

Level UP

Leveraging Explicit Value  
for Every Black Learner,

Unapologetically.



# Executive Summary

Education is one of the strongest vehicles to economic prosperity and overall increased quality of life; even so its structure is riddled with unaddressed systemic barriers that data show most harshly implicates Black learners. To address this requires a holistic approach driven by acknowledgement and understanding that the current structures in place are not serving Black learners well.

Alarming, over the last 20 years, the nation has lost 300,000 Black learners from the community college system, with participation rates among Black students lower today than they were 20 years ago – a documented and drastic decline in access and enrollment long before the wide-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. When looking across all sectors roughly 600,000 Black learners have disappeared from American higher education, threatening both their personal economic success and the success of the communities they enrich.

This decline is not occurring because Black learners are choosing other postsecondary outcomes; Black enrollment did not increase in any other sector over this time period. Nor are Black learners opting to enter the workforce for “good” jobs. The decline is also not because the Black population is shrinking. In fact, the Black young adult population (18-34 years old) has steadily grown since 2000. The value proposition of postsecondary education is increasingly murky for Black learners – both in Black learner perception and societal reality.

**To be clear, the onus is not on Black learners.** State and federal institutions and policymakers at all levels have a responsibility to ensure that places of higher education are accessible and welcoming to all, regardless of a student’s race or background.





Black learners must have postsecondary options that ensure the value proposition of higher education for them. Delivering on this overdue right requires mobilizing core commitments

with shared ownership among federal and state policymakers; local communities and their community colleges and other institutions of higher education; and philanthropic champions.

**Realizing these commitments represents the cornerstone of a new, equitable foundation for Black learner excellence in higher education and beyond.**

What is required? We contend that there are four core commitment areas that state and federal policymakers, institutions and other educational organizations must consider to truly improve the postsecondary value proposition for Black learners.

In order to LEVEL UP, we have to Get REAL with:

-  Real Transparency and True Affordability
-  Ensured Success through Shared Ownership
-  Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging
-  Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners

It is critical for Black Americans to have equitable opportunities to attain a postsecondary credential which creates access to higher-wage jobs and increases social and political capital that impacts not only their lives but their families, future generations and increased economic sustainability for America's overall economy.

This reality must be changed – not just the narrative – through intentional investment and joint action delivering on these core commitments to ensure Black learners thrive.

# Why Black Learners?

**Our country continues to fail Black learners.** In the United States, Black Americans continue to battle inequities related to almost every facet of life as a result of historic and ongoing systemic injustices. Education is one of the strongest vehicles to economic prosperity and overall increased quality of life; even so its structure perpetuates these systemic barriers and most harshly for Black learners.

**The steady decline of enrollment and completion among Black learners across all sectors of higher education since 2011 threatens decades of economic gains and the vitality of Black families.**

While postsecondary enrollment declined for most racial/ethnic groups age 18-34 since 2011, the decline was particularly steep for Black learners, especially for those at [community colleges](#). Adjusting for population size, Black young adults experienced the second largest decline in enrollment – a 29% drop (American Indian or Alaskan Native young adults declined 35%) since 2011. Enrollment declines have been topline news in the context of the pandemic. But this decline is NOT merely the result of the pandemic. It is a 20-year plunge. COVID-19 exacerbated numerous inequities, including postsecondary enrollment, however it did not create them. This persistent decline has direct implications not only for educational attainment but for the economic mobility and progress of Black Americans overall.

**The education system in the United States is riddled with pervasive barriers.** From the history of this country's founding, Black people have been dehumanized, marginalized, and underserved; there was no formal education at all for the vast majority of Black people, as it was against the law for enslaved people to read or write. Even those few Blacks who gained freedom were denied access to public education. After Reconstruction, segregated and

inherently unequal schools were standard fare; and even now, Black students are more likely to learn in schools with less access to high quality instruction and attend colleges that spend fewer dollars per student on education. To address these severe, long-standing injustices requires a holistic approach driven by acknowledgement and understanding that the current structures in place are not serving Black learners well. As stated by President Lyndon B. Johnson in a Howard University address (1965): “You cannot take a man who has been in chains for 300 years, remove the chains, take him to the starting line and tell him to run the race, and think that you are being fair.”<sup>1</sup>

**To be clear, the onus is not on Black learners. The responsibility lies on state, federal, institutional and other decision-makers to right centuries of dismissing and devaluing Black intellect and ability and to dismantle the structures that uphold systemic injustices.**

While there are numerous factors and root causes related to the lack of Black educational attainment and economic prosperity in this country, some clues may lie in an examination of an entry point for many Black learners, **community colleges**. Black enrollment in public community colleges [dropped by 26%](#) between 2011 and 2019. Data show the number of Black learners enrolled in community colleges in 2020 was the SAME as in 2000.

**Explained another way, the nation has lost nearly 300,000 Black community college learners and when looking across all sectors roughly 600,000 Black learners have disappeared from American higher education.**

Black learners are *not* choosing other postsecondary outcomes; Black enrollment did not increase in any sector over this time period. Nor are Black learners opting to enter the workforce for “good” jobs. The decline is also not because the Black population is shrinking.





In fact, the Black young adult population (18-34 years old) has steadily grown since 2000. It is clear that the value proposition of postsecondary education is increasingly murky for Black learners – both in Black learner perception and societal reality.

**Recent years have shown society's increased questions about the value of higher education; restoring belief will require unapologetic leadership to do things differently and centering Black learners within the educational process.**

The return on investment (ROI) for Black learners is not limited solely to economic mobility or generational wealth. Although there are important positive economic aspects for multiple generations, increased educational attainment also provides critical non-monetary gains including increased social and cultural capital, long-term health benefits, increased power and voice in decision-making.

Many have wrestled with the current state of postsecondary value for students. Through the Postsecondary Value Commission, a set of diverse leaders examined a value proposition for postsecondary education: "Students experience postsecondary value when provided equitable access and support to complete quality, affordable credentials that offer economic mobility and prepare them to advance racial and economic

justice in our society.”<sup>2</sup> In this conception of postsecondary value, equity, institutions and programs, policy, public returns – and investment, and measuring value all matter. This effort focused on ways that postsecondary institutions might provide value for traditionally marginalized populations, including Black students, in particular. Other recent efforts similarly explored the specific challenges and opportunities to ensuring postsecondary value for Black learners in the context of stubborn enrollment declines. For example, Chicago State University’s [Equity Working Group](#) developed a framework to address the decline in Black student enrollment in Illinois, with student input providing key insight on recommendations.

The findings from these endeavors can be instructive in considering the unique needs of Black learners; however, based upon the lived experiences of Black learners, they need their own value proposition.

Outcomes matter, and Black learners know that the outcomes of their enrollment in postsecondary education have not lived up to their potential promise. Learners who have typically attended community colleges are different from other postsecondary learners in that they are more likely to be older, working while enrolled, paid wages that are poverty-level, and/or have dependents of their own.<sup>3</sup> Serving this population well requires a clearer focus on the need to provide an affordable, accessible education that leads to economic agency, with embedded supports for program completion and placement into family-sustaining jobs. While noting the unique needs of community college learners, we also must acknowledge that Black learners are not monolithic. There are varied lived experiences that must be both honored and served by postsecondary institutions if we are to realize a renewed value proposition for Black learners.

Why should this population continue to engage with a system of institutions whose unaddressed barriers perpetuate their exclusion? So how do we restore the postsecondary value proposition for Black learners?

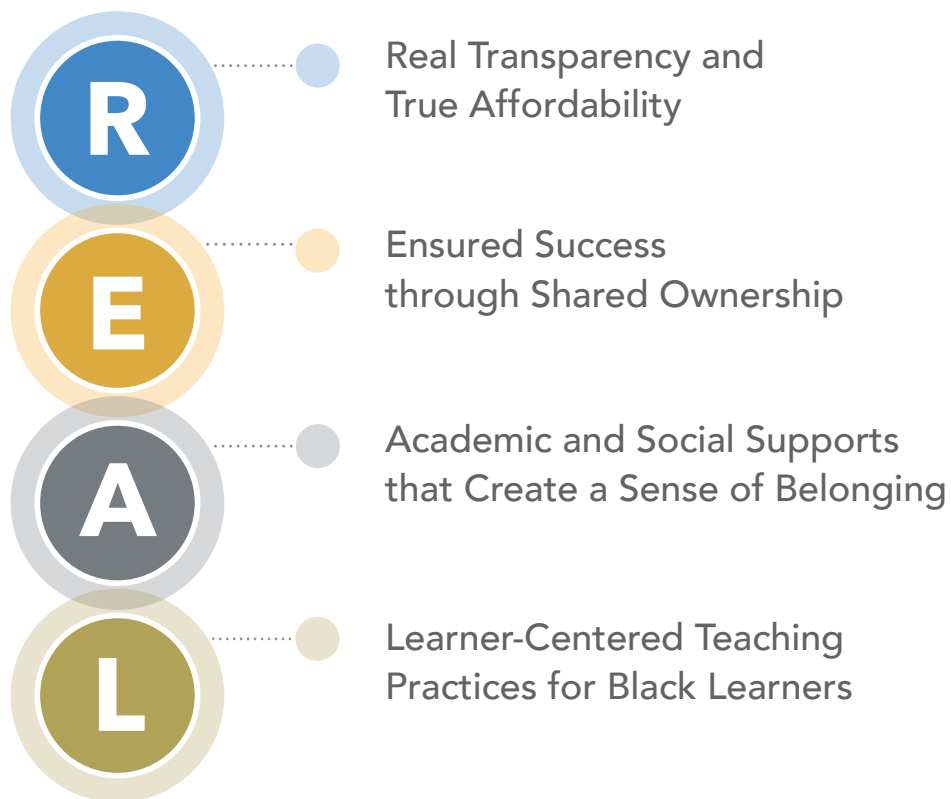
## How is the Postsecondary Value Proposition for Black Learners Realized?

Black learners must have postsecondary options that ensure the value proposition of higher education for them. Delivering on this overdue right requires mobilizing core commitments with shared ownership among federal and state policymakers; local communities and their

community colleges and other institutions of higher education; and philanthropic champions. Realizing these commitments represents the cornerstone of a new, equitable foundation for Black learner excellence in higher education and beyond.

## What is Required?

In order to LEVEL UP, we have to Get REAL with:

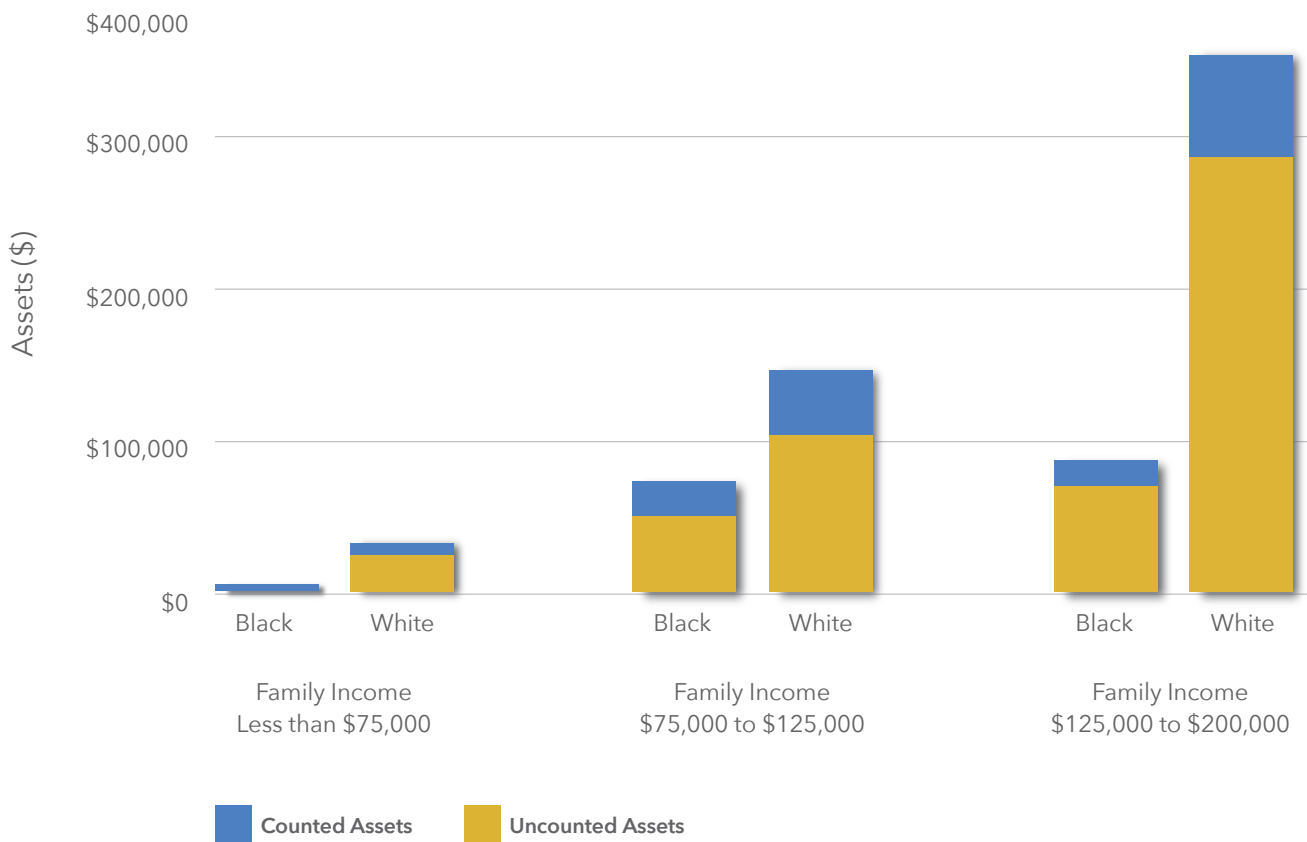


**Real Transparency and True Affordability** are foundational to ensuring that the value proposition for Black learners improves. The vast majority – 80% – of Black Americans believe that college is unaffordable.<sup>4</sup> For decades, higher education has suffered from an inequitable pricing structure that favors those who have prior experience with the system. While the “sticker price” of college can be an unnecessary barrier, efforts to address affordability that focus only on increasing need-



based aid without also considering the accompanying transparent messaging to students about the final price they will pay are insufficient. Learners should have a clear understanding of the true price of their education prior to application, including a full understanding of the direct costs they will face, ideally bundling all direct learning related expenses and eliminating supplemental “fees” that are not optional for students to pay. Ultimately, pricing structures must not only be transparent, but they must align with a true assessment of what students have the ability to pay and what is morally acceptable to charge so that they do not incur insurmountable debt. The following graph shows average income of families by race illustrating the lowered likelihood of affording college by disproportionately more Black families.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Median Assets for Families with Children Approaching College Age, by Family Income, Race, and Asset Category**



Source: Author’s calculations based on data from the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF).  
 Notes: Uncounted assets include home equity in a primary residence and retirement savings. Counted assets include all other forms of assets. Sample includes respondents with children between the ages of 13 and 17.

Too often, Black learners leave postsecondary experiences with considerable debt. In 2015-16, 33% of Black graduates with a bachelor's degree faced over \$40,000 in debt compared to 18% of white graduates and 13% of Hispanic graduates. For those earning an associate's degree, only a third of Black learners graduated with no debt compared to 49% of white graduates.<sup>6</sup> In a system already entrenched with systemic racial disparities, these daunting figures matter. Furthermore, these Black-white disparities in debt are NOT explained away by parent income or education levels.

A [2019 CAPS study](#) found that within six years of starting college, one third of all Black borrowers who entered repayment defaulted on their loans compared to just 13% of their white peers."<sup>8</sup>





Part of creating true affordability is Black learners seeing the value of committing resources to higher education. For instance, while half of Black students in a 2022 poll believed their college loans were probably worthwhile, the other half could not say so for sure.<sup>9</sup>

Paul Quinn College provides a viable example of clear transparency and increasingly affordable pricing that all Black learners need. A new business model encouraged by the college President reduced tuition by \$10,000 and offered a work credit of \$5,000.<sup>10</sup> With this affordable value proposition, enrollment and donations increased; learners could see how to afford college, including community colleges, and accept the opportunity costs of enrolling in postsecondary education.

**Ensured Success through Shared Ownership** for Black learners requires rebuilding confidence in a failed system and offering pathways leading to increased economic prosperity for Black families. Creating shared ownership for success must be part of our model for realizing value for Black learners moving forward. Institutional leaders and policymakers have a responsibility to implement the necessary systemic changes in higher education that will result in a stronger value and sense of belonging for Black learners. Policymakers, institutions and other decision-makers must

track outcomes, from retention to completion, making swift adjustments as needed.

For true shared ownership, transparency is needed in *how* labor market values tie to postsecondary programming. Intentional partnerships with businesses, nonprofits and other employers are required to shape postsecondary programs and pathways that meet national and local demand. Students directly understanding how what they're learning impacts their future (or current) career would result from increased transparency. Ultimately, labor market and other longer-term indicators are needed to make sure postsecondary programs are creating outcomes that equip Black learners in securing strong jobs that allow contributions to their family, community and larger economic ecosystem.

Ensuring programs are successful in preparing Black learners for life beyond their postsecondary experience will require an intentional investment of resources. States, institutions, and other entities committed to serving Black learners well, must make value statements with their budgets by making direct investments in Black learners' needs.

Concerningly, many institutions whose leaders care about the success of Black learners lack adequate resources to meet their needs. Black students are disproportionately enrolled in under-resourced institutions. Recent research has found that Black students attend institutions that spend \$2,000 per student less than average on instruction and student services.<sup>11</sup>

Without equitable and adequate resources, even leaders committed to all the appropriate policy and practice steps will not be able to fully realize them. Historically and currently, federal funding provides less resources for learners at community colleges, who are systematically denied eligibility to campus-based financial aid programs and are often dissuaded from borrowing from the more affordable federally-subsidized loan program. Studies show that reduced financial aid options negatively impact persistence and education attainment for Black learners.<sup>12</sup> Efforts by policymakers to reduce federal loans and community colleges choosing not to participate in the federal student loan program have very real consequences. Despite recent increases in state and federal spending, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), community colleges and open-access regional public four-year colleges have significantly lower per student revenues to spend on learners and their success.<sup>13</sup> HBCU institutions were created as a result of Black learners not being allowed to enroll in pre-existing colleges and universities, yet from their start, funding disproportionately favored white land-grant universities.<sup>14</sup> States often exacerbate these inequities as shown by the historic low funding and fewer resources being provided to institutions, particularly community colleges, that serve higher proportions of Black learners. We must redress systemic underfinancing of





institutions Black learners attend and invest in programs that deliver value and positive outcomes for Black learners. A few states are grappling with what this looks like, including Illinois, which is working collaboratively to develop data-driven criteria to inform equitable financing in public higher education that is stable and sufficient.<sup>15</sup>

Shared ownership cannot be created and maintained without concrete success measures. Data play a critical role and must be collected and disaggregated by race/ethnicity and other key characteristics across numerous entities in order to identify key trends, progress and unintended consequences. At all levels – federal, state and institutional – the nation falls short in equipping leaders with the data needed for shared ownership of Black learner success. For instance, the U.S. Education Department does not collect race/ethnicity data with loan/income data, thus analysis by subgroups is not currently possible. Program-level outcomes data are not available by race/ethnicity. We cannot assess nor track economic ROI for Black learners without this information. Similarly, the FASFA does not require race/ethnicity data either, posing similar limitations to disaggregation of data. Additionally, most states do not have centralized higher education data



systems and institutional practices are case by case. Currently, *some* relevant information is available at the institutional level; however, trends across states and nationally must be consistently tracked in order to systematically address and correct inequities. As data practices become streamlined, we must be willing to hold leaders accountable where data trends show consistent shortcomings regarding Black learner success.

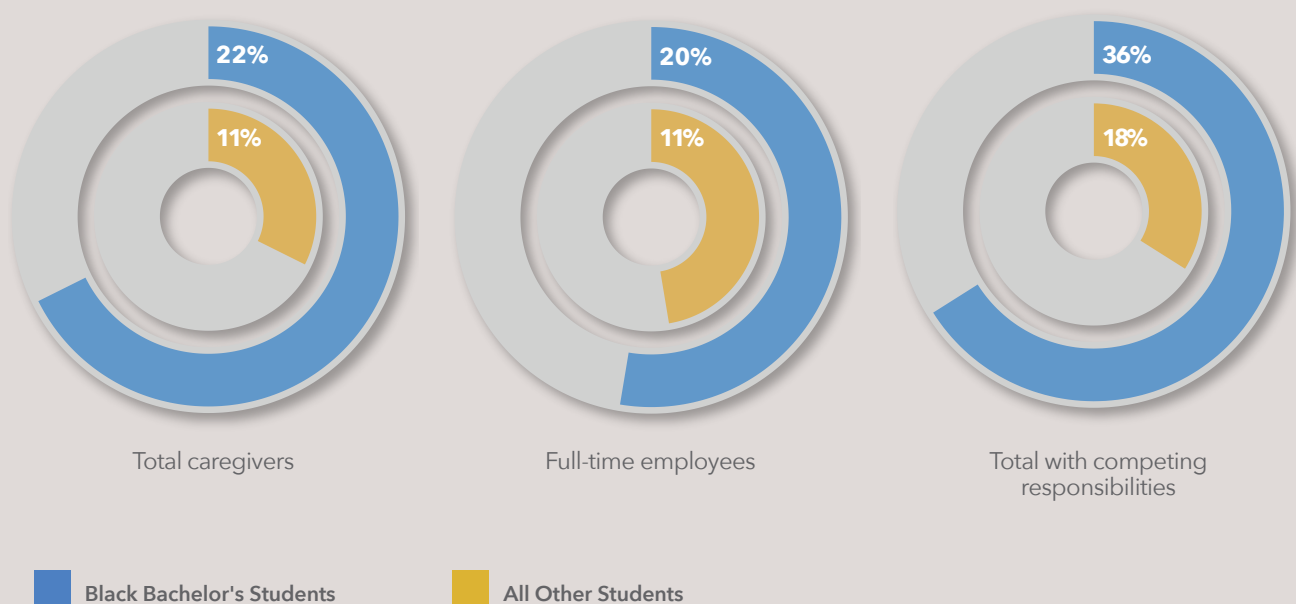
**Academic and Social Supports that Create a Sense of Belonging** are required throughout every students' educational journey from recruitment through completion. In classrooms generally, and in American higher education specifically, education is "disconnected from helping students understand themselves and the power structures that influence their worlds and how these structures operate to stifle or obfuscate young people's purpose." Too few colleges intentionally commit to creating a sense of belonging for the varied experiences of Black learners by embracing the "cultural wealth in communities that have historically been seen as less than genius and in those who may not have had a formal education."<sup>16</sup> To create this sense of belonging a collaborative, coordinated effort is needed across academic departments, students affairs, and community organizations so that Black learners are seen and holistically supported.

**Among all postsecondary institutions, 21% of currently enrolled Black students say they feel discriminated against "frequently" or "occasionally" in their program, vs. 15% of all other students."<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, the likelihood of feeling discrimination increases as the racial diversity of the student body declines. A sense of belonging is a critical factor in realizing the value proposition for Black learners and ultimately increasing their educational attainment.**

Both academic and social supports are critical as Black learners disproportionately face financial and additional life challenges that make it difficult to focus attention on learning. Like all learners, Black learners face non-tuition costs such as meeting basic and learning-adjacent needs including mental health, childcare, housing, transportation and food; however, have less resources to mitigate these challenges.<sup>18</sup>

- 15% of Black students are caregivers for adult family members or friends, vs. 8% of other students
- 11% of Black students are parents or guardians of children under 18, vs. 7% of other students
- Overall, 22% of Black students have caregiver responsibilities, vs. 11% of other students
- 20% of Black students are employed full-time, vs. 11% of other students
- Altogether, Black students are about twice as likely as other bachelor's students to have additional responsibilities as caregivers or full-time workers - 36% vs. 18%, respectively.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of bachelor's students who have responsibilities as caregivers or full-time employees




Based on the 2021 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), 29% of respondents are food insecure and 14% are housing insecure. Black and other historically marginalized populations report the highest levels of running out of food and going hungry with 39% of Black respondents being food insecure within the 30 days of completing the survey.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Black learners often work multiple jobs to meet these needs, struggling to balance work with school. In a recent Gallup survey, there was a 21 point difference between Blacks and other students, regarding the need for responsive options that aligns with what all learners need.<sup>20</sup> Institutions and other entities need to be aware of and responsive to these needs as they impact Black learners' success. Flexible delivery modes such as course length, schedule, and virtual and/or hybrid instruction are not "options" if we commit to serving well the varied needs of Black learners.

Policies and practices must proactively prevent these challenges experienced by many Black learners, while acknowledging the historical trauma associated with formal learning this community experienced and still experiences. Safety and trust are simply too low to assume that "if we build it they will come." Colleges should build ally relationships with local organizations who already have established trust with Black communities and can offer expertise in how to connect meaningfully with Black learners. These allies can collaborate to provide early exposure that explicitly addresses how Black learners will belong and experience value. These experiences, typical among better-resourced research universities, need to extend to community colleges and public regional universities and include public school partnerships, campus visits, family days, overnight visits, and campus orientations. Black learners should have opportunities to be on a community college campus prior to enrollment and immediately part of an intentional peer cohort; seeing oneself there is critical.

Institutions are responsible for creating and maintaining a welcome, opening environment in which Black learners can thrive. However, federal and state governments have a large role to play through the allocation of resources and distribution of power that impact Black learners in all aspects of their life. To realize the postsecondary value proposition for Black learners each stakeholder must be willing to challenge the status quo that is harming Black learners.

**Learner-Centered Teaching Practices for Black Learners** are essential to delivering value to Black learners as they navigate postsecondary opportunities. Centuries of lowered expectations and lack of cultural appreciation of Black students' experiences must all be acknowledged and addressed. Black students deserve to be seen for the brilliant, unique individuals they are without having to constantly battle overt anti-Black bias, microaggressions, or non-inclusive practices which can all inhibit the learning process.



Too little attention is paid to the teaching and learning experiences of Black students, and how these experiences contribute to their success. Faculty must be trained, retrained, and supported in culturally responsive pedagogy and creating inclusive environments. Since there are numerous types of learners with varying demands and experiences, we must systematically value their time and backgrounds. This requires the intentional creation of processes, policies and programs that esteem, rather than marginalize, the lived experiences of Black learners.

Strategies to address this include analyzing overall success rates of Black students from an institutional perspective. Consideration of who walks out of the class successfully, the extent to which culturally competent teaching practices and curriculum are used, feedback from Black learners directly on classroom support and value, inclusive assessment measures, and culturally relevant pedagogy are concrete examples of how institutions can actualize stated beliefs of diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Actively working toward faculty being reflective of the student body is also important. A visual representation of someone can be extremely motivating; this affirmation of identity also supports their success. There is evidence on the effectiveness of increased racial

diversity of faculty for all students,<sup>21</sup> and Black students in particular.<sup>22</sup> Who is teaching, what is being taught, and how it is taught all matter. Students learn best when they not only have the appropriate support needed to succeed, but also when they are reflected in the curriculum, pedagogy and discourse of the classroom.

The Virginia Community College System took initiative to proactively create a culture of belonging with their complete redesign of their approach to law enforcement following repeated murders of Black people by police which contributed to system level change across the state.<sup>23</sup> A Criminal Justice Community Partners Committee was created that included community groups. Curriculum redesign, faculty diversity, elevating community partner voice, and engaged training were named priorities. This intention and consistency is required to revamp institutions of learning to support and enrich Black learners and communities at large in which they exist.

## Why LEVEL UP and Get REAL?

It is critical for Black Americans to have equitable opportunities to attain a postsecondary credential which creates access to higher-wage jobs and increases social and political capital that impacts not only their lives but their families, future generations and increased economic sustainability for America's overall economy.

Creating intentional opportunities for Black learners is a heightened imperative given society's historical exclusion of Black learners from education during enslavement and continued structural inequalities that exists today. In order to do so, it is inherent that we understand, articulate and ensure that there is in fact value for Black learners to continue postsecondary education including credentialing programs, community colleges, and four-year institutions. This critical work is not just about increasing Black learners' understanding of the inherent value of postsecondary education. It is rooted in acknowledging that postsecondary education in its current and originally designed structures does not provide Black learners the access and opportunities that have led to economic and life success for others. **This reality must be changed – not just the narrative – through intentional investment and joint action delivering on these core commitments to ensure Black learners thrive.**



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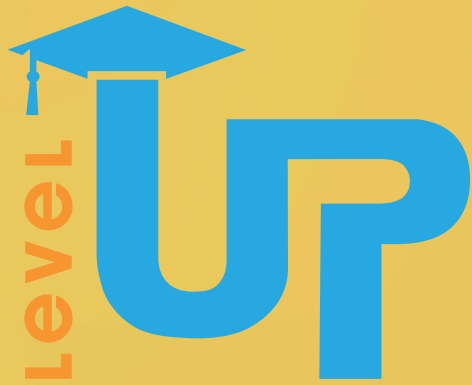
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Most importantly, we thank Black learners who have yet to experience a truly equitable, just educational experience yet continuously strive for success. We hope to center these voices and experiences as we continue on with a call to action. Our intent is not to create yet another document of the problems; however, to collaboratively and intentionally activate collective solutions to enact change.

**PROJECT NOTE: THE ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS PROVIDED IN THIS BRIEF DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE INDIVIDUALS OR ORGANIZATIONS LISTED IN THIS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. THIS BRIEF IS PART OF A LARGER PROJECT LED BY HCM STRATEGISTS AND MADE POSSIBLE WITH FUNDING SUPPORT FROM LUMINA FOUNDATION.**

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

In collaboration with:

