



HBCUs TRANSFORMING GENERATIONS:
Social Mobility Outcomes for HBCU Alumni



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Foreword

Despite persistent questions about the purpose of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in contemporary society, we acknowledge that HBCUs remain indispensable to the Black experience in America. This is especially true as it relates to the economic outcomes of the African American community. For more than 77 years, UNCF has been committed to supporting Black students in their efforts to both obtain a degree and climb the socioeconomic ladder. Through those efforts, we have worked diligently with HBCUs to create pathways toward enhanced academic and economic opportunities; in the process, we have cultivated promising practices in service to Black students and the institutions that support them.

This report—*HBCUs Transforming Generations: Social Mobility Outcomes for HBCU Alumni*—offers an in-depth review of the *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rate and its efficiency as a measure of social mobility for Black students at HBCUs. The report includes an overview of the access, success and mobility rates at HBCUs. Additionally, it offers an equity-centered approach to understanding higher education outcomes for underserved students. It underscores that when such an approach to research is taken a clearer picture may be observed of the sheer magnitude of the outcomes produced by HBCUs. This is especially the case as it relates to access to higher education and economic mobility. While we subscribe whole-heartedly to the belief that the above-mentioned rates capture only a singular aspect of institutional success, it is critical to advance and prioritize methods for measuring outcomes that are both comprehensive and equity-informed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael L. Lomax".

Michael L. Lomax, Ph.D.

President and CEO
UNCF





UNCF

Since its inception in 1944, UNCF has dedicated its efforts toward uplifting Black students and equipping HBCUs with the capacity to affect transformational change for their students. UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute (FDPRI) is the nation's foremost research organization focusing on the educational status of African Americans from pre-school through college. FDPRI conducts and disseminates research that informs policymakers, educators, philanthropists and the general public on how best to improve the educational outcomes for Black students and other historically marginalized student groups across the education pipeline.

HBCUs

There are 101 accredited Historically Black Colleges and Universities currently operating in 19 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. While they constitute only 3% of higher education institutions in the country, HBCUs educate 10% of all Black college students. The HBCU student population is currently over 75% Black. These institutions account for 19% of degrees earned by Black students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, HBCUs account for 80% of Black judges, 50% of Black doctors, and 50% of Black lawyers (The Network Journal, 2010). As a general note, an HBCU graduate working full-time throughout their career can expect to earn \$927,000 in additional income as opposed to non-college goers and Black students at non-HBCUs because of their college credentials¹.

HBCUs were founded to both educate Black American students and to equip them with the viable skills necessary to excel in the nation's workforce (Favors, 2019). These institutions are distinctive in their ability to prepare students for their careers while also acknowledging and celebrating their ethnic histories and cultures. As the only higher education institutions with objectives centered on increasing economic and educational opportunities for the Black community, HBCUs are uniquely positioned within the sphere of academia. However, the traditional measures used to quantify their achievements do not consider this important context; therefore, these measures need to be refined.

Social Mobility

UNCF utilized data from Opportunity Insights² to complete this report. The *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rate was specifically leveraged to measure the impact of HBCUs. It is also worthy of noting that UNCF was intentional about applying a culturally responsive lens to this work. Foremost, the economic standings of African Americans can be attributed to the years of economic oppression experienced through centuries of slavery, Reconstruction, mass incarceration, segregation, redlining, restrictive covenants, gentrification and more. An evaluation regarding the upward mobility of HBCU alumni must be informed of the systemic and systematic ways this country has sought to disenfranchise them. This intentionality was done to illustrate the necessity of revising the metrics that are commonly used to measure American students' social mobility.

Social mobility has emerged as a primary measure for understanding the return on investment for the families of college students as well as society more broadly (Reber and Sinclair, 2020). **It evaluates the movement between defined social statuses or socioeconomic statuses within society.** Understanding the social mobility of students attending HBCUs is particularly important since a significant proportion of the student body at the institutions is economically disenfranchised. The majority of HBCU attendees are Black and Pell-grant eligible. Additionally, nearly 40% of HBCU students are first-generation college students. While there are several formulas used to calculate social mobility, for the purposes of this report, we utilize formulas that are the most useful for capturing shifts between socioeconomic statuses.

¹ This estimate reflects incremental earnings averaged across degree and certificate programs.

² Based at Harvard University, Opportunity Insights is a non-partisan, not-for-profit research and policy institute with a central mission to develop solutions that empower families throughout the United States "to rise out of poverty and achieve better life outcomes."



There have been several social mobility measures conceived using the intergenerational mobility data from Opportunity Insights. Table 1 displays the options that UNCF has identified as notable along with their respective definitions. All of these measures focus on students from low-income backgrounds who have attained higher income levels than they had access to previously.

The **access rate** of an institution represents the percentage of students whose household is considered low-income based on their parent or guardian’s income level (This income level may vary based on the measure being used. See Table 1.).

The **success rate** of an institution represents the percentage of those students from backgrounds defined as low-income (access rate) who attain a certain higher income level than the income category their household was in prior to the student’s admission into college or transition into adulthood (This income level may also vary based on the measure being used. See Table 1.).

The **mobility rate** of an institution is the product of the access rate and the success rate. Put simply, it is the percentage of students who were raised in what is defined as a low-income household and who earned their way into a higher income category. This determines the rate of movement or shifting that occurs amongst the low-income population of students at a particular school from one income strata to another higher one.

TABLE 1: Notable Mobility Measures

Measure	Origin	Access Rate	Success Rate	Mobility Rate
Classic Mobility Rate	Chetty et al. (2017)	Percentage of students coming from the bottom 20%	Of the students coming from the bottom 20%, the percentage that end in the top 20%	Out of all students, the percentage that both come from the bottom 20% and end in the top 20%
Alternative Mobility Rate	Opportunity Insights	Percentage of students coming from the bottom 20%	Of the students coming from the bottom 20%, the percentage that end in the top 60%	Out of all students, the percentage that both come from the bottom 20% and end in the top 60%
Extended Mobility Rate	Espinosa et al. (2018)	Percentage of students coming from the bottom 40%	Of the students coming from the bottom 40%, the percentage that end in the top 40%	Out of all students, the percentage that both come from the bottom 40% and end in the top 40%
Move into Middle Class+	Nathenson et al. (2019)	Percentage of students coming from the bottom 40%	Of the students coming from the bottom 40%, the percentage that end in the top 60%	Out of all students, the percentage that both come from the bottom 40% and end in the top 60%

For the purposes of this report, we use the *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rating because it is most inclusive of students who make any significant upward movement across the socioeconomic strata. By capturing the nuanced income shifts that are attained by some students, their successes are more fully acknowledged; by extension, the impact of the HBCUs they attend are also more fairly assessed. In contrast, competing mobility rate measures fail to account for the persistent systemic oppression of Black Americans by overlooking mobility movements deemed insignificant, though they may have significant impact on life circumstances. Unjustly bypassing the true gains that Black HBCU graduates make (often done when individuals make less than a 40% leap in the social mobility ladder), however subtle, is detrimental to these institutions and the students they serve in a very real way. While some may argue that such incremental shifts are not “significant,” the outcomes are immensely important. For example, even a 10% shift can translate into life-altering access to health insurance, educational options, and expendable income that may ultimately drive outcomes that are both useful and necessary. Ignoring these incremental shifts risks the improvements to individuals, families and communities that otherwise may be imperiled if hard evidence for why HBCUs exist is brushed aside. Few other institutions can boast such outcomes, and UNCF proposes that one of the factors that masks this extremely impactful work is that the current formulas are unnecessarily narrow.



Methodology

UNCF utilized the “Baseline Cross-Sectional Estimates of Child and Parent Income Distributions by College” data set³, which explained intergenerational (involving multiple generations) mobility at American institutions of higher education. This data is based on students born in 1980-1982. 1983-1984 cohort data was used if the preferred 1980-1982 data was incomplete for a particular school. Students were assigned to an institution based on the institution they attended for the majority of their tenure in college. This was captured during the time students were between ages 19 and 22. If a student spent an equal amount of time at multiple institutions, the student was assigned to the first institution. Parental income was measured as the adjusted gross income averaged over the five-year period that the student was between the ages of 15 and 19, and inflation adjusted to 2015 dollars. This income was then compared to the income of other parents with children that fell into the same age categories and was then separated into five sections (or quintiles). Student income was measured as the students’ individual labor earnings as of 2014, which was when the students being targeted would be in their early to mid-thirties. Cohort members’ income was also compared to others their age and then organized into quintiles.

For each institution, the data illuminates the percentage of students who come from each income quintile, which also translates into the income quintile of a student’s household. We refer to the lowest income quintile as 1 and the highest income quintile as 5. For each income quintile the data reveals where students from that quintile end up reaching. Based on the percentage of students that fall into certain pathways (e.g. income quintile 1 to income quintile 4), we can measure intergenerational mobility for each institution in the dataset. Different measures of mobility will consider varying combinations of starting and ending income quintiles.

Sample

For our analysis, we chose to focus on four-year public and private institutions that are considered not-for-profit organizations (N = 1,285). There were 50 HBCUs within the 1,285 schools assessed, which represented over half of the 90 currently operating four-year HBCUs. We analyzed individual HBCUs, HBCU subgroups, how HBCUs compared nationally, and how HBCUs compared to “Ivy Plus” institutions⁴. It is also worth noting that there were a substantial number of HBCU students who were non-local. 38% of HBCU freshmen identified as coming from out-of-state⁵.

We compared HBCUs’ access, success and mobility rates with those of the Ivy Plus institutions due to the prestige they hold in society at-large, with the assumption that a degree from these Ivy Plus institutions equates social mobility for its graduates. We chose to use the various institution types (HBCUs and Ivy Plus institutions) and nationwide averages and averages of non-college goers to illustrate the broad outcomes of American institutions and the broad outcomes for their students.

$$\text{Mobility Rate} = \text{Access Rate} \times \text{Success Rate}$$

³ Data set available at <https://opportunityinsights.org/data/>.

⁴ Ivy Plus includes the eight Ivy League institutions as well as Stanford University, Duke University, University of Chicago, and MIT.

⁵ Among first-time, full-time, degree-seeking, undergraduate students at four-year HBCUs in 2018. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS.



HBCUs Provide Access to Higher Education

A college’s access rate is the percentage of students who come from the bottom two income quintiles, which is also referred to as the bottom 40% (\$46,000 and below in parental household earnings) of the income distribution.

When compared to other institutional types, HBCUs’ average access rate is more than twice that of all institutions nationwide and five times that of Ivy Plus institutions.

These access rates are a reflection of the fact that over 70% of HBCU students are Pell-grant eligible⁶, and 39% are first-generation college students⁷.

TABLE 2: Comparison of Average Access Rates

Institution	Average Access Rate
HBCU	51.3%
Nationwide	22.5%
Ivy Plus	9.3%
Non-College Goers ⁸	61.2%

Even though HBCUs only comprise 3% of all four-year nonprofit colleges and universities, four of the top 10 universities with the highest access rates in the nation are HBCUs.

TABLE 3: Top 10 Access Rates Nationwide (HBCUs Highlighted)

Institution	Access Rate	HBCU
South Texas College	79.1%	
Mississippi Valley State University	75.0%	Yes
Saint Augustine College (Illinois)	74.6%	
University of Texas at Brownsville	74.0%	
Boricua College	73.7%	
Wright Career College	73.6%	
United Talmudical Seminary	72.8%	
Rust College	72.0%	Yes
Philander Smith College	69.1%	Yes
Southern University at New Orleans	66.6%	Yes



⁶ Average percentage of undergraduate students awarded Pell grants at four-year HBCUs in 2018-19. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS.

⁷ Average percentage of first-generation students at four-year HBCUs in 2016-17. U.S. Department of Education, College Scorecard.

⁸ Defined as students who never attended college up to and including 2013.



TABLE 4: Top 10 Highest HBCU Access Rates

Institution	Access Rate
Mississippi Valley State University	75.0%
Rust College	72.0%
Philander Smith College	69.1%
Southern University at New Orleans	66.6%
Florida Memorial University	65.0%
Claflin University	64.3%
Grambling State University	64.2%
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	62.8%
Shaw University	61.9%
Texas Southern University	61.7%

“
Institutions with high success rates are the most successful at moving students from the lowest socioeconomic tiers to a higher tier.
 ”

HBCUs Closing Gaps

The success rate we use in our *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rate is defined as the fraction of students from the bottom two quintiles that earn their way into the top three quintiles, which is also referred to as the top 60% of the income distribution. Institutions with high success rates are the most successful at moving students from the lowest socioeconomic tiers to a higher tier. One may observe that while HBCUs provide access to higher education for low-income students at more than double the average U.S. institution (Table 1), their success rate is just below the national average (Table 4). **This demonstrates HBCUs outsized impact on underserved communities. HBCUs serve more economically disenfranchised students than most U.S. institutions while also facilitating the upward mobility of the majority of their students.**

TABLE 5: Comparison of Average Success Rates

Institution Group	Average Success Rate
HBCU	67.6%
Nationwide	72.3%
Ivy Plus	80.3%
Non-College Goers	33.4%





TABLE 6: Highest HBCU Success Rates—HBCUs with Success Rates Above the National Average

Institution	Success Rate
Xavier University of Louisiana	78.9%
Spelman College	78.1%
Hampton University	76.7%
Tennessee State University	75.2%
Winston-Salem State University	75.2%
Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University	75.0%
Dillard University	74.1%
Howard University	73.8%
South Carolina State University	73.3%
Elizabeth City State University	73.0%
North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University	72.4%

HBCUs Fueling the Middle Class

The mobility rate is defined as the fraction of a college’s students who come from the bottom 40% and transition into the top 60%.

On average and across institution type, when it comes to mobility rates HBCUs outperform all other categories and boast mobility rates more than double the national average. Additionally, it is worth emphasizing that the evidence suggests that HBCUs support nearly five times more students than Ivy Plus ranked institutions in facilitating students’ movement from the bottom 40% in household income to the top 60%.

TABLE 7: Comparison of Average Mobility Rates

Institution Group	Average Mobility Rate
HBCU	34.3%
Nationwide	15.8%
Ivy Plus	7.4%
Non-College Goers	20.4%



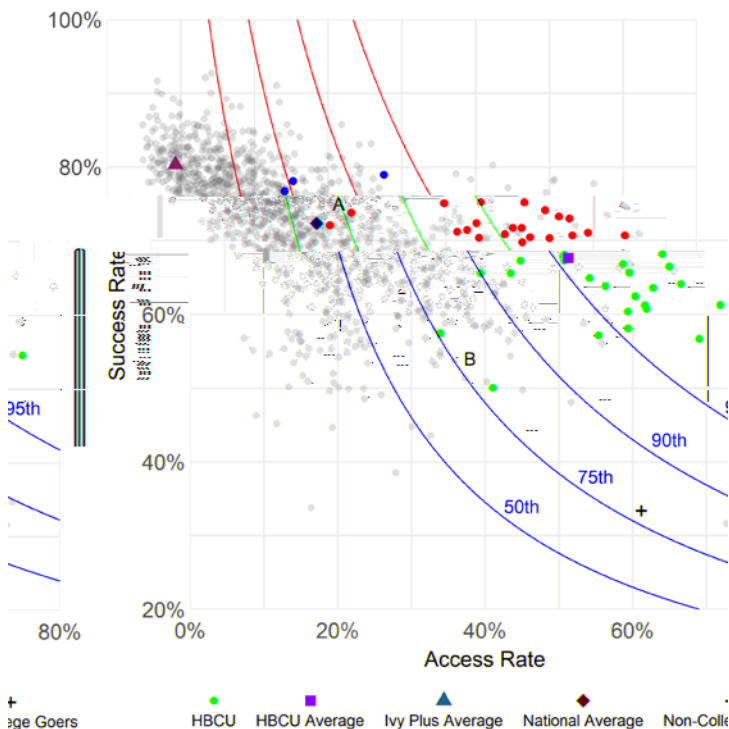


TABLE 8: Highest HBCU Mobility Rates

Institution	Mobility Rate
Clafin University	45.5%
Rust College	44.1%
Grambling State University	43.7%
Florida Memorial University	43.2%
Southern University at New Orleans	42.7%
Jackson State University	42.2%
Elizabeth City State University	41.5%
Mississippi Valley State University	40.9%
South Carolina State University	40.6%
Southern University and A&M College at Baton Rouge	40.4%

Figure 1 below displays the access rates and success rates of HBCUs (blue dots), all schools (grey dots), and comparison group averages (indicated with shapes). The red curves represent mobility rate percentiles. Please note that the mobility rate is the product of both the access rate and success rate. This explains how a similar mobility rate may be yielded for a school even if a low access or success rate is observed for an institution because a lower value in one category can be balanced out by a higher value in another category.

Figure 1: Access, Success, and Mobility Rates of HBCUs and Comparison Group Averages?



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On average and across institution type, when it comes to mobility rates HBCUs outperform all other categories and double the national average.
 ”

⁹ These two HBCU subgroups (indicated with an A and B in Figure 1) and how they compare to other HBCUs demonstrate how the access rates are most often the driving factor in the differences observed among HBCU mobility rates. The range of access rates among HBCUs are about 50 points, while the range of success rates are less than 30 points.



Key HBCU Mobility Outcomes

When ranking the 1,285 institutions based on their *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rate, we found that:

- **Over half (52%) of all institutions above the 95th percentile are HBCUs.**
- **All but six (88%) HBCUs are above the 90th percentile. Those six schools are included in the subgroups marked by A and B.**
- **HBCUs have an access rate two times that of the national average and over five times that of Ivy Plus institutions.**
- **Of the HBCUs with the highest access rate included in this study, 50% are located in rural communities¹⁰.**

Considerations

- HBCUs are remarkably successful at supporting social mobility among their students. In comparison to the national average, HBCUs have strikingly higher access rates. However, despite offering admission to a significant number of underserved students, our findings demonstrate that over half of all institutions included in this study above the 95th percentile of the *Move into Middle Class+* mobility rate are HBCUs.
- The mobility rate used to measure the social mobility of HBCU alumni plays a significant role in the story that is presented about the success of HBCUs. A more inclusive mobility rate accounts for the compounding effects of racism on Black Americans by acknowledging the impact that such oppression has on the income level students are in when they enter college. Additionally, it continues to influence students even once they attain their degree and are well into their field of choice. Promoting the use of a measure that takes a more accurate and comprehensive approach to the data is imperative to ensure all institutions are being assessed on just and equitable grounds. In doing so, such a measure provides a more precise and honest depiction of exactly how successful HBCUs are at facilitating students' upward mobility.
- These findings demonstrate that investment in HBCUs means sowing into institutions that are primary drivers of success for historically marginalized people. Contributing to the advancement of an HBCU directly influences the continued improvement of economic outcomes for Black Americans and by extension society at-large.

“
The mobility rate used to measure the social mobility of HBCU alumni plays a significant role in the story that is presented about the success of HBCUs.

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¹⁰ Communities that are not located in an urban area.



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Appendix

TABLE 9: Top Access Rates for HBCUs and Ivy Plus Institutions

Rank	HBCU	Access Rate	Ivy Plus Institution	Access Rate
1	Mississippi Valley State University	75.0%	Cornell University	12.2%
2	Rust College	72.0%	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	11.9%
3	Philander Smith College	69.1%	University of Chicago	11.3%
4	Southern University at New Orleans	66.6%	Columbia University in the City of New York	11.1%
5	Florida Memorial University	65.0%	Stanford University	9.4%
6	Claflin University	64.3%	University of Pennsylvania	9.0%
7	Grambling State University	64.1%	Yale University	8.4%
8	University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	62.8%	Harvard University	8.4%
9	Shaw University	61.9%	Duke University	8.3%
10	Texas Southern University	61.7%	Dartmouth College	7.9%
			Brown University	7.2%
			Princeton University	6.2%

Note: All the top 10 HBCUs have a higher access rate than those who never attended college (61.2% access rate).





TABLE 10: Top Success Rates for HBCUs and Ivy Plus Institutions

Rank	HBCU	Success Rate	Ivy Plus Institution	Success Rate
1	Xavier University of Louisiana	78.9%	Princeton University	84.8%
2	Spelman College	78.1%	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	84.2%
3	Hampton University	76.7%	Stanford University	83.8%
4	Winston-Salem State University	75.2%	University of Pennsylvania	81.6%
5	Tennessee State University	75.2%	Brown University	81.6%
6	Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University	75.0%	Cornell University	81.2%
7	Dillard University	74.1%	Dartmouth College	80.6%
8	Howard University	73.8%	Yale University	79.1%
9	South Carolina State University	73.3%	Columbia University in the City of New York	79.1%
10	Elizabeth City State University	73.0%	Harvard University	77.0%
			University of Chicago	75.3%
			Duke University	75.2%

Note: All the top 10 HBCUs have a success rate above the national average (72.3% success rate), although the success rates are lower than the Ivy Plus average (80.3% success rate).





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