

BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING BRIDGES:

Examining Teacher and School
Counselor Strategies for
College Readiness and HBCU
Exposure for Students



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BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING BRIDGES:

Examining Teacher and School Counselor Strategies for College Readiness and HBCU Exposure for Students

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Methodology	5
HBCU Familiarity and Exposure in High School	6
Teachers' and School Counselors' Impact on College Exposure and Preparedness.....	10
Recommendations	14
Conclusion	16
Appendix	16
Endnotes	18



Introduction

At UNCF, we know that parents and communities play an integral role in students' decision to attend college. Our research shows that parents are deeply engaged and invested in the learning outcomes of their children.¹ However, the school setting plays a critical role in postsecondary decisions for students. Many students first learn about college options and begin their college planning within their K-12 schools. In fact, teachers and school counselors play a significant role in students' college application process. Studies have shown that frequent communication with a high school counselor can predict whether the student will apply for college.² Additionally, we know that too often schools and counselors lack knowledge and exposure to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), yet these institutions provide viable higher education options for students. HBCUs are not only engines for social and economic mobility but also provide a space for academic rigor, authentic faculty support and care, and a strong sense of belonging for students.³ As such, this study explores the school environment from two interrelated areas: (1) HBCU exposure and awareness and (2) teacher and school counselor impact on college exposure and preparedness.

Key Findings Highlights

- There is a need for more HBCU exposure from teachers and school counselors among all students.
- A majority of teachers and counselors in this study reported that they were knowledgeable about HBCUs; however, data showed over 60% of students surveyed were not familiar with HBCUs.
- Teachers who examined disparities in their school's data and encouraged the establishment of fair school policies for all students were also more inclined to support rigorous coursework and higher education opportunities for students of color. However, we also found several instances of teacher bias regarding minority students' post-secondary pathways.

“Many students first learn about college options and begin their college planning within their K-12 schools.”

Methodology

This paper utilized quantitative methods to assess key themes related to HBCU exposure and college readiness. A survey was administered to a total of 146 students, teachers, and counselors of all races in 2022 across seven high schools located in three regions: the West, Midwest, and Northeast. Though only six counselors participated in the study, it is comparable to counselor availability observed in schools nationwide. The American School Counselor Association recommends a 250:1 student-to-school-counselor ratio⁴ yet the average ratio is 376:1.

Surveys were administered electronically by WhitworthKee Consulting via a survey link to school administrators who distributed it to students and staff in their schools. The resulting data was split into three categories—students, teachers, and school counselors. We analyzed questions pertaining to college exposure, college enrollment, knowledge of HBCUs, attitudes pertaining to HBCU application, and general perceptions of their school's practices. A statistical analysis (ordered logit regression analysis) was performed to examine the factors that affected a teacher's inclination to support rigorous, college-level coursework for minority students. The following section will review the key findings related to two categories: (1) HBCU familiarity and exposure, and (2) teacher and school counselor impact on college exposure and preparedness.

“There is a need for more HBCU exposure from teachers and school counselors for all students.”



“Overall, most teachers that participated in this study were somewhat, very, or extremely knowledgeable of HBCUs...”

HBCU Familiarity and Exposure in High School

TEACHERS & COUNSELORS

The data indicated that a majority of teachers (67%) and counselors (60%) were somewhat, very, or extremely familiar with HBCUs. In contrast, the majority of students (61%) reported not being at all or only slightly familiar with HBCUs. We investigated whether differences in familiarity with HBCUs varied by the race of teachers and counselors. Overall, most teachers that participated in this study were somewhat, very, or extremely knowledgeable of HBCUs—Black teachers, 100%; multiracial teachers, 90%; White teachers, 71%; and Hispanic teachers, 67%. Our correlational analysis revealed a relationship between a teacher’s race and their familiarity with HBCUs, particularly showing the highest level of knowledge amongst Black and Multiracial teachers.

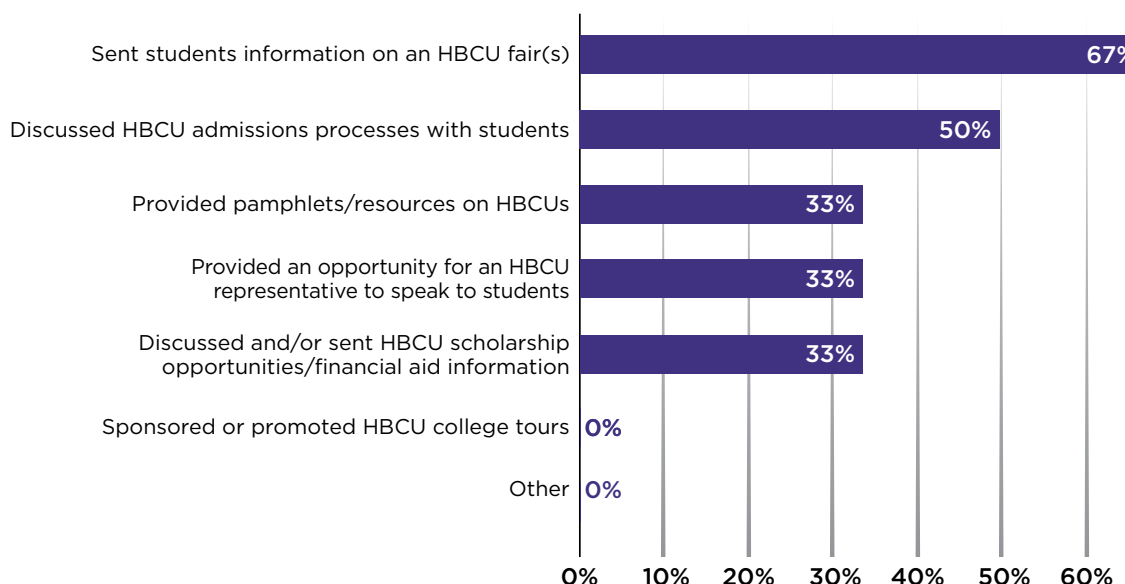
Teachers were also asked about ways they have provided opportunities for students to learn more about HBCUs. Teachers were given the following options: 1) discussed HBCUs in a lesson plan, discussed notable HBCUs in lessons plans; 2) discussed HBCU admissions processes; 3) discussed or sent HBCU scholarship opportunities/financial aid information to students; and 4) provided an opportunity for an HBCU representative to speak to students; and an open-ended option. Only 27% of teacher participants said that they discussed HBCUs in lesson plans and discussed or provided students with HBCU scholarship opportunities or financial aid information. Even fewer stated they provided other information, such as discussing HBCUs’ admissions processes and providing opportunities for HBCU representatives to speak to students (8%). Among those who selected “Other,” 67% either said that they had not provided any opportunities to learn about HBCUs, that their students were unlikely to attend college, or that counselors were the ones to offer these learning opportunities.



Several studies suggest that another key indicator of high school students' college preparation is their participation in counselor-facilitated college readiness activities, such as attending college tours and engaging in college searches.⁵ As a result, we inquired about the types of opportunities school counselors provide for students to learn about HBCUs. The following options were offered: 1) discussed HBCU admissions processes with students; 2) discussed and/or sent students HBCU scholarship opportunities/financial aid information; 3) provided an opportunity for an HBCU representative to speak to students; 4) sent students information on an HBCU fair/s; 5) provided pamphlets/resources on HBCUs; or 6) sponsored or promoted HBCU college tours; we also provided a space to specify other opportunities. A majority of counselors surveyed (67%) reported that they sent students information about HBCU fairs, and 50% stated they have discussed HBCU admissions processes with students. Approximately one-third of respondents mentioned that they discussed or disseminated HBCU scholarship and financial aid information, provided opportunities for HBCU representatives to speak with students, or supplied pamphlets and resources on HBCUs.

“A majority of counselors surveyed (67%) reported that they sent students information about HBCU fairs and 50% stated they have discussed HBCU admissions processes with students.”

Figure 1: (Counselors) What opportunities have you provided for students to learn about HBCUs?





“Despite teachers and counselors having knowledge on HBCUs, our analysis highlights how their knowledge may not adequately reach students.”



STUDENTS

Despite teachers and school counselors having knowledge on HBCUs, our analysis highlights how their knowledge may not adequately reach students. Over 60% of students surveyed indicated that they were either not at all familiar or a little familiar with HBCUs. The large majority of Hispanic (83%) and White (80%) students had little to no familiarity of HBCUs, while approximately half of both Black and multiracial students shared the same lack of familiarity.

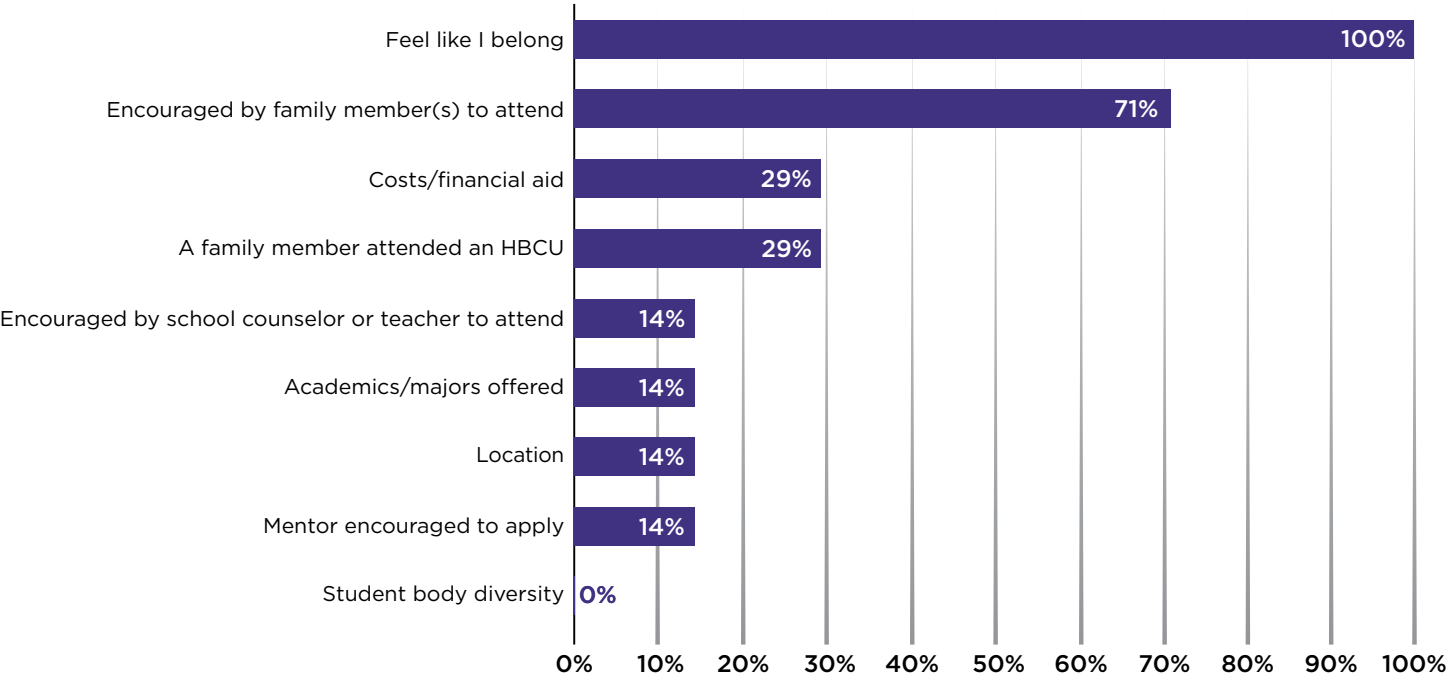
We also asked students about their likelihood of applying to or planning to attend an HBCU, followed by a list of factors influencing their response. Among students who expressed a desire to attend or apply to an HBCU, 100% of students selected “feeling like I belong” as one of their contributing factors. This is consistent with other UNCF research findings, showing a sense of belonging as a significant motivation for students planning to apply to or attend an HBCU.⁶ Additionally, while it is important for schools to expose students to HBCUs, student responses also highlight the importance of family support. Of the students who decided to apply or attend an HBCU, 71% attributed their decision to encouragement from their families. However, the support students received from their families to apply to HBCUs was not always reflected in their school environments. When asked how often their school counselors suggested attending an HBCU, over half (53%) of the students said that this never or rarely occurred. Similarly, 54% said that their school counselors never or rarely provided resources on attending an HBCU.

Among students who answered the follow-up question regarding contributing factors for not applying or planning to attend an HBCU, 58% selected that they simply did not know much about HBCUs. In contrast, among those who provided reasons for their decision to apply or attend an HBCU, only 14% selected being encouraged by a school counselor or teacher to attend.

While a significant number of students enrolled at HBCUs in 2022 were Black or African American, approximately 24% of these students were not Black.⁷ Enrollment data reveals a rising number of international and Hispanic students at HBCUs.⁸ Furthermore, according to Pew Research, at least eighty HBCUs report enrollment where more than half of the student body was not Black, such as St. Philip’s College in San Antonio, Texas, which has a large Hispanic population.⁹ Given these growing enrollment demographics at HBCUs, we also analyzed Hispanic students’ familiarity with and perceptions of HBCUs. Among students in this study who reported being not at all or slightly familiar with HBCUs, 25% identified as Hispanic. Additionally, among Hispanic students who expressed low likelihood of attending an HBCU, 83% attributed this decision to a lack of knowledge about these institutions.

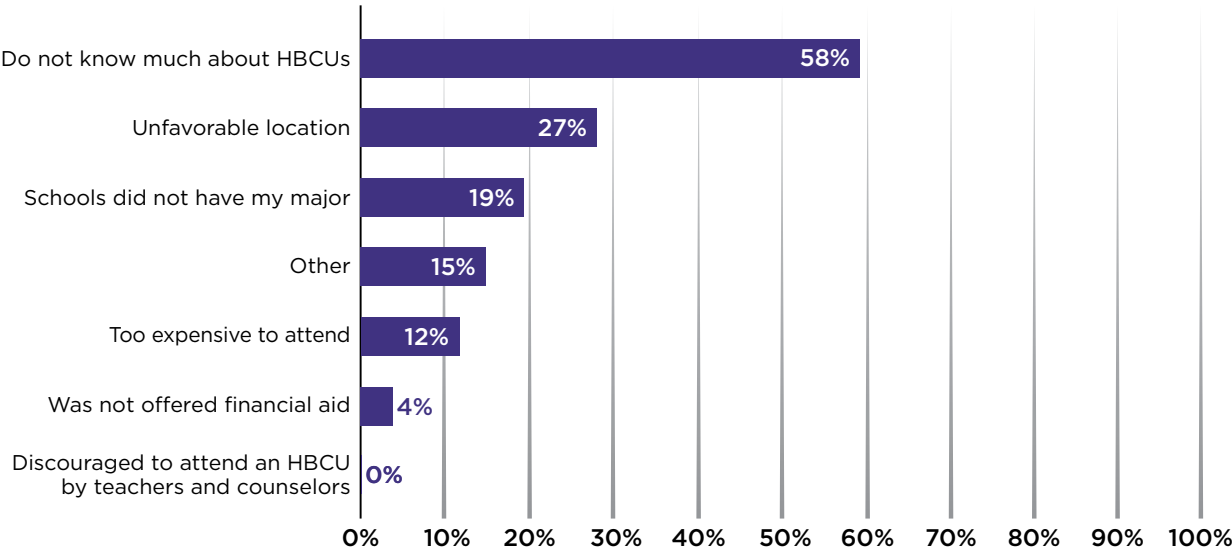



Figure 2: What reasons contribute to your decision to apply or attend an HBCU?



Note: This is only for African American students, as they were the only student group that indicated they applied to an HBCU.

Figure 3: What reasons contribute to your decision to not apply or attend an HBCU?





“For young people, speaking with high school counselors about higher education options is critical for effective post-secondary planning.”

Teachers’ and School Counselors’ Impact on College Exposure and Preparedness

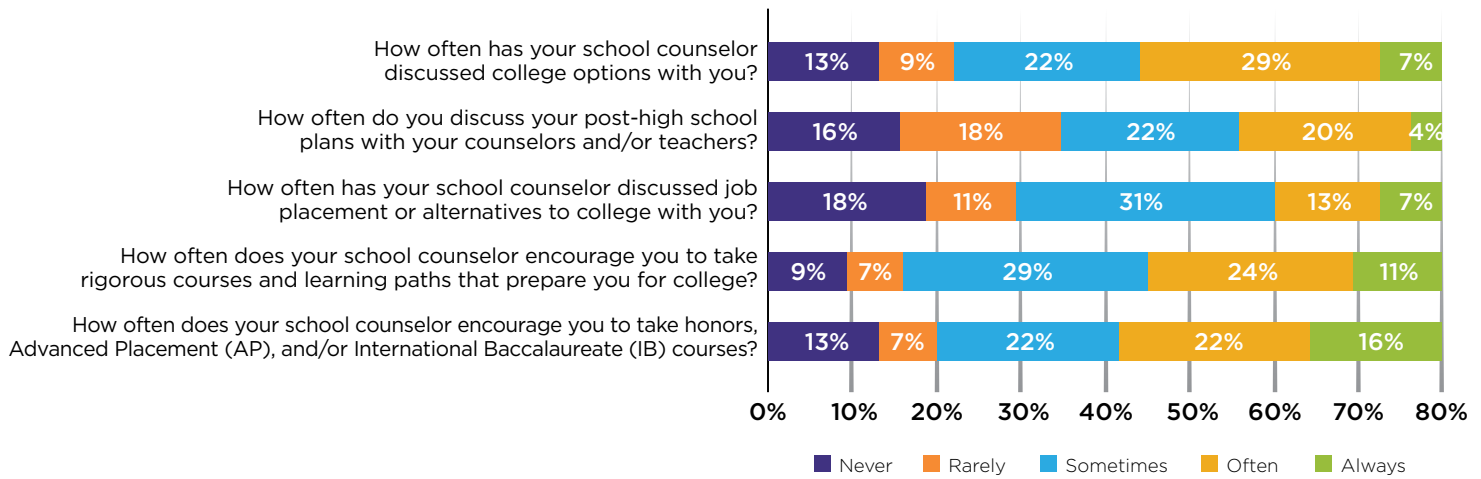
Student responses showed that students certainly consult with teachers and school counselors about their post-secondary plans, though there seems to be room for schools to advise students more often. Only 36% of students said that they often or always discuss college options with them.

For young people, speaking with high school counselors about higher education options is critical for effective post-secondary planning. Counselors in our study had a student caseload ranging between 325 to 400 students, a number that is close to the national average ratio of 408-to-1.¹⁰ Our respondents reported spending between 24% to 70% of their time in a typical week on college counseling. It is important to mention that school counselors are often juggling multiple, competing priorities. While some districts strive to provide college-going support, the realities of the caseload may hinder that goal.

Additionally, research suggests that one of the best ways for teachers and counselors to prepare students for college-level coursework is by encouraging students to enroll in rigorous courses, such as honors or Advanced Placement (AP) classes.¹¹ Thirty-five percent of students said that their school counselors often or always encouraged them to take rigorous courses and learning paths to prepare them for college, and 38% of students said their counselors encouraged them to enroll in honors, AP, and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes.



Figure 4: Teacher and counselor support surrounding post-secondary planning for students.



Note: "No answer" responses were removed.

Promoting rigorous coursework, engaging in discussions about post-secondary plans, and exploring college options with students are some of the strategies recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to foster college preparedness and promote school equity.¹² ASCA also advises counselors to aid families in locating support services and exploring options to pay for college expenses. Twenty-seven percent of students said their counselors often or always provided financial aid workshops to students and families about paying for college.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON MINORITY STUDENTS' POST-SECONDARY PATHWAYS

We examined teachers' open-ended responses regarding the most significant barriers to college and noted several instances where deficit narratives about minority students and their communities both impacted how educators saw them as scholars and colored their perceptions of students' post-high school options. Some staff held opinions that their students of color lacked the motivation and/or skills necessary for college. Other responses highlighted how they also did not believe their students could afford college. Additionally, some educators believed minority students' most significant barrier to attending college was the deficit mindsets of their families and communities. These responses may indicate that teacher perceptions could play a mediating factor in students' decision to pursue postsecondary education. Studies on school racial climates have also investigated teacher perceptions of students' likelihood of reaching their educational goals based on their race.¹³

While many responses were deficit-based, we did hear from a few teachers stating structures and supports were significant barriers. One teacher mentioned, "...we ensure that we spend extra time and opportunity to share with our parents, as many have either not completed high school and/or have not attended college themselves. Therefore, they lack the understanding of the opportunities afforded to their child." Another teacher mentioned a key barrier was "the support systems needed for success and access and exposure to those colleges."

Table 1. “What would you describe as the most significant barrier to minority students’ access to college?”

SAMPLE QUOTES FROM HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS



Parental/Family Influence

- “Lack of successful role models in their families.”
- “Unfortunately, I think it is a mindset inherited from the parents or their community! I think if we (Parents, Guardians and Educators) eliminate excuses and set our differentiated expectations properly and high for each student they will thrive to meet those expectations.”



Lack of Motivation/Effort

- “Willingness to attend class, ask questions and apply themselves. The majority of my minority students do get good grades and plan for college.”
- “I do not feel there is a significant barrier to minority students’ access to college except their own confidence and desire to attend college.”
- “There are students who work hard but there are way too many that are just trying to slide without doing much work. Unfortunately, education is not a spectator sport and you have to work hard at learning. The biggest barrier I see is that too many students just don’t care if they get an ‘F’ in a class. The challenge is to motivate these students. I have a record of mixed success at getting these students motivated. Also, electronic devices such as cell phones are a big distraction to the learning process.”
- “Lack of work ethic.”
- “Lack of motivation. Feeling like college is out of reach financially and academically.”



Finances

- “The overwhelming pressure that is placed on them to go straight to a four year college when it is not financially feasible for them.”
- “Funding, financial limitations”
- “Not knowing what is required and when. Also, money.”



Lack of Knowledge

- “Students do not always have all the information about the colleges and scholarship opportunities that are available to them.”
- “The students’ primary barrier—their lack of info, lack of money, and lack of support from the parents.”

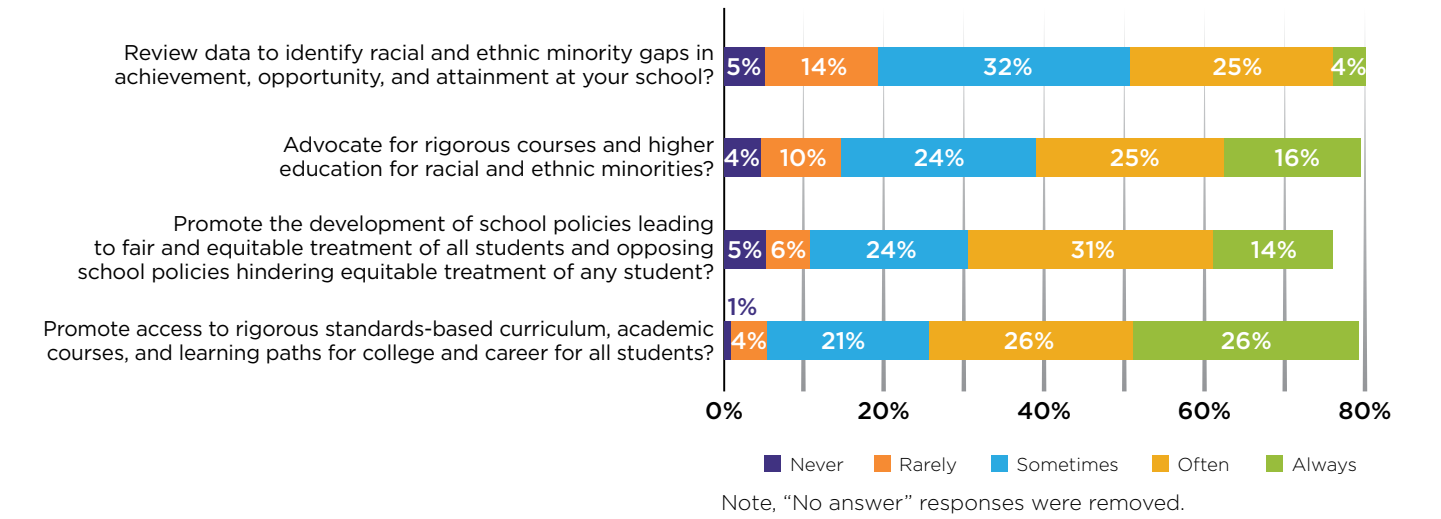


REVIEWING DATA AND POLICIES TO ENSURE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

As on-the-ground practitioners, teachers and counselors are well positioned to identify racial achievement and opportunity gaps at their school that may hinder future college success. An important way to address these gaps is by reviewing the data on a consistent basis. This can help in determining interventions and ensuring students are prepared for college. Half of the counselors who responded stated that they often identify racial and ethnic minority gaps in achievement, opportunity, and attainment at their school, and 67% stated that they often or always advocate for rigorous courses and higher education for racial and ethnic minorities. Sixty-seven percent also stated that they often or always promote the development of school policies leading to fair and equitable treatment of all students and oppose those that hinder fair treatment to any student.¹⁴ Fifty percent responded that they often develop plans to address over- or under-representation of specific groups in programs such as special education, honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate.

For teachers, 29% responded that they often or always review school data to identify racial and ethnic minority gaps in achievement, opportunity, and attainment at their school, and 41% stated that they often or always advocate for rigorous courses and higher education for racial and ethnic minority students. However, more than half (52%) of teachers stated that they often or always promote access to rigorous standards-based curriculum, academic courses, and learning paths for college and career for all students.

Figure 5: Teacher Practices



In addition, an ordered logit regression model analysis showed that teachers are more likely to promote rigorous courses and higher education for minority students if they: (1) engage in intentional data review to identify achievement gaps and (2) promote policies leading to fair and equitable treatment of all students.¹⁵ In other words, teachers and schools that intentionally invest in data review and equity may assist with college readiness and enrollment for students of color.

“Annually, UNCF rewards over 11,000 scholarships worth about \$62 million for students to attend various HBCUs and other institutions across the country.”



Recommendations for High Schools and School Districts/Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)

1) Provide More Exposure to Scholarships and Financial Opportunities for HBCU Attendance

The findings show that some teachers do not think their students can pay for college and therefore, they probably will not attend. While the costs of postsecondary education are high, there is aid for students available. Annually, UNCF rewards over 11,000 scholarships worth about \$62 million for students to attend various HBCUs and other institutions across the country.¹⁶ HBCUs also have their own unique need-based and merit-based scholarships. School counselors and teachers should familiarize themselves with the financial resources available not only through UNCF but other places like the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the HBCU Money Guide assist students and families in understanding what options they may qualify for to pay for college.

2) Provide Training for Teachers to Review Student Data to Identify Gaps That May Hinder College Success

Intentional and ongoing review of student data is a crucial part of identifying achievement and opportunity gaps in schools. Our findings indicate that such reviews may be associated with greater proclivity to promote higher education opportunities for minority students. Schoolwide training from school administrators and outside non-profit organizations may assist in fostering a climate of transparency that helps students and families.

3) Engage School Staff in Anti-Bias Training

Some of the biases observed in teacher responses and in schools across the country can be intentional or implicit and unintentional. Nonetheless, even when these biases are not deliberate, they can have real life consequences. In school environments, if an educator believes implicit biases about a student's ability and motivations subconsciously because of their race, it can impact how this educator communicates post-high school options to them and their families. We recommend that schools invest in regular implicit anti-bias training that teaches staff how to confront stereotypes they may have subconsciously accepted as truth about their students and how to be equitable in sharing post-secondary resources. Further, equity in post-secondary advising also means providing information about various options, including HBCUs.



Recommendations for HBCUs

1) Distribute Financial Aid and Scholarship Information with High Schools

Our survey of students and educators found that both could benefit from having more information about HBCU scholarships and financial aid. Therefore, we encourage HBCUs to intentionally share funding information and recruitment materials with high school students and families, even as early as middle school.¹⁷ One way to distribute information to communities is through student ambassadors at HBCUs. These students may return to their local high schools and share key information with students. Our research and outreach show that high school students prefer to hear from college students to learn more about their experiences.

2) Share Academic and Other Support Resources Available at HBCUs

Additionally, this study revealed that both students and educators could benefit from knowing more about the academic and student support services available at HBCUs. UNCF researchers conducted focus groups with college students at HBCUs, and several stated they wished they had developed better study and time management skills in high school to help them better adjust to college life.¹⁸ HBCUs should intentionally highlight to students early in their college journeys the services the institution provides to develop these skills so they understand how they will be supported as they complete college-level academics.

3) Support K-12 Schools with Anti-Bias Training

Finally, in our inquiries about the significant obstacles deterring minority students from attending college, we noted numerous responses seemingly influenced by biases about student success and motivation. Therefore, we suggest that HBCUs address these barriers by offering implicit bias training to K-12 educators, with a specific emphasis on how such biases can hinder college access. Xavier University's Norman T. Francis Teacher Residency Program and Voorhees University's Center of Excellence for Educator Preparation and Innovation stand out as exemplary examples of HBCUs providing teacher professional development opportunities to the broader community.¹⁹ However, HBCU support for such initiatives does not necessarily need to be on such a large programmatic scale to make a difference. Given their unique positionality and familiarity with various forms of bias, HBCUs and their faculty can continue to collaborate with local K-12 schools to offer one-to-two-day professional development training sessions for teachers. HBCUs have a deep and enduring history of collaborating with the K-12 community to create transformational change for students. UNCF is committed to bolstering such partnerships and fostering innovations.²⁰

“Teachers and school counselors carry considerable influence in guiding students through the college application process.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the pivotal role of K-12 schools in shaping students' college aspirations and preparedness cannot be overstated. Teachers and school counselors carry considerable influence in guiding students through the college application process. We hope the findings of this study will contribute to dismantling barriers surrounding higher education and perceptions of HBCUs and build bridges between schools, communities, and HBCUs to enhance college access for all K-12 students.

Appendix

Figure 6: Influence of Teacher/School Practices on Advocacy for Higher Education for Minority Students

Dependent variable: How often teacher advocates for rigorous courses and higher education for racial and ethnic minorities

	Odds Ratio	Standard Errors
Teacher Race	.97	.47
School's Commitment to Culturally Relevant Lesson Plans (Teacher's Perspective)	.61	.19
School's Commitment to Increasing Minority Teachers (Teacher's Perspective)	.73	.25
School Provides Affinity Group (Teacher's Perspective)	.32	.39
Teacher Promotes Fair Policies for All Students	2.60*	.75
Teacher Reviews Data to Identify Gaps	2.90*	.92
Discussed HBCUs in Lesson Plans	1.36	.64
Discussed or Sent HBCU Scholarship Opportunities/ Financial Aid Information to Students	.75	.37

Ordered logit model *Statistically Significant, $P < .05$ N= 73



Variable	Variable Description
Teacher Advocacy for Rigorous Courses and Higher Education for Minority Students	How often teacher advocates for rigorous courses and higher education for racial and ethnic minorities: (1) Never, (2) Rarely (3) Sometimes, (4) Often (5) Always
Teacher Race	White = 0, Non-white = 1
Schools Commitment to Culturally Relevant Lesson Plans (Teacher's Perspective)	To what extent does the teacher feel like the school is committed to providing students with culturally-relevant lesson plans: (1) To extremely small extent (2) To a small extent, (3) To a moderate extent (4), To a large extent (5) To an extremely large extent
Schools' Commitment to Increasing Minority Teachers (Teacher's Perspective)	To what extent does the teacher feel the school leadership is committed to increasing the percentage of racial minority teachers at your school: (1) To extremely small extent (2) To a small extent, (3) To a moderate extent (4), To a large extent (5) To an extremely large extent
School Provides Affinity Group (Teacher's Perspective)	Teachers' responses to if their schools provide spaces or opportunities for affinity group for students: No = 0, Yes = 1
Teacher Promotes Fair Policies for All Students	Promote the development of school policies leading to fair and equitable treatment of all students and opposing school policies hindering equitable treatment of any student? (1) Never, (2) Rarely (3) Sometimes, (4) Often (5) Always
Teacher Reviews Data to Identify Gaps	How often does teacher review data to identify racial gaps in achievement? (1) Never, (2) Rarely (3) Sometimes, (4) Often (5) Always
Discussed HBCUs in Lesson Plans	Discussed HBCUs in lesson plans No = 0, Yes = 1
Discussed or sent HBCU Scholarship Opportunities/ Financial Aid Information to Students	Discussed or sent HBCU scholarship opportunities/ financial aid information to students plans No = 0, Yes = 1

Note: data were obtained from 7 high schools in: California, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Note, the N size for the study was lower than expected due to administration in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic however, the findings are robust and reify the existing literature on college access and HBCUs exposure.

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- ¹⁴ This framing is derived from the ASCA National Model
- ¹⁵ See Appendix for model information
- ¹⁶ The UNCF Fact Sheet 2025 https://uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/UNCF-Fact-Sheet-2025-v2.pdf?_gl=1*t0d1ay*_gcl_au*MjA0NjA2NjQyMS4xNzU0MzM1MDQ1
Also see, Opportunities.UNCF.org
- ¹⁷ UNCF holds monthly webinars September- April about scholarships, aid and other opportunities. Learn more at [UNCF.org/collegewebinars](https://uncf.org/collegewebinars)
- ¹⁸ Anderson, M. (2020). HBCUs: Promoting benefits and attendance. *American School Counselor Magazine*
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- ²⁰ Learn more at [UNCF.org/HBCUK12](https://uncf.org/HBCUK12)



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