



Educational Justice Journal

Changing the Narrative: Be the HBCU Leader Who Makes a Difference

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Abstract

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) play a critical role in advancing educational access, workforce preparation, and social mobility for Black communities, yet they continue to confront structural inequities, deficit-based narratives, and sustainability challenges. This conceptual paper examines how transformational leadership can serve as a strategic and equity-centered response to these conditions. Grounded in the transformational leadership framework, the paper explores how HBCU leaders can address institutional barriers, reshape public perception, advance inclusive excellence, and foster sustainable pathways to success. Drawing on an integrative review of leadership and higher education literature, the paper offers actionable, practice-oriented recommendations aligned with the mission of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE). By positioning leadership as both a cultural and structural intervention, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about Black leadership, institutional advocacy, and justice-centered transformation within higher education.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, HBCUs, institutional success, inclusive excellence, Black leadership

Introduction

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) perform a vital role in American higher education, particularly for African American students. These institutions have been instrumental in providing students with access to higher education, fostering cultural empowerment, and promoting social and economic mobility (White House Council of Economic Advisers, 2024; Reeves & Joo, 2017). For example, according to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF, 2024), although HBCUs represent only 3% of higher education institutions in the United States, they produce nearly 20% of all African American graduates. In particular, HBCUs graduate nearly 25% of all Black students earning degrees in STEM fields and close to 50% of Black K–12 teachers across the country (UNCF, 2021; UNCF, 2024).

However, in today's higher education environment, HBCUs face significant and persistent challenges, ranging from institutional funding (Escobar et al., 2023), public perception issues (Perry, 2019), to enrollment and retention concerns (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2025). Notwithstanding, although HBCUs continue to produce strong outcomes (College Board Research, 2024; Edwards et al., 2024), it is critical to positively change the narrative surrounding these institutions, especially regarding their value and potential. This paper argues that transformational leadership offers a powerful framework for addressing these interconnected challenges. Specifically, it examines how transformational leadership can empower current and emerging HBCU leaders to confront institutional barriers, promote inclusive excellence, and cultivate sustainable pathways to success. In alignment with the mission of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE), this paper positions leadership as both a moral and strategic imperative for reshaping institutional narratives and advancing justice-centered outcomes in higher education.

Literature Review

An integrative literature review strategy (Torraco, 2005) was employed to examine scholarship at the intersection of transformational leadership, HBCUs, and higher education equity.

Searches were conducted using ERIC and Google Scholar with key words related to the HBCU leadership, transformational leadership, inclusive excellence, and institutional sustainability.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, foundational leadership texts, and reports from credible organizational sources.

The literature was synthesized to identify recurring institutional challenges facing HBCUs and to examine how transformational leadership practices have been applied in higher education practice. In addition to theoretical and conceptual sources, the review incorporates illustrative examples of HBCUs that have implemented successful leadership-driven practices to address funding inequities, public perception, and capacity building. Collectively, this body of literature provides a foundation for examining transformational leadership for institutional change within real-world institutional contexts.

Transformational Leadership Within HBCUs

Northouse (2019) defines transformational leadership as a process that changes and transforms individuals. This leadership style emerged in the early 1980s and focuses on the charismatic and affective dimensions of guiding and influencing organizational groups (Bryman, 1992). According to Bass and Riggio (2006), this paradigm emphasizes intrinsic motivation and the development of followers. This leadership approach is especially powerful for stakeholders seeking inspiration, empowerment, and long-term personal growth. Historical figures who have represented this leadership style include Frederick Douglass (Bass & Riggio, 2006), Martin Luther King (Pennsylvania State University, 2021), and John Lewis (Jackson-Weaver, 2020).

Northouse (2019) explains that transformational leadership is built on four core components, often referred to as the "Four I's". These include Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Together, these components create a leadership style that empowers followers to satisfy their needs and exceed expectations. This framework is particularly critical to HBCUs because of its capacity to influence individuals and entire organizational cultures.

According to Northouse, Idealized Influence refers to leaders who model high standards, act ethically, and lead by example. These leaders are visionary and earn the trust, respect, and admiration of their followers. In return, stakeholders are motivated to emulate the leader's behavior and commit to the organization's shared mission. At HBCUs, this leadership component is essential to building trust and transparency among stakeholders. Additionally, this area has the potential to inspire constituents to believe and contribute to a collective vision of excellence and transformation.

Inspirational Motivation, as described by Northouse, occurs when leaders articulate a compelling vision and communicate high expectations in ways that uplift and energize others. By using encouraging words and shared goals, leaders foster a sense of collective purpose. As a result, followers often exceed expectations and achieve more than they would through self-interest alone. In the HBCU context, this component is especially important in addressing internal and external challenges that can contribute to decreased morale and motivation. Intellectual Stimulation involves encouraging followers to think critically, challenge assumptions, and explore innovative solutions to complex problems. Northouse highlights that leaders who embrace this component help foster a culture of creativity, open dialogue, bidirectional reflection, and new ideas. This aspect of transformational leadership is particularly

important at HBCUs, as it empowers students, faculty, and staff to collaboratively address institutional challenges. By promoting innovation and critical thinking, leaders can engage stakeholders in developing meaningful, forward-thinking solutions that support institutional growth.

Finally, Individualized Consideration reflects the leader's commitment to recognizing and supporting the unique needs of each follower. Northouse emphasizes that through active listening and personalized coaching or mentoring, leaders help stakeholders realize and achieve their full potential. This type of relational leadership fosters self-actualization and long-term professional development. At HBCUs, where community and mentorship are deeply embedded in the institutional culture (Lomax, 2024), personal investment by leaders is essential in recruiting, retaining, and nurturing students, faculty, and staff. Overall, utilizing the transformational framework within the HBCU context is essential to addressing institutional barriers, promoting a culture of inclusive excellence, and fostering sustainable pathways to success.

Addressing Institutional Barriers

HBCUs function as transformative spaces for academic excellence (White House Council of Economic Advisers, 2024) and upward mobility (UNCF, 2021). However, despite these significant contributions, HBCUs face specific and contextual barriers that hinder institutional progress and threaten long-term sustainability (Adams & Tucker, 2022; Williams & Davis, 2019). These challenges affect students, faculty, staff, and leadership across various dimensions of campus life. Rather than responding reactively, transformational HBCU leaders must adopt a proactive approach by targeting critical issues, strengthening internal capacity, and empowering institutional stakeholders. The following section identifies two key barriers impacting HBCUs, and outlines approaches to address them effectively.

Institutional Funding

As George-Joseph and Kodnani (2023) note, one challenge for HBCUs is persistent underfunding. Specifically, Adams and Tucker (2022) reported that, when adjusted for inflation, HBCUs have been underfunded by approximately \$12.8 billion. For example, in North Carolina, one state supported institution was appropriated \$16,400 per student, while a nearby HBCU received \$8,200 per student (Escobar et al., 2023). Escobar also highlights that this financial disparity is further compounded by lower alumni giving rates, which may reflect broader patterns of racial wealth inequality in the United States.

Also, HBCU endowments are approximately 70% lower than those of non-HBCU institutions (Williams & Davis, 2019). These funding disparities directly impact institutional stakeholders. For example, institutional funding impacts students' tuition costs (Stein et al., 2024), facilities (Hauschildt et al., 2025), and academic outcomes (Burmicky et al., 2024). Additionally, faculty have heavier workloads with teaching courses, advising students, completing research, and participating in service, often with lower compensation compared to other institutional types (Escobar et al., 2023). In response to these challenges, transformational leaders must garner financial support and cultivate strategic partnerships to promote institutional sustainability.

Alumni engagement represents a particularly powerful avenue for strengthening institutional identity and long-term financial sustainability, especially when outreach strategies are culturally responsive and grounded in alumni identity and lived experience (Williams et al., 2014). Taken together, these conditions underscore the necessity for transformational HBCU leaders to move beyond deficit management toward proactive, relationship-centered strategies that leverage alumni engagement and strategic partnerships as critical mechanisms for institutional sustainability.

Funding Advocacy and Partnerships

Transformational leaders take initiative to advocate on behalf of their institutions, especially at the state level, to secure sustained financial support. As Escobar et al. (2023) emphasizes, endowments alone cannot compensate for the significant financial gap between the needs of HBCUs and the state funding they receive. To address this gap, leaders must actively engage with policymakers by clearly articulating institutional challenges and demonstrating the measurable impact of state investment. This type of visionary and proactive leadership reflects the transformational leader's role in driving institutional change and mobilizing external support. It is especially imperative during a time when policymakers and taxpayers are demanding increased accountability for the use of state funds.

Moreover, because many state-supported institutions are expected to drive economic productivity (Association of American Universities, n.d.), transformational leaders must embody strategic thinking and inspire confidence in their institution's ability to meet workforce demands. Presenting compelling data and success stories clearly demonstrates sustainable, mission-driven impacts. For example, South Carolina State University's (2024, 2025) engineering technology and teacher education programs can be highlighted as actively addressing critical shortages in STEM and K–12 education across the state. By showcasing high job placement rates or notable alumni outcomes, leaders fulfill the transformational leadership goal of aligning institutional work with broader social needs, turning vision into measurable, community-centered progress. In addition to advocacy, transformational leaders must also cultivate strategic partnerships. According to Williams and Davis (2019), public HBCUs rely more heavily on local, state, and federal funding than their non-HBCU counterparts. Specifically, 54% of HBCU revenue comes from these sources, compared to 38% for non-HBCUs. This disproportionate reliance on funding

places HBCUs in a vulnerable position when political climates shift or public funds are constrained. For example, multiple sources (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018; SHEEO, 2020) have found that federal and state funding levels have not risen to their same level as before the 2008 housing market crash. Therefore, to increase financial sustainability and reduce dependency, transformational leaders must actively pursue partnerships that align with institutional missions and long-term goals.

Foremost among these partnerships are alumni. As graduates of the institution, alumni are a core stakeholder group for sustainable funding and advocacy. As Williams et al. (2014) describe, targeted, culturally resonant outreach strategies such as alumni reunions, generationally tailored marketing campaigns, and expanded opportunities for alumni engagement beyond athletics can increase giving and strengthen institutional identity. These two outcomes are especially valuable for underfunded HBCUs.

Building on this foundation, transformational leaders can then expand other external partnerships, including corporate sponsorships, philanthropic collaborations, public-private infrastructure projects, and workforce-aligned training programs. For example, Howard University (2021a; 2021b) has partnered with Google and Netflix to expand access to technology and media careers. Similarly, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (2020) leveraged a strategic relationship with IBM to support quantum computing and STEM education initiatives. These alliances generate both direct funding and expanded access to resources, while also enhancing institutional visibility and reputation.

Public Perception

Despite HBCUs' remarkable history, contributions, and demonstrated success, these institutions frequently encounter negative public perception and stigma (Perry, 2019). These

perceptions are often rooted in external issues such as systemic underfunding, which impact institutional capacity and contribute to the undervaluing of HBCU missions (White House Council of Economic Advisers, 2024). Consequently, HBCUs are sometimes portrayed as less rigorous, less prestigious, or less capable than other institutional types (Wright, 2022). This stigma not only affects student recruitment and alumni engagement but also influences external funding, strategic partnerships, and policy decisions. Transformational leaders can respond to these challenges by developing positive narratives and providing a variety of opportunities to highlight stakeholders.

Reshaping Narratives and Amplifying Voices

To combat persistent negative narratives, transformational leaders must take an active role in reshaping public perception by emphasizing institutional strengths, student success, and the unique cultural and social value HBCUs offer. Transformational leaders must also employ a leadership style that emphasizes identity, cultural competence, and equity (Santamaría, 2014). As such, by integrating transformational and equity-driven leadership, HBCU leaders can reframe institutional identity in ways that affirm cultural assets.

One prominent example is Dr. Michael Lomax, president and CEO of the UNCF (2024), who consistently publishes op-eds, speaks at national conferences, and engages with media to amplify the contributions and impact of HBCUs. Additionally, initiatives like The HBCU Effect® by UNCF challenge misconceptions by showcasing the substantial return on investment of HBCUs through data-driven reports, strategic media campaigns, and national storytelling (UNCF, n.d.). These efforts reflect a transformational approach, as leaders not only react to negative narratives but actively reframe them with compelling, mission-aligned messaging.

Equally important is elevating student and alumni voices. Involving current students in outreach, recruitment, and media opportunities enables the public to visibly identify positive student outcomes. Likewise, amplifying alumni voices through targeted storytelling and engagement initiatives can reshape public narratives and reinforce institutional pride. As Williams et al. (2014) emphasize, tailoring communication strategies to reflect alumni identity and lived experience reinforces institutional pride, an approach aligned with transformational leadership practices. Promoting Inclusive Excellence

One vital framework transformational leaders at HBCUs can adopt to address persistent challenges is inclusive excellence. In this model, rather than solely having a diverse body of stakeholders, active inclusion of these individuals is critical to driving academic and institutional success (Williams et al., 2005). As Santa Clara University (n.d.) notes, inclusive excellence recognizes that an institution's success depends on how it values, engages, and includes university stakeholders. Consequently, embedding inclusive practices throughout all areas of campus life can enhance student outcomes, support faculty and staff development, and strengthen their overall institutional identity (Shay et al., 2025).

Transformational leaders can accomplish this goal by grounding their approach in culturally responsive leadership. For example, Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasize that culturally responsive leadership requires affirming stakeholder identities, elevating community voices, and integrating equity-driven practices across various organizational levels. When combined with the Four I's of transformational leadership, culturally responsive leadership provides an inseparable framework to advance inclusive excellence at HBCUs. Building from this foundation, transformational leaders can advance inclusive excellence by countering two critical challenges that may hinder its implementation.

Faculty and Staff Capacity and Development

As Williams et al. (2005) note, successful implementation of inclusive excellence requires significant institutional capacity building, particularly the development and support of trained personnel. However, one challenge that may prevent HBCUs from incorporating inclusive excellence is that, as a byproduct of financial constraints, they often operate with fewer faculty, staff, and administrators (Taylor & Stan, 2025). This shortage places a disproportionate burden on existing personnel and limits the institution's ability to fully engage in and sustain inclusive practices.

Specifically, understaffing can hinder the provision of comprehensive professional development in inclusive pedagogies, and the increased workload on current personnel can lead to burnout and reduce their capacity and willingness to participate in such initiatives. Additionally, lower salaries and fewer research opportunities (often linked to funding) make it challenging to attract and retain high-quality faculty (Escobar et al., 2023). Consequently, to advance the implementation of inclusive excellence despite these barriers, transformational leaders must prioritize internal stakeholders.

Strengthening and Sustaining Faculty and Staff

Transformational leaders must prioritize the professional growth of existing faculty and staff by allocating internal resources for ongoing training in inclusive excellence. In addition to structured professional development, mentorship programs and collaborative learning communities can promote shared responsibility for inclusion. Reducing workloads by strategically increasing instructional and support personnel can also mitigate burnout and improve morale. As Williams et al. (2025) emphasizes, efforts to enhance institutional capacity will strengthen the implementation of inclusive excellence.

Simultaneously, leaders must also foster inclusive hiring and retention practices. Given chronic understaffing at many HBCUs (Escobar et al., 2023), increasing the number of full- and part-time personnel is critical to reducing workload, preventing burnout, and sustaining inclusive excellence initiatives. Once individuals are hired, transformational leaders must foster a supportive campus culture where all employees feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and professional growth. This includes onboarding that affirms identity, mentoring that promotes development, and retention strategies that are relational rather than transactional. For example, Spelman College's (2005) faculty mentoring program connects new hires with experienced faculty to support long-term success.

Belonging and Engagement

As Williams et al. (2025) highlights, inclusive excellence requires fostering environments where all campus members, especially students, faculty, and staff from various backgrounds feel a strong sense of belonging and are actively engaged in institutional life. Although HBCUs have historically served as affirming spaces for Black students (Palmer & Gasman, 2008), the need for intentional practices around belonging has become even more pressing in today's higher education landscape. Likewise, faculty and staff need belonging and engagement, as well.

Recognition and Inclusion

Transformational leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1994) must create opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to shape the institutional culture through open dialogue, collaboration, and meaningful participation. This includes supporting student-led initiatives, holding regular town halls or listening sessions, and acting on the feedback provided. Advisory councils (Northouse, 2019) or working groups that reflect the institution's diversity can also help guide decision-making with inclusion in mind.

Equally important are intentional efforts to celebrate diverse identities, contributions, and achievements, which foster a culture of appreciation and inclusion. Leaders can develop recognition programs, campus traditions that honor different cultures, and support networks like mentoring programs. When stakeholders such as students feel seen and valued, their engagement in institutional life, and their commitment to its mission, deepens (Strayhorn, 2012).

Fostering Sustainable Pathways to Success

Transformational leadership within HBCUs must ultimately lead to sustainable pathways, or the long-term success of institutions. For HBCUs to thrive, transformational leaders must be proactive in implementing short- and long-term solutions to continuous historical challenges. In this context, sustainability extends beyond financial health to institutional relevance, stakeholder success, and innovation (Myrick-Harris, 2014). To advance long-term sustainability, transformational leaders must address two critical challenges related to enrollment management and leadership succession.

Enrollment Challenges and Retention

One persistent challenge facing all institutions of higher education is declining enrollment, exacerbated by factors such as the demographic cliff. However, as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2025) highlights, this trend poses an immediate existential threat to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which hold a smaller share of the higher education market. Additionally, research suggests that HBCUs tend to have lower retention rates than other institutional types, particularly among African American male students (Richards et al., 2012).

Strengthening Enrollment and Retention

Enrollment and retention efforts are most effective when guided by transformational leaders who embrace innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) can move beyond transactional recruitment by leveraging predictive analytics and early alert systems to personalize the student experience (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Transformational leaders not only adopt these tools but build cross-functional teams to dismantle structural barriers facing HBCU students.

As Hossler et al. (2015) express, institutions that embed SEM within a culture of mission-driven leadership are more responsive to shifting demographics and student needs. Through dynamic leadership, HBCUs can coordinate financial aid, academic advising, and student support in ways that affirm students' cultural identities while improving institutional outcomes. As such, enrollment management becomes a strategy and reflection of visionary and transformational leadership.

In addition to SEM, transformational leaders play a crucial role in designing and advancing culturally responsive First Year Experience (FYE) programs that speak to students' identities. As Tinto (2012) and Strayhorn (2012) note, student persistence improves when these stakeholders experience belonging and institutional integration. Consequently, implementing FYE programming may dramatically impact student retention.

The Leadership Pipeline and Succession Challenge at HBCUs

Sustainable success at HBCUs depends on preparing the next generation of institutional leaders, including faculty, staff, and administrators, who are equipped to navigate complex challenges while preserving the institution's mission and legacy. However, Minor (2020) found that HBCUs lack structured leadership development programs and intentional succession planning. This absence can create leadership gaps, hinder innovation, and make transitions disruptive.

Leadership Development and Succession Planning

Transformational leaders should implement structured mentorship and professional development programs that identify and nurture leadership potential within the institution. By investing in the growth of faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators, HBCUs can create a strong internal pipeline for future leadership roles. According to Freeman and Gasman (2014), mentorship within HBCUs not only supports professional growth but also reinforces institutional culture and mission. These programs will help emerging leaders develop critical transformational competencies in areas such as vision-setting and adaptive change.

Alongside mentorship and leadership development, transformational leaders must also prioritize formal succession planning as a strategic imperative and ensure leaders are aligned with institutional values. This involves identifying high-potential employees early, offering stretch assignments, and embedding succession planning into the institution's long-term strategy. Research by Rowe (2010) emphasizes that succession planning, when tied to leadership development, helps organizations maintain momentum during transitions and prevents stagnation. At HBCUs, where mission alignment and cultural knowledge are especially critical, intentional succession planning can preserve legacy while fostering innovation.

Actionable Recommendations

To ensure that HBCUs thrive, transformational leaders must enact visionary, inspirational, motivational, and culture centered action. The recommendations derived from this review are summarized in Table 1. Each recommendation is paired with suggested indicators of success to guide HBCU leaders in implementation and assessment.

Table 1.***Transformational Leadership Strategies for HBCUs***

Challenge	Transformational Strategy	Measurable Outcome/Indicator
Institutional Funding	Funding Advocacy and Alignment	Documented increases in state/federal appropriations; case studies of policy impact
	Cultivating Strategic Partnerships & Alumni Networks	Growth in alumni giving rates (e.g., % increase annually); number/value of corporate or philanthropic partnerships
Public Perception	Reshape Public Perception	Positive media coverage; improved community/public perception survey results
	Leverage Student & Alumni Voices	Increased alumni participation in events; number of student-led outreach initiatives
Inclusive Excellence	Strengthen Faculty & Staff Development	Number of professional development programs completed; faculty/staff retention rates

	Foster Inclusive Hiring & Retention	Increased representation/diversity in hiring; improved employee satisfaction surveys Frequency of town halls/listening sessions;
	Center Student & Employee Voice	documented policy/program changes from feedback
	Build Cultures of Recognition & Connection	Increased recognition events; higher campus climate/belonging survey scores
Sustainability	Strategic Enrollment & Retention	Enrollment stability (year-over-year % change); retention rates disaggregated by student group
	Comprehensive First-Year Experience (FYE) Programs	Improved first-to-second year retention; increased student satisfaction scores

Challenge	Transformational Strategy	Measurable Outcome/Indicator
	Cultivate Internal Talent	Number of faculty/staff in leadership development programs; promotion rates
	Succession Planning	Existence of formal succession plans; number of leadership roles filled internally

Note. Outcomes are examples; institutions may adapt based on context.

By implementing these recommendations, transformational HBCU leaders will reshape the narrative, remove barriers, champion inclusive excellence, and foster sustainable pathways to success. HBCUs have always been centers of brilliance, resilience, and progress, and with visionary leadership, these institutions will continue to flourish as beacons of empowerment and progress for generations to come.

Conclusion

Transformational leadership is not optional for HBCUs; it is essential. As institutions rooted in resilience, resistance, and collective advancement, HBCUs require leaders who are prepared to confront structural inequities while cultivating inclusive excellence and long-term sustainability. In alignment with AABHE's mission, this paper calls on scholar-practitioners to lead boldly, advocate unapologetically, and reclaim narrative authority. By

positioning

leadership as both a cultural and structural intervention, HBCU leaders can ensure that these institutions continue to serve as engines of equity, innovation, and social transformation for generations to come.

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