

What Are HBCU Colleges? Facts About Historically Black Colleges And Universities

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are uniquely American institutions. Just as the U.S. would not be the culturally dynamic country it is without jazz music and hip-hop culture, its intellectual and political landscapes would be weaker without the contributions of HBCU colleges.

Although [HBCUs](#) have been around since the 1830s, they have received newfound interest in the past few years thanks to HBCU alum Kamala Harris' election to vice president of the United States and the recent Black Lives Matter movement.

While HBCUs account for less than 3% of America's colleges and universities, they enroll 9% of America's Black college students, according to data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES).

What Is an HBCU?

The U.S. Department of Education defines an HBCU as a college or university established before 1964 with the primary mission of educating Black students.

Origins

Most HBCUs are located in the American South, going as far west as Texas and Oklahoma and even as far north as Ohio and Pennsylvania. These institutions were founded by activists and philanthropists who understood the transformative powers of a formal education and wanted to extend such opportunities to Black Americans.

HBCUs have traditionally been seen as safe and nurturing spaces for Black students, given that the majority of their students, faculty, administration and staff are Black.

Mission

HBCUs have grown in size and stature since the 19th century, enrolling around 287,000 students as of 2021. Though these schools have long accepted students of any race or ethnicity, they are still guided by a mission to educate, uplift and empower the Black community.

As bastions of Black intellectualism, they serve as epicenters of Black empowerment and intersectional social justice movements. Public intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who authored groundbreaking texts such as *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Talented Tenth*, and Toni Morrison, who won the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes and authored the novels *Sula* and *Beloved*, attended HBCUs for undergrad.

Looking Forward

HBCUs have been experiencing a recent renaissance thanks to Millennial and Gen-Z students raised on economic and social justice movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Compared to their predecessors, these students are generally more aware of the issues surrounding racial inequity in the United States and have less tolerance for such offenses.

A Brief HBCU History

HBCUs were founded in the 19th and 20th centuries to offer Black Americans opportunities to earn college degrees when, at the time, most predominantly white institutions (PWIs) refused to admit them. Several HBCUs started as colleges of education, intending for graduates to go on to teach Black Americans at all grade levels.

Most HBCUs were founded after the Civil War; [Clark Atlanta University](#), for example, became the first HBCU in the American South when founded in 1865. HBCUs became sanctuaries of higher education for Black students from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Movement.

The successes of the Civil Rights Movement led to better federal funding and resources for many HBCUs, leading to a 47% enrollment increase between 1976 and 2010. By 2021, non-Black learners made up 25% of HBCU student enrollment, compared to 15% in 1976.

Amid renewed attention toward HBCUs, students and administrators are fighting for financial equity. Having been underfunded for centuries, several public HBCUs are suing their state governments for financial compensation.

After a 15-year lawsuit, a coalition of Maryland's four public HBCUs resulted in a \$577 million settlement from the state in 2021. Inspired, Florida A&M University students recently sued the state of Florida for chronic underfunding of their HBCU.

Philanthropists such as Mackenzie Scott and the HBCU Transformation Project have also joined the fray by boosting HBCUs' endowments to help fund student scholarships and capital improvement projects.

HBCU Fast Facts

- You can find 99 HBCUs across 19 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. (Source: NCES)
- Cheyney University of Pennsylvania became the first HBCU when it was founded in 1837.
- Of all degrees awarded by HBCUs, nearly 75% go to Black students, but HBCUs accept students of any race or ethnicity. (Source: NCES)
- Although HBCUs represent a small percentage of America's higher education landscape, they graduate nearly 50% of Black teachers, 70% of Black doctors and dentists, and 80% of Black lawyers. (Source: [U.S. Department of Education](#))
- One-third of HBCUs received their largest donations to date after the death of George Floyd and the resulting racial justice protests in 2020. (Source: [WeAreHBCUs](#))
- With 14 HBCUs, Alabama is the state with the most HBCUs. (Source: [Advance Local](#))

Reasons To Consider an HBCU

If the goal of all HBCUs were to be summed up in one phrase, it would be: student success. Whether public or private, a research powerhouse or a teaching-oriented liberal arts college, any HBCU's goal is to prepare its students to thrive as intellectuals, professionals and thoughtful citizens.

Intellectual and Activist Community

Is it any surprise that HBCUs produce nearly half of America's Black teachers? With two of the early 20th century's most important American intellectuals—W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington—having attended HBCUs, these institutions have long offered a sanctuary for Black intellectuals and a hub for Black activism.

Look at the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, the Black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Black Lives Matter protests of the 2010s and 2020s, and you'll find the leaders of Black political initiatives have often come from HBCUs.

Alumni Success

The strength of HBCU alumni networks is evident in the number of HBCU graduates who thrive in professions where networking is key. The [National HBCU Alumni Alliance](#) reports that HBCUs have produced about 40% of Black engineers, 40% of Black members of Congress, 50% of Black lawyers, 70% of Black doctors, and 80% of Black judges in America.

Moreover, a [Gallup poll](#) indicates that Black HBCU graduates are more likely to report better financial well-being and a stronger sense of purpose than those who attended non-HBCUs.

Boosting Student Confidence

HBCU professors are known for investing their energy to effectively teach, mentor and uplift their students. And the results are clear: [A study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*](#) found that Black medical students who attended HBCUs reported higher levels of confidence than those at PWIs.

HBCUs provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in their chosen field, also boosting their confidence and self-esteem for their future careers.

Diversity and Inclusion

When PWIs refer to diversity initiatives, they often mean racial diversity. But because the Black community is not a monolith, diversity campaigns take different forms at HBCUs.

HBCUs celebrate the diversity of the African diaspora by including Afro-Latinos, African-born students and Black students from countries with small Black populations. And just like PWIs, HBCUs have made an effort to account for student differences when it comes to class, sexuality, religion, disability and other identity markers, ensuring no one feels like an outsider.

Financial Resources

HBCU students qualify for the same federal student aid programs as students at other institutions. However, HBCUs also receive special federal funding carved out just for HBCUs, thanks to The Higher Education Act of 1965. This expands funding opportunities for HBCUs.

The Biden-Harris Administration has invested more than \$7 billion in HBCUs and their relationships with various government agencies, all with the aim of bolstering internship and job opportunities for HBCU students.

Additionally, philanthropic organizations that support the Black community such as the United Fund, NAACP and the Thurgood Marshall Fund offer specialized programs for HBCU students and administrators.

Affordability

HBCUs make a concerted effort to offer an affordable college experience. In 2022, NCES reported that tuition and fees for in-state students at HBCUs cost \$9,900 per year, compared to around \$11,160 for in-state learners at all higher ed institutions.

The [Thurgood Marshall College Fund](#) reports that 52% of HBCU students are first-generation college students, who often come from lower-income backgrounds. As such, low tuition costs are a major draw for prospective HBCU students.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About HBCU Colleges

What does HBCU mean in college?

HBCU stands for historically Black college or university. This federal designation applies to colleges and universities that were founded before 1964 to educate Black students in a time when other colleges and universities refused to admit them. Although students of any race or ethnicity can attend an HBCU, “historically” is used in the designation to honor the legacy of these colleges.

How many HBCUs are there?

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes 99 colleges and universities as HBCUs, 50 of them are public and 49 of them are private. HBCUs are located in 19 U.S. states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Who are some famous HBCU alumni?

Prominent HBCU alums include Vice President Kamala Harris (Howard University), media mogul Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University), astronaut Christa McAuliffe (Bowie State University), U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock (Morehouse College), NAACP co-founder W.E.B. Du Bois (Fisk University), comedian Wanda Sykes (Hampton University), and singer Erykah Badu (Grambling State University).