57] Walizer, L. States Strategies for Addressing College Students' Basic Needs. Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). (2020). [58] Smalley, A. Promoting FAFSA to Get More Students into Higher Education. National Council for State Legislatures (2021).

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Real Transparency and True Affordability, Black learners will:

▸ Understand the potential benefits and true costs of attaining a credential.

▸ Attend institutions incentivized to improve support for Black learners.

▸ Receive sufficient financial support to meet their educational costs and basic needs.

AFFORDABILITY SPOTLIGHTS

▸ **Illinois** has enacted legislation to establish a public university funding model that is grounded in equity and adequacy. The statutory charge calls for a data-driven approach that adequately, equitably, and stably funds public universities, including a direction to remediate disparities in access, affordability, and completion for underrepresented students.[59]

▸ **Twelve states across the nation,** from nearly all regions and regardless of political party control, have enacted FAFSA completion policies to require or encourage high school seniors to file the form.[60] Most states have developed a multipronged effort with statewide outreach, student support, K–12 training, data sharing, and highlighted best practices.

▸ **Louisiana** implemented outcomes-based funding in 2010 and has incorporated student-centered adjustments into the model. Institutions that improve credential completion among underrepresented minority (URM) students and achieve URM enrollments above the state average are compensated to provide them with additional capacity to improve outcomes.[61]

▸ **Minnesota** offers comprehensive investments to address affordability. In addition to a robust need-based aid program, the state invested in housing, emergency aid, student parents, and student hunger programs.[62] New Jersey has created an online navigation tool to connect college students to basic needs resources.[63]

▸ **Washington** has a need-based grant entitlement program that covers short-term credentials and degrees, serves low- and middle-income students, and provides generous award amounts.[64]

59 Illinois Commission on Equitable Public University Funding. Illinois Board of Higher Education. (2023). 60 Four More States Adopt Universal FAFSA; Total Comes to 12. National College Attainment Network (NCAN). (2023). 61 Outcomes-Based Funding Formula. Louisiana Board of Regents (BOR). (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 62 Legislature Takes Bold Action to Make College Affordable and Support Students' Basic Needs. LEADMN. (2023). 63 New Jersey Offers Free Online Tool to Connect College Students Facing Basic Needs Insecurities to Resources. Diverse Issues in Higher Education. (2023). 64 Washington Lawmakers Want to Beef Up State Aid for College Students. The Seattle Times. (February 2023).

E Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership

At each level—federal, state, system, and institutional—we must create mechanisms to support Black learners and ensure shared accountability for their success in and beyond their postsecondary experiences.

Through stronger economies and healthier families and communities, all residents in a state benefit when Black learner excellence is embraced. Building a strong state environment for the sustained success of Black learners requires shared accountability to provide optimal experiences in postsecondary education and beyond. State policymakers can set the tone, establish the data infrastructure, convene stakeholders, elevate student voices, and support institutions.

States should ensure Black learners have opportunities to enroll in any public institution, complete a valuable program of study, and be financially better off having invested time and money in their education. If every working Black adult with a high school diploma or equivalent earned as much as the average Black college graduate with at least an associate degree, their collective additional earnings would equal an estimated $222 billion more. This increase would not only significantly improve Black learners' financial stability and wealth-building but would also bolster the overall state economy. Skilled workers would be available to fill jobs, and reinvestment in the economy would occur with increased disposable income.[65]

Grappling with the inequities in education systems and the adverse impacts on Black learners, states must prioritize policymaking decisions that are evidence-based and data-driven. At the same time, they must act now to reverse the decades-long trend of divesting in institutions and programs that serve Black learners.

To ensure success through shared ownership, state policymakers should:

☐ **Create longitudinal, multisector data systems and publish annual, institution-level outcomes and disparities for Black learners.**

State policymakers should also use the findings and reports in hearings and dedicated public meetings to examine how the state is serving Black learners and how the state's policies, practices, and regulations impede or promote Black student success.[66]

☐ **Calculate, publish broadly, and widely use data that measure the extent of the decline in Black learner enrollment during the past 20 years at the sector and institutional levels.**

Understanding the state economic impact of reversing these trends can anchor a statewide focus on Black learner excellence and create a sense of shared responsibility across systems and institutions.

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To ensure success through shared ownership, state policymakers should:

☐ **Develop minimum standards for program quality and financial aid eligibility.**

State policymakers should also publish watchlists for programs that have poor graduation rates for Black learners or graduate them with debt that is difficult to be repaid within a reasonable period.[67]

☐ **Capture Black learner voices in policy discussions and processes to achieve more equitable outcomes.**

This will require systematically including their perspectives and experiences during policy development and implementation. Student surveys, focus groups, interviews, and designated seats on committees and advisory groups can ensure student voices inform policy and practice reforms.[68]

☐ **Facilitate regular, trust-building convenings with leaders from the Black community.**

State policymakers should engage with small and large business leaders and associations to discuss Black learner outcomes and the importance of centering excellence.[69]

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership, Black learners will:

▸ Be protected from postsecondary programs and institutions with low demonstrated return on investment.

▸ Be recognized throughout state policy with unequivocally clear investments and consequences for Black learner excellence, particularly at institutions where most Black learners traditionally access higher education opportunities.

▸ Be centered and included in policy development and practice reforms, thus increasing the likelihood of their success.

[67] Meyer, K. Higher Education Accountability: Measuring Costs, Benefits, and Financial Value. Brookings Institute. (2023). [68] Michener, J. & Ford, T.N. Engaging Voice to Support Racially Equitable Policy. The Commonwealth Fund. (2022). [69] Building Cross-Sector Partnerships to Support Career and Technical Education Pathways: A Playbook for State Policymakers. AdvanceCTE. (2018).

SHARED OWNERSHIP SPOTLIGHTS

▸ **California** authorized a cradle-to-career, consumer-facing [longitudinal data system](). A diverse group of community leaders, educators, and researchers is developing the data infrastructure.[70]

▸ **New Jersey** enacted legislation to protect [students from tuition increases]() deemed unreasonably high, based on anticipated wages and the ability to repay. Agencies are required to develop minimum performance standards for short-term career programs.[71]

▸ **Oregon** created an advisory group composed of members of the Black community that developed a [statewide education plan for Black learners]() from early childhood through postsecondary education.[72]

▸ **Washington** invested $22 million to create [community partnerships]() supporting underrepresented students to expand enrollment and credential completion.[73] In addition, the state established a [permanent legislative committee]()—the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee—to recommend strategies to state education agencies and develop policy reforms.[74]
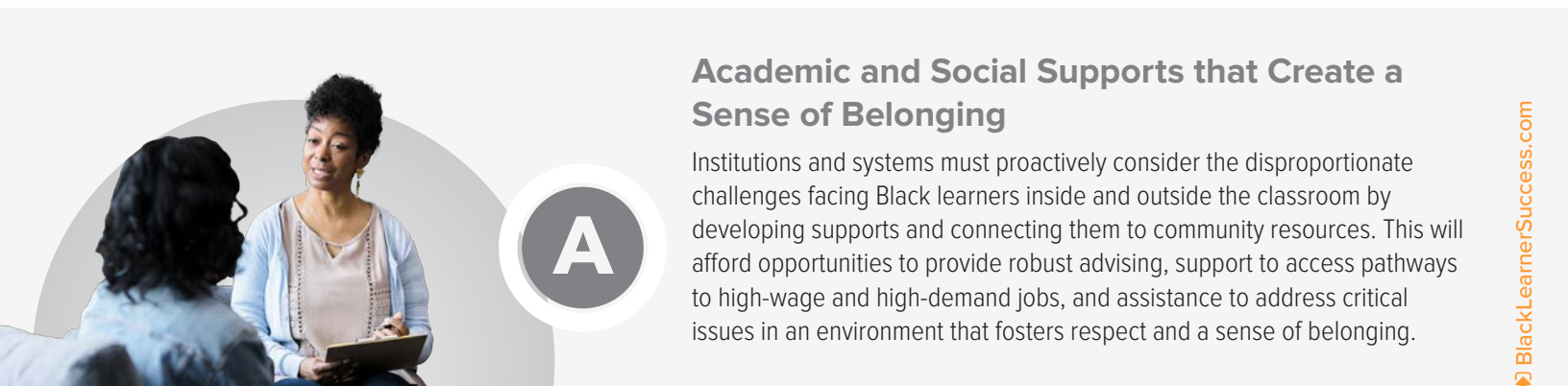
Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging

A

Institutions and systems must proactively consider the disproportionate challenges facing Black learners inside and outside the classroom by developing supports and connecting them to community resources. This will afford opportunities to provide robust advising, support to access pathways to high-wage and high-demand jobs, and assistance to address critical issues in an environment that fosters respect and a sense of belonging.

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State policymakers have the power to own the crisis that is the loss of 600,000 Black learners from higher education. They can do this with a systematic review and dismantling of the clear obstacles that Black learners face. States can create higher expectations for Black learner excellence that reflect the dignity of Black learners and the value of their workforce preparedness to state economies. By making evidence-based, state-supported interventions and state policies the default path for all learners, Black learners can be protected from biases and off ramps that harm or, even worse, end their opportunities to earn a postsecondary credential.

Black learners benefit from the opportunity to access any quality postsecondary pathway that meets their academic and career goals. Yet they are underrepresented in higher education enrollments across all sectors, with particularly pronounced gaps among selective four-year public and private institutions. For-profit colleges is the only sector where Black learners are accessing higher education at greater rates than other demographic groups. They accounted for 29% of undergraduates at private for-profit institutions in fall 2018, a percentage more than twice as high as at public four-year colleges.[75] States must ensure their policies support equal opportunities for Black learners to access a variety of quality and affordable pathways.

State policymakers have also developed education and career reentry programs for incarcerated individuals. Although nearly half the U.S. population has earned a postsecondary credential, only 13% of incarcerated individuals have done so.[76] Black incarcerated individuals account for nearly 39% of the correctional population.[77] Education is critical to addressing disparities in incarceration rates.

[70] Monarrez, T. & Washington, K. Racial and Ethnic Representation in Postsecondary Education. The Urban Institute. (2020). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (Spring 2022). [71] Governor Murphy Signs Bill to Protect Students from Unsustainable Debt After Completing Post-Secondary Job Training. New Jersey Office of Governor Phil Murphy. (2022). [72] Black/African American Student Success. Oregon Department of Education. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [73] Regional Challenge Grants: Moving the Attainment Needle. Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [74] Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [75] Monarrez, T. & Washington, K. Racial and Ethnic Representation in Postsecondary Education. The Urban Institute. (2020). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). (Spring 2022). [76] Harlow, C.W. Educational and Correctional Populations. Bureau of Justice. (2003). [77] Inmate Race. Federal Bureau of Prisons. (2023).

To develop academic and social supports that create a sense of belonging, state policymakers should:

Develop a standing cross-agency task force focused on understanding Black learner outcomes.

The group should research the barriers to Black learner enrollment and success and study strategies for systematically removing them. It should elevate what is working, including efforts by historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).[78] The state can then target financial support to adopt what is working.

Require foundational policies to ensure students can seamlessly transfer from an associate degree program to a bachelor's degree program.

States can develop key policies, such as common course numbering, guaranteed two- to four-year transfer pathways, and acceptance of general education course work, to support effective transfer.[80]

Develop policies and systems to automatically admit and support students without having them complete applications.

State policymakers should track Black learner data from application to acceptance, enrollment, retention, and completion. They should also determine where students are most likely to disengage and target responses and interventions accordingly.[82]

Create statewide early awareness campaigns that leverage relationships with trusted partners in Black communities.

These campaigns should be supported with state resources and include career exploration opportunities, campus visitations, peer mentoring, and guidance on admissions, scholarship, housing, and financial aid processes.[84]

Strengthen incarcerated education and prison reentry educational opportunities.

State policymakers should request a status update on these programs from their higher education governing agency and department of correction. Individuals who participate in any type of educational program while in prison are 43 percent less likely to return to prison.[86]

Offer opportunities for high school students to complete college credits, including workforce-oriented courses and paid apprenticeships.[79]

State policymakers can also commission a review of the impact of credit mobility policies (e.g., dual credit, credit for prior learning, and transfer) on Black learners and other underrepresented students.

Support the equity-minded redesign of developmental education with a goal to eliminate the need for noncredit developmental courses.

Equity-centered developmental education reforms include access to college-level math and English, targeted and tiered supports, contextualized learning, and coordinated support.[81]

Develop statewide campaigns to reach adult learners who previously attempted college, particularly through credible and trusted voices in the Black community.

State-based adult reengagement programs should seek input directly from adult learners and create materials, programs, and activities tailored to meet adult learners' needs and encourage enrollment.[83]

Support robust advising, mentoring, and community-building programs.

States should support advising strategies that include holistic interventions, proactive communication, and comprehensive case management to improve student outcomes.[85]

Expand on-campus child care options for students and fund child care vouchers so Black learners have access to high-quality child care.

Importantly, states have oversight of eligibility rules for federal child care benefits. States have supported access to child care on postsecondary campuses and developed scholarships for students to pay for child care.[87]

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[78] Seymour, S. & Ray, J. Gallup-Purdue Poll. (2015). [79] Moore, C. Making Equity Intentional: The Role of State Policy in Removing Barriers for Underserved Students to Access Dual Enrollment Opportunities. HCM Strategists. (2019). [80] The State of State Transfer Policy: A Typology to Evaluate Transfer and Recognition of Learning Policies. HCM Strategists. (2021). [81] Bickerstaff, S. Five Principles for Reforming Developmental Education: A Review of the Evidence. Community College Research Center (CCRC). (2022). [82] Guaranteed Admissions Policies Overview. Education Commission of the States. (2022). [83] Evaluating Adult Promise: How States Support Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education. Mathematica. (2021). [84] Glaser, E. & Warick, C. What does the research say about early awareness strategies for college access and success? National College Access Network (NCAN). (2016). [85] Feygin, A. et al. Advising for College Success: A Systematic Review of the Evidence. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and College Completion Network. (2022). [86] Bender, K. Education opportunities in prison are key to reducing crime. Center for American Progress (CAP). (2018). [87] Eckerson, E. et al. Child Care for Parents in School: A State-by-State Assessment. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). (2016).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Academic and Social Supports, Black learners will:

▶ Receive early information and knowledge on how to navigate enrollment processes.

▶ Receive automatic admission to public institutions.

▶ Receive personalized outreach, advising, and coaching.

▶ Benefit from a nurturing community alongside other Black learners and professionals supporting their academic progress and social-emotional well-being.

▶ Have access to postsecondary educational opportunities known to benefit Black learners in high school or those who are justice-involved.

▶ Earn more low-cost college credits while still in high school or prison.

▶ Have an easier time transferring from two- to four-year colleges.

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SUPPORT SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **California** allows community colleges to include prison course costs in their standard budgets and use the universal fee waiver.[88] The participation and performance of incarcerated students are strong. This is a critical strategy, because 28.5% of the state's male incarcerated individuals are African American.[89]

▶ **Idaho** does not make high school graduates apply to public higher education. It uses its integrated data systems to proactively admit them to public institutions. [91]

▶ **Indiana** created the "You Can. Go Back." campaign to reach former students and offer support to complete what they started.[91]

▶ **Kentucky** commissioned a study of dual credit outcomes and found participating students were more likely to persist, achieve higher grade point averages, and be college ready. However, students of color were less likely to participate in the program.[92]

▶ **New York** funds higher education adult opportunity programs and training centers, which focus on GED preparation, job training, etc.[93]

▶ **Tennessee** created a statewide mentoring program for financial aid recipients. Volunteers support students with navigating enrollment and meeting Promise program requirements.[94] Texas leveraged its state-funded work-study program to create a mentorship program to improve completion and career readiness.[95]

88 Paynter, B. California's Prison Education System Is Yielding Impressive Results. Future of Philanthropy. (2018). 89 Hayes, J. California's Prison Population. Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). (2019). 90 Direct Admissions. Next Steps Idaho. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 91 You Can. Go Back. Campaign. Indiana Commission for Higher Education. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 92 Dual Credit & Student Success: The Effect of High School Dual Credit on Educational Outcomes at Kentucky Public Universities. Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education. (2020). 93 Educational Opportunity Centers. SUNY University Center for Academic and Workforce Development. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 94 Statewide Mentoring. TN Higher Education Commission & Student Assistance Corporation. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 95 2022-23 Program Guidelines Work-Study Student Mentorship Program. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023).

Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

Teaching practices should center students' lived experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs as grounding for learning.

State policymakers can help create an environment where quality programs and instruction lead directly to student learning. For example, states can invest in faculty development with culturally relevant practices and programs to strengthen the teacher/ professor pipeline and retention. States can also enact critical policies to ensure Black learners are able to access and complete college programs aligned to their academic preparation and career goals.

To strengthen learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners, state policymakers should:

☐ **Support the creation of equity-minded teaching centers of excellence that support faculty development.**

Centers can provide professional development and training to faculty from one or more institutions.[96]

☐ **Invest in the recruitment, growth, retention, and support of all faculty, particularly underrepresented faculty, to center Black learners in the classroom through an understanding of lived experiences.**

A higher percentage of underrepresented racial minority (URM) faculty is significantly related to increased URM student graduation rates.[97]

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[96] Policymakers can explore equity-minded teaching centers of excellence and request the exploration or establishment of something similar in their state. Examples include The Center for the Advancement of Teaching Excellence, University of Illinois-Chicago; Teaching & Learning Center, University of California-Santa Cruz; Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning, University of Connecticut. [97] Stout, R. et al. The Relationship Between Faculty Diversity and Graduation Rates in Higher Education. Intercultural Education. V 29(3). (March 2018).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Learner-Centered Teaching Practices, Black learners will:

▶ Benefit from equity-designed curriculum and teaching practices.

▶ Believe their success is the top priority of their institution's faculty and administration.

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TEACHING SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **Washington State** enacted legislation creating a permanent faculty professional development program focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism. In addition, the Washington community college system created a college faculty consortium that is working to change teaching and writing assessments to be free of negative racial biases.[98]

▶ **Public university systems** are collaborating to improve credential completion and social mobility by addressing several key imperatives, including equity and learning. The initiative is seeking to shift to a student-centric focus and share ways to teach students by recognizing individual learning and social-emotional needs and advancing equity in academic and experiential curricula.[99]

98 RCW 28B.10.145: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Antiracism. Washington State Legislature. (2023). Anti-Racist Curriculum Initiative. State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 99 About the Power of Systems. National Association of System Heads (NASH). (2021).

LEVEL UP

FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

Commitment to Black Learner Excellence

Federal policymakers must commit to focus its capacity to collect data, produce research, and elevate priorities through policy, regulation, and investment in a postsecondary system that values all learners and unapologetically serves Black learners well.

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Americans with postsecondary credentials provide skills and knowledge needed to maintain the nation's labor force and enable the United States to compete in the world economy. Indeed, this partially explains why 94% of members in the 118th Congress hold a four-year degree.[100] To this end, federal policymakers—congressional members and agency staff—play a crucial and often underappreciated role in supporting Black learners and their success. Additionally, they have the authority and financial means to carry out this important role.

Federal policymakers have a long history of supporting higher education. They have invested nearly $75 billion in postsecondary education, with most of the funding focused on financial aid.[101] While the federal government oversees student financial aid, federal policymakers also have the authority to enforce civil rights laws, maintain large data systems (with disaggregated data by race and ethnicity at the institutional level), support higher education research, and administer policies and programs that directly support Black learners.

This LEVEL UP Playbook presents a call to action for federal policymakers to acknowledge where and how federal policies and programs are failing Black learners and take the necessary steps to advance Black learner enrollment and success.

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The data present a clear and compelling call to action for federal policymakers. Black learners' lack of success jeopardizes not only their individual freedom and well-being, but also the nation's national security and economic prosperity. More directly, however, federal policymakers have a clear incentive to increase Black learner success. During the course of an average lifetime, an individual with a four-year-equivalent degree provides federal, state, and local governments with $471,000 more in income, payroll, property, and sales tax revenue — more than twice what it would collect in lifetime taxes from a high school graduate lacking a college degree.[102] We must ensure Black Americans have equal opportunity to access and complete higher education credentials to contribute to the nation's vital labor force.

[100] Schaeffer, K. Nearly All Members of the 118th Congress Have a Bachelor's Degree. Pew Trusts. (2023). [101] Trostel, P.A. Two Decades of Change in Federal and State Higher Education Funding. Pew Trusts. (2019). [102] High Returns: Public Investments in Higher Education.
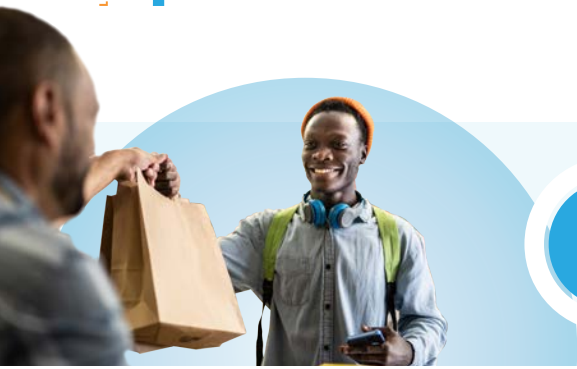
(R) REAL Transparency and True Affordability

We must focus not only on increasing need-based aid, but also on making more visible the bottom-line cost students will pay, based on a realistic assessment of what students can reasonably afford.

The federal government supports higher education research and maintains expansive data systems. It also manages the national aid and student loan delivery systems and has developed public-facing tools to bolster transparency. The data and delivery systems include the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which houses data reported by institutions participating in federal financial aid; the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS), which houses data on federal student loan borrowers; and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is used to collect data on financial aid applicants. These systems interface with other large federal systems to verify eligibility for financial aid. An immense opportunity exists to expand the use of these systems to improve delivery and monitor results.

Higher education costs remain too high. Most federal spending on higher education supports affordability, with $26 billion expended on the federal Pell Grant in 2022.[103]

Other critical affordability-related programs include Veterans' benefits, student and parent loans, and smaller campus-based programs. These financial aid investments are crucial for Black learners. More than 72% of full-time Black learners rely, in -part, on the federal Pell Grant.[104]

The awareness and transparency tools and policies the federal government supports, such as the College Scorecard and gainful employment regulations, aim to protect students and arm them with quality information. Because Black learners are more likely to attend for-profit and lower-resourced public institutions than other racial/ethnic groups,[105] federal efforts focused on quality and awareness are essential to supporting Black learners in their choice of college and program of study.

STUDENT VOICE

Black learners need more affordable college options.

Affordability continues to be a key barrier to college enrollment and is frequently cited as a major reason why Black learners drop out. According to a recent Gallup survey, only 39% of Black students who want to pursue a postsecondary degree believe they can afford to do so. Federal policymakers must make college affordability a priority.*

* Voices of Gen Z: Perspectives on U.S. Education, Wellbeing and the Future. (2023). Walton Family Foundation and Gallup.

103 Trends in Student Aid. The College Board. (2023). 104 Percentage of full-time, full-year undergraduates receiving financial aid, 2015-16. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). 105 Monarrez, T. & Washington, K. Racial and Ethnic Representation in Postsecondary Education. The Urban Institute. (2020).

To provide real transparency and true affordability, federal policymakers should:

☐ Continue strengthening the purchasing power of federal Pell Grants with appropriate protections against programs with low return on investment.

Allowing Pell Grants to keep pace with cost increases and cover the costs of short-term training programs will help more low-income individuals access industry-recognized training and prepare for higher-paying jobs.[106]

☐ Expand access to federal campus-based aid programs for community college students and double the investment in these programs.

Federal policymakers should also redesign the formula to improve equitable distribution of campus-based aid. Campus-based programs, including the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and Federal Work-Study programs, incentivize institutions to expand need-based grant and work programs for students.[107]

☐ Monitor and address the gaps between Black and white student loan borrowers regarding initial debt levels, default rates, and total repayment amounts and revise policies accordingly.

Black borrowers owe $25,000 more on average than their white peers and owe more four years after graduation than they borrowed.[108] Federal policymakers should consider updating Parent Plus Loan programs so families and institutions share debt servicing obligations when the student graduates on time but remains unable to find gainful employment.

☐ Require institutions to provide clear and consistent financial aid award letters and finance plans.

Implement a universal financial aid offer with standardized language to be used across institutions. Currently, institutions voluntarily use the College Financing Plan tool to provide students with the financial aid award in a standardized and simplified manner that is easily comparable.[109]

☐ Work with states to develop agreements with the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services to share information across programs.

Using federal data systems, auto-qualify eligible students for federal means-tested benefits across programs regardless of the administering agency.[110]

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[106] Stratford, M. Senate Education Committee Weighs Short-Term Pell Grants. Politico. (2023). [107] Campus-Based Aid Allocation Formula. National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA). (2019). [108] Hanson, M. Student Loan Debt by Race. Education Data Initiative. 2023. Black College Graduates and the Student Debt Gap. White House Initiative. (2016). [109] The College Financing Plan. US Department of Education. (2023). [110] Sadler, C. & Park, C. Better Data Sharing for Benefits Delivery. New America. (2022).

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Real Transparency and True Affordability, Black learners will:

▶ Have an equal opportunity to afford postsecondary training.

▶ Have access to tailored guidance that is driven by data and information, especially as it relates to student outcomes and paying for college.

▶ Be supported with student loan borrowing and offered repayment benefits.

AFFORDABILITY SPOTLIGHTS

▶ The recent overhaul of the FAFSA application streamlines the process and expands access to Pell Grants, starting with the 2024–25 application.[111] As Black learners are more likely to receive the Pell Grant, these improvements are critical.[112]

▶ **The U.S. Department of Education** updated its student loan management provisions to increase the accountability of servicers, allow borrowers to access their loans through a centralized website, and reduce disruptions from account transfers.[113] This is especially important to ensure Black borrowers, half of whom report that their loan debt is more than their net worth, can access repayment benefits.[114]

▶ Since 2009, **the Internal Revenue Service** data retrieval match **process** has improved, reducing both the number of FAFSA questions students and parents must complete and the burden of providing verification of eligibility.[115]

[111] (GEN-23-11) FAFSA Simplification Act Changes for Implementation in 2024-25. U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid. (2023). [112] Percentage of full-time, full-year undergraduates receiving financial aid, 2015–16. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). [113] Biden-Harris Administration Releases Final Rules that Strengthen Accountability for Colleges and Consumer Protection for Students. U.S. Department of Education. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [114] Student Loan Debt by Race. Education Data Initiative. 2023. [115] (GEN-23-34) Access and Use of Federal Tax Information (FTI) for Federal Student Aid Programs Beginning with the 2024-25 FAFSA Processing Cycle. U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid. (2023).

E Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership

At each level—federal, state, system, and institutional—we must create mechanisms to support Black learners and ensure shared accountability for their success in and beyond their postsecondary experiences.

The federal government and state governments each provides substantial funding to support higher education.[116] The federal government is uniquely positioned to collaborate with states and institutions through funding, policy, and accountability efforts. Federal-state partnerships—whether through funding and/or regulation—can support national and regional workforce and attainment goals and improve affordability and equitable access to higher education.

Congressional lawmakers and agency staff can create environments that strengthen programs designed to bolster Black learners' success. For example, federal support to strengthen historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) amplifies opportunities for Black learners nationwide; Black learners account for 75% of total enrollments in these institutions.[117] Federal funding includes investments to expand HBCUs' research and development infrastructure and capacity.

To ensure success through shared ownership, federal policymakers should:

☐ **Ask the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine the impact of federal policies on underserved learners, including Black learners.**

As an example, GAO was directed to examine disparate disciplinary practices involving Black learners in K–12 education.[118]

☐ **Develop new federal legislation that combines value-based accountability with support for evidence-based capacity-building.**

Efforts should focus on the institutions where most underserved and Black learners enroll.

☐ **Incentivize states to develop or refine strategic financing formulas to reduce disparate impacts on Black learners.**

Federal policymakers should also establish a federal-state partnership with clear outcomes, incentives, and expect minimal investments.[119]

☐ **Expect, or perhaps even require, institutions receiving federal funds to maintain a minimum representation of Pell Grant students.**

Federal policymakers should provide incentives to colleges and universities that improve access and completion rates for underserved learners.

☐ **Allow accrediting bodies to protect institutions from political overreach.**

Accrediting bodies should keep their attention on quality and fraud-free education with equitable outcomes for all students.[120]

☐ **Incentivize accrediting bodies at both the institution and program levels to strengthen educator preparation programs.**

Institutions must produce teachers prepared to teach diverse learners, especially Black learners.[121]

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[116] Two Decades of Change in Federal and State Higher Education Funding. Pew. (2019). [117] Fast Facts: Historically Black Colleges and Universities. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023). [118] K–12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys and Students with Disabilities. General Accountability Office (GAO). (2018). [119] How to Make College More Affordable and Recession-Proof. Bipartisan Policy Center. (2022). [120] Kelchen, R. Higher Education Accreditation and the Federal Government. Urban Institute. (2017). [121] Kelchen, R. Higher Education Accreditation and the Federal Government. Urban Institute. (2017).

☐ **Invite Black learners, and other underserved learners, to advise Congress at hearings and briefings.**

This provides formal and informal learning opportunities for learners and allows them to inform decision-making.

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership, Black learners will:

▶ Have greater awareness of postsecondary outcomes by being able to compare area of study with market outcomes and employment opportunities.

▶ Be centered and included in congressional discussions, thus increasing the likelihood that the resultant law or rule is successful.

▶ Be protected from fraudulent practices by for-profit institutions and have access to quality educational programs. For-profit colleges have been found to practice predatory inclusion in Black communities. Two-thirds of Black learners who borrowed at these institutions defaulted on their student loans.[122]

▶ More frequently receive instruction from teachers (and faculty) who graduated from educator preparation programs that intentionally address the needs of Black learners.

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SHARED OWNERSHIP SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **The former Leveraging Educational Assistance Program** can serve as a blueprint to develop a strong federal-state partnership that expands access to underrepresented and low-income students.[123]

▶ Recent changes to gainful employment regulations ensure that 32,000 federally supported career training programs require graduates to have an affordable level of debt and receive an earnings premium to qualify for federal financial aid.[124]

▶ Lawmakers established a congressional caucus focused on predominantly Black institutions to educate policymakers on the important role these institutions play in serving low-income, first-generation, and minority students.[125]

[122] Mapping Exploitation: Examining For-Profit Institutions as Financial Predators in Communities of Color. Student Borrower Protection Center (SBPC). (2022). [123] Carey, K. & Palmer, I. The Case for Quantum Leap. New America. (2021). [124] What's in the New Gainful Employment Rule? Third Way. (2023). [125] Kyaw, A. Democratic Lawmakers Establish Congressional Predominantly Black Institutions Caucus. Diverse Issues in Higher Education. (2023).

Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging

A

Institutions and systems must proactively consider the disproportionate challenges facing Black learners inside and outside the classroom by developing supports and connecting them to community resources. This will afford opportunities to provide robust advising, support to access pathways to high-wage and high-demand jobs, and assistance to address critical issues in an environment that fosters respect and a sense of belonging.

Federal policymakers have a clear, distinct role to play in facilitating academic and social supports that will increase the sense of belonging for Black learners. While historical programs such as TRIO and, more recently, GEAR UP have worked in these spaces, more can and should be done.

Community colleges have historically enrolled Black learners at higher rates. However, Black enrollment in public community colleges dropped by 26% between 2011 and 2019. Indeed the number of Black learners enrolled in community colleges in 2020 was the same as in 2000.[126] Federal policymakers must ensure community colleges and other postsecondary institutions have the academic and social supports in place to adequately serve Black learners and address enrollment decline.

To develop academic and social supports that create a sense of belonging, federal policymakers should:

☐ **Promote measurement, evaluation, and continuous improvement among TRIO and GEAR UP grantees.**

Both federal programs serve students most likely to be from low-income and racially minoritized backgrounds.[127]

☐ **Continue to expand the Child Care Access Means Parents in School program.**

About 40% of Black women in college are mothers, and Black learners comprise one-third of parenting students.[128]

☐ **Continue to invest in programs that broaden participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), particularly in institutions with large concentrations of Black learners.**

Working collaboratively for inclusive change with entities such as the National Science Foundation, the STEM workforce should reflect the nation's population demographics.[129]

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[126] A National Imperative: Addressing Black Student Enrollment. HCM Strategists. (2022). [127] Goals and Strategies to Improve Programs. New America. (n.d.) [128] Parents in College: By the Numbers. Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR). (2017). Melillo, G. Black students more likely to be balancing responsibilities beyond coursework: Gallup. Changing America. (2023). [129] NSF Ten Big Ideas. National Science Foundation. (2022). Melillo, G. Black students more likely to be balancing responsibilities beyond coursework: Gallup. Changing America. (2023). [129] NSF Ten Big Ideas. National Science Foundation. (2022). Melillo, G. Black students more likely to be balancing responsibilities beyond coursework: Gallup. Changing America. (2023).

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Academic and Social Supports, Black learners will:

▶ Have more opportunities to take advantage of programs known to support Black learner success.

▶ Receive support for child care, as needed.

▶ Feel a sense of belonging that keeps them matriculating through postsecondary experiences that add value.

SUPPORT SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **The College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium** is a collaboration of 28 GEAR UP grantees across 630 middle and high schools interested in understanding the impact of interventions. [130]

▶ **YouthBuild** is a pre-apprenticeship program to expand postsecondary opportunities for those without high school diplomas. The program serves 5,000 youth across 40 states.[131]

▶ **The Child Care Access Means Parents in School program** helped 3,300 student parents pay for child care with payments of $385 per month on average. Appropriations for the program have increased from $15 million in FY 2017 to $75 million in FY 2023. In FY 2022, 300 new institutions were awarded $150,000 per year on average.[132]

[130] College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium. National Council for Community and Education Partnerships. [131] YouthBuild. U.S. Department of Labor. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [132] Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Brief. Congressional Research Service. (2023).

L Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

Teaching practices should center students' lived experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs as grounding for learning.

The federal roles to ensure quality and hold institutions accountable as a condition to participate in federal financial aid are important for making sure Black learners receive quality instruction. Oversight of accrediting bodies has an indirect impact on quality in the classroom and beyond. In fact, accrediting bodies have an important role to play following the Supreme Court decision to prohibit affirmative action in admissions. In states that have eliminated affirmative action, Black student enrollments immediately declined. For example, after the 1996 ban on affirmative action in California, the University of California system saw a 12% decline in enrollment of students from underrepresented groups.[133] Likewise, after banning affirmative action in Michigan in 2006, the University of Michigan's

Black undergraduate enrollment declined from 7% to 4%.[134] To mitigate the effects of prohibiting affirmative action, accreditors can encourage institutions to promote diversity in supporting students, faculty, and staff.

Furthermore, enforcing laws related to civil rights and nondiscrimination is required for Black learners to have equal opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education's regulations related to protecting students and ensuring compliance with financial aid programs also have direct implications for quality and accountability, thus impacting Black learner success.

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To strengthen learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners, federal policymakers should:

☐ **Create an interagency resource library with federally funded research on learner-centered practices.**

Recent guidance directs federal agencies to expand public access to publicly-funded research, publications, and data. Gathering evidence-based strategies correlated with Black learner success in one place would benefit postsecondary leaders, researchers and practitioners.

☐ **Establish a sub-program within the federal Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) program to create Black learner centers of excellence.**

FIPSE is designed to support efforts addressing critical needs in higher education. A subprogram for Black learner centers of excellence would allow the incubation of innovative initiatives designed to support Black learner success.

[133] Bleemer, Z. The Impact of Proposition 209 and Access-Oriented UC Admissions Policies on Underrepresented UC Applications, Enrollment, and Long-Run Student Outcomes. UC Office of the President. (2020). [134] Amicus Brief to the US Supreme Court for the University of Michigan. (2022).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Learner-Centered Teaching Practices, Black learners will:

▸ Access culturally relevant guidance and support to plan, prepare, and pay for postsecondary education.

▸ Benefit from institutions' implementation of proven practices to affirm Black learners, support their learning and growth, and actively engage in their growth.

TEACHING SPOTLIGHTS

▸ **The Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence Program** aims to support centers of excellence at historically black colleges and universities or other minority serving institutions to increase the number of well-prepared educators and teachers of color.[135]

▸ **The National Endowment for the Humanities**, an independent federal agency, supports professional development institutes for higher education faculty. The convenings support higher education faculty from across the nation to deepen their understanding of significant topics and enrich their capacity for effective scholarship and teaching.[136]

[135] Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence. U.S. Department of Education. (2023). [136] Institutes for Higher Education Faculty. National Endowment for the Humanities. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023).

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COMMUNITY & BUSINESS LEADERS

Commitment to Black Learner Excellence

Community and business leaders are invaluable partners to advocate for and support Black learner excellence. They can strengthen the vitality of a community and bolster the impact of higher education and student success.

Community and business leaders can provide supplemental learning opportunities and work experience, invest in Black learners, connect Black learners with human services, and foster community through mentorship and shared experiences. Moreover, leaders in the community can hold others accountable and advocate for change on behalf of, and in collaboration with, Black learners. Community-based organizations support educational partners with direct student support, and those with a focus on human services can provide vital complimentary assistance to Black learners and families. Community leaders also serve as strong advocates for Black learners, without the same political and regulatory constraints often faced by public institutions. At the same time, business leaders are uniquely equipped to inspire and amplify efforts to support Black learners. They can offer jobs after graduation. In addition, they can help increase graduation rates by providing experiential learning opportunities, such as paid internships and apprenticeships, that are linked to college completion and career advancement opportunities.

This LEVEL UP Playbook presents a call to action for community and business leaders to relentlessly focus on Black learner excellence until parity in educational and workforce outcomes is achieved.

The data present a clear and compelling call to action for community and business leaders. Black Americans are underrepresented in high-wage jobs and careers that provide stability, greater benefits, and more opportunity for economic mobility. Black workers represent only 9% of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce.[137] Furthermore, college-educated Black workers have median wages that are 23% lower than white workers with a college degree.[138] Through career exposure, experiential learning opportunities, and educational resources, community and business leaders can reduce equity gaps and improve career outcomes for Black learners.

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[137] Fry, R. et al. STEM Jobs See Uneven Progress in Increasing Gender, Racial and Ethnic Diversity. Pew Research Center. (2021). [138] Jardina, A., et al. The Limits of Educational Attainment in Mitigating Occupational Segregation Between Black and White Workers. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). (2023).
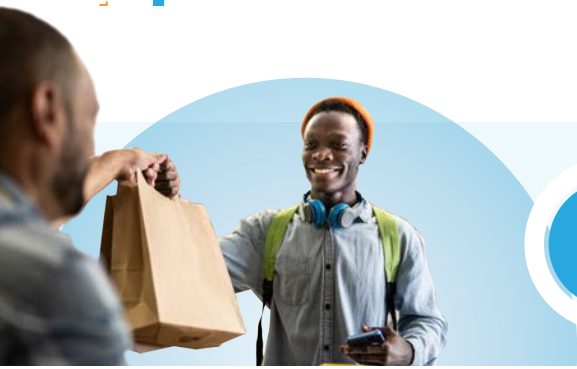
REAL Transparency and True Affordability

(R) We must focus not only on increasing need-based aid, but also on making more visible the bottom-line cost students will pay, based on a realistic assessment of what students can reasonably afford.

Businesses and community organizations play a significant role in helping to ensure affordability for students. They award more than 1.7 million fellowships and private scholarships each year, and employers spend millions of dollars on tuition assistance programs.[139] Employers fund tuition for their employees, are philanthropic partners, and advocate for addressing affordability with policymakers. Community leaders play similar roles, and many lead college access organizations that help Black learners navigate financial aid and scholarship processes.

Providing financial resources besides governmental financial aid and institutional aid is crucial to making college more affordable for Black learners. With the current financial aid system, Black learners are accumulating student loan debt at much higher rates than their white counterparts. In 2015–16, 33% of Black graduates with a bachelor's degree left their postsecondary institution with more than $40,000 in debt, compared with 18% of white graduates. Only one-third of Black learners graduated with an associate degree without debt, compared with 49% of white associate degree graduates.[140] Direct business and community organization investments in Black learners not only increase student success, but also improve broader community outcomes.

To provide real transparency and true affordability, community and business leaders should:

☐ **Offer employer-provided tuition benefits, resulting in reduced employee turnover and increased employee retention and advancement.**

Although nearly 60% of employers offer tuition reimbursement, only up to 5% of eligible employees participate.[141]

☐ **Raise funds to provide targeted scholarships for high-demand fields and promote them to Black learners.**

The bachelor-degree completion rate increases by 12 percentage points for students of color who receive additional scholarships.[142]

☐ **Advocate for new and increased investments in student financial aid and other policies that promote valuable pathways for Black learners and other underrepresented students.**

Most public four-year institutions are not affordable for the average low-income student even after receiving government and institutional grant aid, borrowing, and working.[143]

☐ **Provide financial aid and scholarship application assistance to Black learners.**

Learning from peers and Black professionals, students can understand and navigate financial aid and scholarship systems.[144]

139 Dickler, J. Student aid secret: Even high-income families can qualify. CNBC. (2020). Glover, H. The Case for Talent Investment. Lumina Foundation. (2017). 140 Baum, S. Student Debt: The Unique Circumstances of African American Students. American Council on Education (ACE). (2021). 141 Glover, H. The Case for Talent Investment. Lumina Foundation. (2017). 142 Why Scholarships are Vital for Low-Income Students and Families. Scholarship America. (2023). 143 Shutting Low-Income Students out of Public Four-Year Education. National College Attainment Network (NCAN). (2018). 144 Next Generation: A College Completion Tool Kit for First-Generation and Nontraditional Students. White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. U.S. Department of Education. (2016).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Real Transparency and True Affordability, Black learners will:

▸ Receive additional scholarship and financial assistance to defray educational costs.

▸ Be incentivized and supported to pursue high-demand fields without concern about costs.

▸ Understand how to navigate scholarship and financial aid applications and related processes.

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AFFORDABILITY SPOTLIGHTS

▸ **The National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering** offers $3 million in scholarships to underrepresented minorities pursuing engineering.[145] Additionally, the Executive Leadership Council seeks to expand Black executives and offers scholarships to Black learners.[146]

▸ **The Scholarship Academy** supports Black learners in Georgia, New York, and Washington D.C., helping students from low-wealth backgrounds navigate financial aid and access scholarships.[147]

▸ **Washington's** large technology employers supported a tax for businesses that rely on employees with advanced degrees to partially fund the statewide guaranteed financial aid program.[148]

▸ **OneTen** seeks to create 1 million jobs in 10 years to unlock opportunities for Black learners and workers. Employers and community partners provide support, training, and hiring to close gaps in the Black talent pipeline.[149]

▸ **The Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative** established a new framework for community leaders, researchers, policymakers, practitioners and philanthropists to advance solutions to build Black wealth in the region.[150]

145 National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME). (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 146 Executive Leadership Council. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 147 The Scholarship Academy. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 148 Boosting Higher Ed with a Tax on Business. Inside HigerEd. (2019). 149 Higher Skills for Higher Returns. OneTen. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). 150 Building A Beloved Economy: A Baseline and Framework for Building Black Wealth in Atlanta. Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative. (2023).

(E) Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership

At each level—federal, state, system, and institutional—we must create mechanisms to support Black learners and ensure shared accountability for their success in and beyond their postsecondary experiences.

Developing a relentless focus on Black learners' success requires shared ownership and partnerships beyond typical actors in postsecondary education and policy spaces. The voices of business and community leaders bolster advocacy efforts, and their flexibility to work outside the constraints of government enable them to act swiftly and creatively on behalf of Black learners.

Partnerships between corporations and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provide an important example of the benefits

of shared ownership. Black learners benefit from scholarship funds, paid internship opportunities, and educational programming, while businesses are able to recruit and diversify their workforce; both contribute to improved Black learner career outcomes. With more than 100 HBCUs across 20 states and 25% of Black learners with STEM degrees graduating from HBCUs,[151] these partnerships are proving impactful in promoting Black learner college and career success.

To ensure success through shared ownership, community and business leaders should:

☐ **Acknowledge and support institutions serving Black learners.**

Community and business leaders need to hold policymakers and institutions accountable for the educational success and economic mobility of Black learners through direct advocacy. They should also focus on tracking changes over time and working toward policy change.[152]

☐ **Facilitate broad-based community and postsecondary education engagement to develop strategic and sustained approaches to advance Black learner excellence.**

This can include creating advisory committees that include Black learners, creating a dedicated liaison to partner with higher education in support of Black learners, and creating wrap-around services for Black learners even as they seek and gain employment.[153]

☐ **Undertake advocacy efforts with leaders from community organizations and business associations such as chambers of commerce and embed a focus on Black learners into strategic objectives.**

Employer partners can offer paid internships, share information on their industry with Black learners, communicate workforce needs to educational leaders, host events, provide program feedback, and forge new partnerships.[154]

[151] By the Numbers: How HBCUs Stack Up. The United Negro College Fund (UNCF). (2019). [152] 13 Practical Ways Businesses Can Support Local Higher Education. The Business Journals. (2020). [153] Similar approaches are included in this federal initiative. The White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans. U.S. Department of Education. (2022). [154] How Chambers of Commerce Connections Can Help Align Programming with Workforce Needs. The Evolution. (2019).
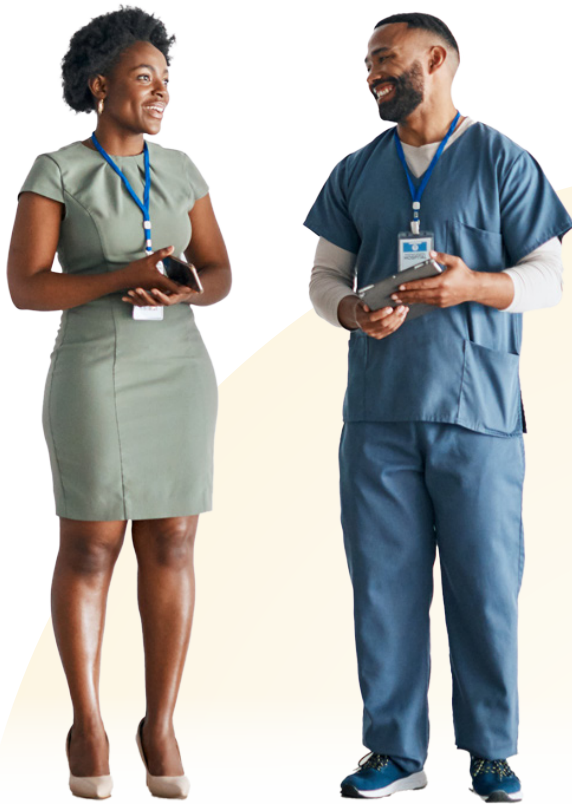
IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Ensured Success Through Shared Ownership, Black learners will:

▶ Benefit from shared partnerships focused on Black learner success.

▶ Participate in the development of community-based and business-led approaches to advance Black learner excellence.

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SHARED OWNERSHIP SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **NAACP** partnered with Google to expand a high school program preparing students for tech fields.[155] Additionally, Grow with Google supports HBCUs to encourage Black learners to pursue technology fields.[156]

▶ **The Albuquerque African American Chamber of Commerce** focuses on education, advocacy, mentorship, and networking to promote Black-owned businesses.[157]

▶ **The African American Trade Association** promotes trade, commerce, economic development, and well-being through education, collaboration, and lucrative partnerships that advance opportunities for Black communities.[158]

[155] Google.org to Provide $3M Grant to Support Expansion of NAACP's Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics (ACT-SO) Program. NAACP. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [156] Bringing new Digital skills trainings to HBCUs. The Keyword. (2020). [157] African American Greater Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [158] In Relentless Pursuit of African American Wealth and Health. African American Trade Association. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023).
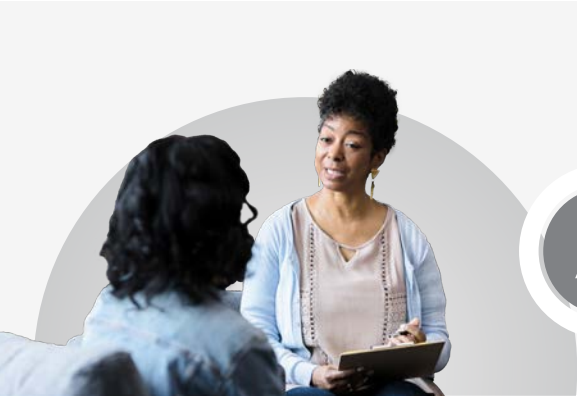
Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging

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Institutions and systems must proactively consider the disproportionate challenges facing Black learners inside and outside the classroom by developing supports and connecting them to community resources. This will afford opportunities to provide robust advising, support to access pathways to high-wage and high-demand jobs, and assistance to address critical issues in an environment that fosters respect and a sense of belonging.

Business and community leaders can mobilize partners to provide essential guidance and mentoring to Black learners. By learning from professionals, students get career exposure, expertise, guidance, and networking and growth opportunities.

Mentoring has been shown to provide consistent and positive effects on educational attainment.[159] For Black learners, mentoring can support persistence and completion.[160] Several philanthropic foundations are funding initiatives to center Black learners and provide them with both academic and social support, such as tutoring, mentoring, college and career planning, and career exposure.

To develop supports that create a sense of belonging, community and business leaders should:

☐ **Mentor current Black learners through formal and informal means.**

Black learners have found mentoring worthwhile, and mentoring has a positive impact on their college transition.[161]

☐ **Engage philanthropic organizations to invest in broad community partnerships focused on oversight for Black learner outcomes and implementation of the Get REAL agenda.**

Foundations across the nation, large and small, have invested in Black learners, and these entities can uniquely support and augment what institutions serving Black learners already do well.[162]

☐ **Partner with colleges and universities to incorporate the perspectives and services of local human services organizations.**

Establishing a forum that includes organizations offering child care, housing, and peer affinity support can strengthen coordinated assistance for students.[163]

☐ **Include Black learners and Black-led organizations in the design of their company-wide partnerships with colleges and universities.**

Several Black-led nonprofit organizations have incorporated educational partnerships into their missions.[164]

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[159] Kraft, M. et al. How Informal Mentoring by Teachers, Counselors, and Coaches Supports Students' Long-Run Academic Success. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). (2023). [160] Why Mentoring Matters: African American Students and the Transition to College. The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal, V 19. (2017). [161] Why Mentoring Matters: African American Students and the Transition to College. The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal, V 19. (2017). [162] New Research on Philanthropy Directed to Black Males in U.S. Reveals Important Trends. Open Society Foundations. (2012). [163] Higher Education Collaboratives for Community Engagement and Improvement. National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. (2005). [164] Bean, H. 20 Black-Led Non-Profit Organizations that Should be on Your Radar. Give Butter. (2022).

IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Academic and Social Supports, Black learners will:

▸ Receive mentoring and guidance from Black professionals with relatable experiences and backgrounds.

▸ Become inspired and motivated to challenge themselves and prepare for education and training beyond high school.

▸ Receive customized, systemic, and sustained support to get to and through a credential or degree.

SUPPORT SPOTLIGHTS

▸ **The National Cares Mentoring Movement** seeks to transform the lives of impoverished Black children through a national network of volunteer mentors. An example is the collaboration between higher education and community partners in New York City.[165]

▸ Under the **Achieve Atlanta initiative**, higher education institutions and college access partners support Atlanta Public Schools to provide district-wide college advising to all juniors and seniors.[166]

▸ **The National Black Justice Coalition** is a civil rights organization with a focus on education that is working to end discrimination against Black LGBTQ+ individuals.[167]

▸ **Regional partnerships in the Seattle area** focus on advancing Black learner success through data-driven strategies and support from middle school through postsecondary education. In the same region, a Black and Brown Summit, sponsored by community partners, is an annual event designed to empower and motivate Black and Brown young men in high school to excel in academics and strive for excellence.[168]

▸ **Take Off: Institutional Innovations for College Men of Color** is a project of the University of Southern California's Race and Equity Center. The philanthropic-supported project supports 12 community colleges nationwide to bolster initiatives advancing the success of Black learners and men of color.[170]

▸ **California Funders for Boys and Men of Color** aligns leading philanthropic entities with the goal of improving opportunities for Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American young men in the San Francisco and Los Angeles communities. The network offers programming and legislative advocacy to remove structural barriers.[171]

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[165] Partnership for Our Children: A Collaboration Between Higher Ed and Community Partners. Columbia School of Social Work. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [166] Helping Atlanta Public Schools Students Earn Postsecondary Credentials. Achieve Atlanta. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [167] National Black Justice Coalition. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [168] Black Student Success. Roadmap Project. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [169] Reviving Our Roots Through Courageous Conversations: Black and Brown Summit. Highline College. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [170] Take-Off: Institutional Innovations for College Men of Color. University of Southern California Race and Equity Center. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023). [171] California Funders for Boys and Men of Color. (Retrieved on November 1, 2023).

L Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

Teaching practices should center students' lived experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs as grounding for learning.

Community and business leaders can further support Black learners working to complete their postsecondary credential by providing impactful experiential learning opportunities.

STUDENT VOICE

Black learners seek more support in finding internship opportunities connected to classroom learning.

The 2021 National Survey of College Internships queried students about barriers to participating in internships. More than one-third (36%) of Black students reported they were unsure how to find internships, and 23% reported a lack of internship opportunities.[172] Black learners need more information and resources about internships, especially paid internships. Bridging gaps and forming more robust partnerships between organizations and postsecondary institutions is crucial to support Black students' participation in internships and other experiential learning opportunities.

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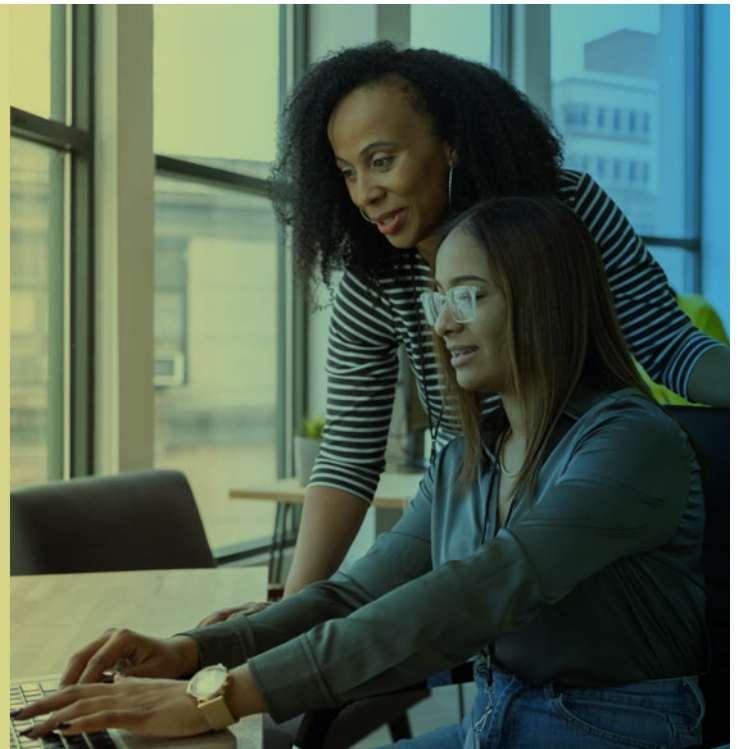
[172] Insights into the prevalence, quality, and equitable access to internships in higher education. National Survey of College Internships (NSCI). (2021).

To strengthen learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners, community and business leaders should:

☐ **Offer paid internships to provide career-connected experiences and develop a pipeline for Black learner graduates.**

Companies convert 58% of internships into full-time employment, resulting in a benefit for both students and employers.[173]

☐ **Support the needs of faculty working to deliver culturally relevant pedagogy and trauma-informed practices.**

Community leaders can offer resources and training and facilitate cross-institution mentoring programs to ensure faculty and, ultimately Black learners, are seen and supported.[174]

☐ **Expand apprenticeship programs and target outreach to prospective Black learners.**

Nationwide, Black workers represent less than 10% of apprentices.[175]

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IMPACT ON BLACK LEARNERS

As a result of Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners, Black learners will:

▶ Feel valued and empowered in the classroom, resulting in increased persistence and completion rates.

▶ Experience career-connected learning, enabling them to be competitive for immediate employment post-graduation or credential completion.

[173] Paid Internships Are Vital To Student And Employer Success. Forbes. (2023). [174] Higher Education Collaboratives for Community Engagement and Improvement. National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. (2005). [175] Together We Can Increase Black Participation in Apprenticeships. Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2021).

TEACHING SPOTLIGHTS

▶ **Complete College America** created a [network of community colleges](#) to align academic programs with workforce needs for Black learners. Participating colleges will share expertise and receive technical assistance focused on workforce alignment, basic needs, and other key topics.[177]

▶ **Year Up** offers a [one-year training program](#) with paid internship and support and has been recognized for supporting achievement among Black learners.[178]

[173] Paid Internships Are Vital To Student And Employer Success. Forbes, (2023). [174] Higher Education Collaboratives for Community Engagement and Improvement. National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. (2005). [175] Together We Can Increase Black Participation in Apprenticeships. Jobs for the Future (JFF). (2021). [176] Historically Black and Predominantly Black Community Colleges Unite to Create One-of-its-Kind National Network. Complete College America. (2022). [177] Year Up. (Retrieved November 1, 2023).

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LOOKING AHEAD

Institutions in all sectors are experiencing staggering enrollment declines. Community colleges are most adversely impacted by the 600,000 Black learners lost in the past two decades, with 300,000 lost from the community college system. Community colleges have historically enrolled and supported Black learners more than any other sector. Finding actionable solutions and supporting these institutions are critical to improve postsecondary access and success for Black students. Institutions must increase outreach strategies that target Black learners. Perhaps more importantly, they must also put the supports in place that foster positive and successful learning environments for Black learners.

Although federal and state policymakers are not involved in the day-to-day activities of institutions and students, their goals, priorities, and policies impact the on-the-ground work directly supporting Black learner success. State data continue to reveal racial disparities in educational attainment. In recent years, states have adopted more policies to increase affordability and support student success. However, alarming enrollment declines make clear the work must continue with more targeted policies that support Black learners to enroll, earn a credential of value, and enter careers.

To engage Black learners and increase the value proposition of earning a credential of value, community and business partnerships are crucial. This work does not materialize without the advocacy and mentorship of community leaders, additional academic support outside the classroom, and real-world career experiences that supplement curricula. The strong partnerships existing within communities are what drive action and hold us accountable for our commitments.

Looking ahead, higher education institutions, state policymakers, federal policymakers, and community and business leaders must take deliberate actions that are student-centered and built through collaboration to realize Black learner excellence. Every stakeholder must have a hand in combating enrollment decline, closing equity gaps, and supporting the overall success of Black learners holistically. The onus is not on Black learners. This is the chance for key players to unapologetically lead on their behalf and rectify the long-standing injustices that continue to plague our higher education system and shut out Black learners. It is time to lift and support Black learners in ways we never have before.

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About HCM Strategists: HCM is an impact-driven consulting firm that believes in the transformative power of education to improve social and economic mobility.

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