

Why MA Students Need HBCU Access

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Executive Summary

As a student at a Historically Black College, I have experienced firsthand how these institutions create opportunities for students to grow academically, professionally, and personally. Learning in an environment where Black students are surrounded by Black mentors, faculty, and peers who affirm their identities has deeply strengthened my belief that these institutions have a very unique value. Because I have benefited from these opportunities, my goal is to expand this access as much as possible. I firmly believe students in Massachusetts deserve equitable access to the same educational environment that has shaped my growth and the lives of so many others.

Massachusetts is known for its prestigious academic culture, yet there is a great disparity in access to resources and opportunities for certain student populations across the state. Black students in Massachusetts continue to face significant barriers to academic success, leadership development, and entry into high-demand professions including STEM, medicine, education, and public service. Research consistently shows that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are uniquely positioned to address these challenges through environments that promote belonging, mentorship, confidence, and academic achievement.

Despite the proven success and opportunities found at HBCUs, Massachusetts students still face financial, geographic, and institutional barriers that limit access to these opportunities. To address this issue, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education should establish partnerships between public institutions and HBCUs, expand scholarship opportunities for students attending HBCUs, and offer mentorship and leadership programs.

Expanding access to HBCUs would strengthen student performance, increase workforce diversity, and create spaces for future generations of Massachusetts leaders to thrive in fields where Black representation remains disproportionately low.

Background

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created to give Black Americans a space to learn, grow, and access resources that would allow them to achieve social mobility in a society that rejected them. Although HBCUs make up about 3% of U.S. colleges and universities, they enroll roughly 10% of Black college students and, even more, produce 17% of Black bachelor's degree recipients and 25% of Black STEM graduates ([World Economic Forum](#)). The impact of these institutions not only creates educated black citizens, but also offers the opportunity for economic mobility, social and workforce development, and leadership advancement.

HBCU enrollees are 14.6% more likely to earn a bachelor's degree and enjoy a 5% higher household income by age 30 than their peers. Beyond economic and academic metrics, these institutions cultivate robust social capital through faculty mentorship, peer networks, and an institutional culture dedicated to celebrating Black achievement.

Massachusetts is considered the “gold standard” of education, home to the world's most prestigious colleges and universities. Despite this impressive information, there is a great underrepresentation of bachelor degree-granting- college options beyond Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) for Black students. They frequently have to navigate predominantly white environments, not by choice, but by the lack of regionally accessible alternatives. Research on psychological safety, threats from stereotyping, and identity development indicates that these environments could cause isolation and lower retention rates.

HBCU ecosystems, particularly ones like the Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUCC), give Black students an experience that extends beyond the classroom. Through their unique campus culture, mentorship, and extensive leadership opportunities, these institutions create environments that support both academic and professional development. Students can learn in environments where they regularly see Black faculty, administrators, and leaders who become their mentors and role models. The curriculum highlights and centers Black history, culture, and professional networks, which reinforce a strong sense of belonging and identity. Rather than being among the few Black students in a classroom, students are surrounded by peers with similar cultural experiences, fostering a deep sense of community that encourages collaboration, leadership, and confidence. Research has shown that these culturally affirming environments strengthen students' sense of belonging, increase engagement, and support academic persistence. Expanding access to such ecosystems would give these underrepresented students an additional opportunity to grow and thrive academically, socially, and mentally.

Problem Statement

Black students from Massachusetts lack equitable access to educational environments that foster retention and leadership, often leaving them with no choice but to attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) where they are severely underrepresented. This systemic lack of diversity among peers, faculty, and administration creates daily psychological barriers and a deficit in mentorship that can deeply undermine their sense of belonging, motivation, and ultimate academic success.

Although so many Massachusetts colleges offer high-quality academic programs, they simply cannot replicate the structure found in HBCUs that lead to well-documented success for Black students.

Black students in high-demand fields like STEM and medicine face systemic barriers—including limited representation, stereotype threat, and exclusionary environments—that undermine their confidence, mentorship access, and professional identity. Rather than a reflection of individual ability, these challenges trigger a form of "imposter syndrome" rooted in racial rejection that fractures their sense of belonging, ultimately hindering both academic retention and personal development.

Additionally, financial and structural barriers limit students' opportunities to identify and attend out-of-state HBCUs. Due to the absence of things like transfer agreements, tuition assistance programs, and scholarships, there is a large lack of access to institutions that have proven to produce successful black leaders.

Without specific and targeted policy, Massachusetts risks limiting educational opportunities for a large portion of underrepresented students. Many students are missing out on the benefits of a culturally enriching environment designed to cultivate resilient, educated leaders in society. Failure to intentionally foster these opportunities reduces the state's ability to develop a strong, well-prepared, and diverse workforce.

Current Situation

Massachusetts has strong transfer pathways through the MassTransfer program, which provides structured pathways for community college students to transfer credits and guarantee admission to state universities and UMass campuses. However, similar pathways do not exist between Massachusetts institutions and most out-of-state HBCUs.

Students who want to attend HBCUs face significant obstacles, including higher out-of-state tuition costs, psychological uncertainty regarding their credit transfers, and limited institutional partnerships. These barriers disproportionately affect low-income students and first-generation college students, reducing access to educational environments that support their academic and professional pursuits.

Meanwhile, research continues to prove the value of HBCU ecosystems. Studies on identity affirmation show that students develop stronger academic confidence when their racial and cultural identities are recognized as assets rather than obstacles. Research on psychological safety finds that students are more likely to take intellectual risks, seek assistance, and persist through challenges when they feel supported and valued. Mentorship studies similarly indicate that culturally responsive faculty relationships contribute significantly to leadership development and career success. Despite this evidence, Massachusetts lacks a coordinated strategy to connect students with these proven support systems. Existing policies focus primarily on in-state mobility and do not address the unique benefits associated with HBCU attendance.

Analysis

One of the biggest reasons HBCUs are so successful is that they offer more than just a strong education. They create environments where students feel supported, valued, and encouraged to grow into leaders.

A major part of this success comes from environments where students feel their identities are valued rather than treated as challenges. At many HBCUs, students are surrounded by people who understand their experiences and encourage them to see their backgrounds as strengths rather than obstacles. This allows students to develop confidence in who they are while thriving in demanding academic fields such as STEM, business, education, and public policy.

Mentorship also plays a significant role in the success of HBCUs and its students. It is normal for HBCU faculty to serve as more than just their professional title. They become mentors, advocates, and role models who help students navigate college, build professional networks, and prepare for future careers. These relationships can open doors to opportunities that students may not have otherwise known existed.

When all of these things come together in one setting, they create an environment where students can truly thrive. Students gain confidence, pursue leadership opportunities, participate in research, and enter careers in fields such as medicine, engineering, business, education, and public service. Expanding access to these types of environments would allow more Massachusetts students to benefit from the same proven support systems that have helped generations of HBCU students succeed.

Recommendations

To address these serious issues and increase educational opportunity among Massachusetts students of color, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education needs to take several policy actions.

1. The state should establish formal partnerships between Massachusetts public colleges and selected HBCUs. These agreements could simplify credit transfers, create guaranteed admission pathways, and reduce barriers for students interested in attending an HBCU. This is a great way for students to transition seamlessly without the immediate burdens of figuring out enrollment options on their own.
2. Massachusetts should create scholarship programs specifically for students who choose to attend HBCUs. While many students are interested in these institutions, the additional cost of out-of-state tuition can make attendance extremely difficult. Targeted financial support would help ensure that students are not prevented from accessing these opportunities because of cost alone.
3. Policymakers should invest in mentorship and leadership programs that connect students with HBCU students, faculty, alumni, and professionals across industries starting in early high school. This would allow students to have unique access to information and advice that they would not simply find through an internet search. These relationships can help students build confidence, develop career goals, expand their professional networks, and help them navigate the college application process more effectively. And, more importantly, this would give students an outlet amid an incredibly overwhelming and uncertain process in their lives.
4. The state will need to collect and publicly publish data on post-graduate outcomes such as graduate school enrollment and workforce placement. By measuring these outcomes, policymakers will be able to determine which initiatives are most effective and ensure public resources are being used responsibly.

By taking these steps, Massachusetts can expand access to educational environments that have consistently produced successful scholars, professionals, and community leaders. Investing in these support systems will not only benefit individual students but ultimately strengthen the state's future workforce and leadership pipeline.