

Barriers to HBCU Access

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During my high school years in Massachusetts, I heard about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) only a handful of times. They were occasionally mentioned in college presentations or featured on informational flyers, but there was little discussion of what made these institutions unique or why they could be an excellent option for students like me. As a result, HBCUs felt unfamiliar and distant rather than realistic colleges that I could seriously consider. Looking back, I now understand that my experience was not unique. It reflects a larger issue within Massachusetts' college planning resources and highlights a gap in how students are introduced to postsecondary opportunities.

Participating in the HBCU Policy Fellowship changed my understanding of this issue. Through research, policy analysis, and conversations with education professionals, I learned that increasing awareness of HBCUs is not simply about promoting a different type of college. It is about educational equity and ensuring that students have access to complete information when making one of the most important decisions of their lives. My work throughout this fellowship has reinforced my belief that every student deserves the opportunity to explore all higher education options, including HBCUs, regardless of where they live.

This essay examines the lack of HBCU information available through the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE). Through secondary research and practitioner feedback, I argue that Massachusetts can strengthen educational equity by incorporating HBCU information into statewide college planning resources, counselor training, and student outreach initiatives while still supporting the Commonwealth's broader higher education goals.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established before 1964 to provide higher education opportunities to African Americans during segregation. Today, there are more than 100 HBCUs across the United States that welcome students from all backgrounds while continuing their historic mission of academic excellence, leadership development, and cultural empowerment. Although they represent only a small percentage of colleges nationwide, HBCUs produce a disproportionate number of Black professionals in fields such as medicine, engineering, education, law, business, and public service.

Massachusetts has demonstrated a strong commitment to educational equity through DESE and DHE. Both agencies provide valuable resources that help students prepare for college, understand financial aid opportunities, and explore career pathways. However, after reviewing both websites, I found little to no meaningful information about HBCUs. There are no dedicated HBCU resource pages, no counselor materials focused on HBCU recruitment, and very few opportunities for students to learn about these institutions through official state resources.

This information gap creates an equity issue because not every student begins the college search with the same level of knowledge. Students whose families already understand the college admissions process may discover HBCUs independently. However, first-generation college students and students without strong college-going networks often rely heavily on school counselors and state education websites for guidance. When HBCUs are largely absent from those resources, many students never have the opportunity to seriously consider them.

My own experience reflects this challenge. Although HBCUs were occasionally mentioned during high school, I never received enough information to understand what attending one would actually look like. I was never introduced to current students, alumni, campus life, scholarship opportunities, or the academic programs available at these institutions. Instead of feeling like attainable options, HBCUs seemed unfamiliar simply because they were rarely discussed.

My research confirmed that the absence of HBCU information extends beyond my personal experience. Both DESE and DHE provide extensive information about Massachusetts public colleges, financial aid, transfer pathways, career readiness, and college planning. While these resources are valuable, students interested in HBCUs must leave official Massachusetts education websites and search independently through federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, or college search websites.

Research from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) further supports this concern. Many students report that their school counselors rarely discuss HBCUs during the college planning process. Additionally, students who choose not to apply to HBCUs often cite limited knowledge about these institutions rather than a lack of interest. This suggests that awareness, not opportunity, is one of the greatest barriers to HBCU enrollment.

The practitioner interview I conducted added another important perspective that expanded my understanding of this issue. My interviewee encouraged me to consider the problem from the perspective of DESE and DHE rather than assuming the lack of HBCU information is simply an oversight. They explained that Massachusetts naturally prioritizes promoting colleges and universities within the Commonwealth because state agencies hope students will attend local institutions, graduate, and eventually contribute to the state's workforce and economy.

This insight challenged my initial perspective. Before conducting the interview, I viewed the absence of HBCU information primarily as an equity issue. While I still believe educational equity should remain the priority, the interview helped me recognize that state agencies also have legitimate economic and workforce development goals. Massachusetts invests significant resources in its public colleges and universities, which makes it understandable that these institutions receive greater visibility in official state resources.

However, acknowledging this perspective does not eliminate the equity concern. Supporting Massachusetts colleges and ensuring students have access to complete college information are not mutually exclusive goals. Students can learn about in-state institutions while also receiving information about HBCUs and other out-of-state opportunities that may better align with their educational, cultural, or career aspirations. This interview strengthened my understanding of policy design by reminding me that effective public policy often requires balancing competing priorities. Rather than asking Massachusetts to reduce support for its own colleges, my recommendations focus on expanding available information so students can make informed decisions based on their individual goals. My personal experience, secondary research, and practitioner feedback all point toward the same conclusion: increasing awareness of HBCUs is not about encouraging every student to leave Massachusetts. Instead, it is about ensuring that every student has equitable access to information about the full range of higher education opportunities available to them.

The practitioner interview influenced several of my original recommendations by encouraging me to think more carefully about how they could complement Massachusetts' existing higher education priorities rather than compete with them.

Recommendations

- 1. Create a Centralized HBCU Information Resource:** DESE and DHE should collaborate to develop a shared webpage explaining the history of HBCUs, admissions requirements, scholarship opportunities, academic programs, and links to accredited institutions. Rather than replacing existing college planning materials, this resource would expand them by providing students with access to information currently unavailable on official state websites.
- 2. Integrate HBCUs into Existing College Planning Resources:** Instead of treating HBCUs as separate institutions, DESE and DHE should include them alongside other college options within existing college readiness guides, counselor resources, and planning materials. This approach promotes educational equity without reducing attention given to Massachusetts colleges and universities.
- 3. Expand Statewide Outreach:** Massachusetts should partner with HBCUs to host virtual admissions events, financial aid workshops, alumni panels, and informational webinars. Because Massachusetts does not have an HBCU, many students have limited opportunities to visit campuses or meet admissions representatives. Virtual programming would help close this geographic gap while remaining cost-effective.
- 4. Strengthen Counselor Professional Development:** School counselors remain one of the most influential resources during the college search process. Providing counselors with professional development opportunities focused on HBCU admissions, scholarships, and academic programs would better prepare them to advise students about a wider range of postsecondary options.
- 5. Measure Equity Outcomes:** DESE and DHE should evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives by tracking website traffic, participation in HBCU-related programming, counselor engagement, and student awareness over time. Collecting this data would allow policymakers to determine whether increased visibility leads to greater awareness and more informed college decision-making.

These recommendations are relatively inexpensive because they build upon existing college access initiatives rather than creating entirely new programs. More importantly, they recognize the balance highlighted during my practitioner interview by supporting educational equity while respecting Massachusetts' interest in promoting its own higher education institutions.

Throughout this project, I have come to understand that educational equity extends beyond financial aid, admissions policies, or college affordability. It also includes ensuring that students have access to complete and accurate information about every available pathway. When students are unaware of HBCUs, they cannot fully evaluate whether those institutions align with their academic goals, personal identities, or career aspirations.

Conducting policy research alongside practitioner interviews strengthened my understanding of this issue. My research confirmed that HBCUs remain largely absent from Massachusetts education resources, while my interview demonstrated that this issue must also be viewed through the lens of state priorities and workforce development. Rather than viewing these perspectives as conflicting, I believe they can coexist. Massachusetts can continue to support its public colleges while ensuring students have equitable access to information about HBCUs. As someone who has personally experienced this information gap, I find that this project has reinforced my commitment to expanding educational opportunities. Before joining the HBCU Policy Fellowship, I recognized that HBCUs lacked visibility, but I did not understand that this represented a policy issue that could be addressed through thoughtful changes to state resources. Today, I believe that improving awareness is one of the most practical ways to expand college access without requiring significant financial investment.

Looking ahead, I envision a Massachusetts where every student, regardless of background, school district, or family experience with higher education, can easily access information about all postsecondary pathways. By intentionally incorporating HBCUs into DESE and DHE resources, Massachusetts can further its commitment to educational equity while empowering students to make informed decisions based on knowledge rather than limited exposure. Expanding awareness does not diminish opportunities for Massachusetts institutions; instead, it demonstrates the Commonwealth's commitment to ensuring every student has the information necessary to choose the college that best supports their future.