



# THE HBCU POLICY FELLOWSHIP

**Driving Change through Student Leadership**

Mizani Benjamin, Leah Pires, and Jolana Thirkill

The HBCU Summer Student Policy Fellowship is an advocacy-oriented leadership initiative that puts students at the forefront of educational transformation. Undergraduate students selected as policy fellows led research aimed at dismantling barriers to Massachusetts students' accessing Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). By transforming their own lived experiences, deep campus observations, and research into concrete legislative and administrative strategies, HBCU Policy Fellows worked to ensure that future policy in the Commonwealth is built by students, for students.

Launched through a partnership between [uAspire](#) and [Building Bridges Education](#), this initiative unites our organizations around a shared objective: breaking down systemic barriers and forging more equitable pathways to HBCUs for Massachusetts students.

### Acknowledgements

*This set of recommendations was compiled and synthesized by Femi Stoltz, Massachusetts Director at uAspire, based on the research, policy analysis, and lived experiences of the 2026 HBCU Student Policy Fellows cohort.*

## Greetings from the HBCU Policy Fellows!

### Mizani Benjamin



I am a second-year Business Transfer major concentrating in Finance at Bunker Hill Community College. Driven by a passion for higher education accessibility, I joined the HBCU Policy Fellowship to address a critical gap in student outreach—while HBCUs are frequently advertised, those promotions often lack the depth needed for prospective students to truly envision themselves there. Through this program, I want to help high school students move beyond superficial flyers and connect directly with actual students and alumni. Ultimately, my goal is to dismantle the narrative that HBCUs are out of reach and ensure students of color understand how these institutions are built to empower them to belong, thrive, and succeed.

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### Leah Pires



I'm an 18-year-old Boston native and a recent graduate of the Boston Arts Academy. Currently, I'm a sophomore at Fordham University in New York City, where I'm double-majoring in Dance and Political Science on a pre-law track. Through Fordham's dual program with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, I am training for my BFA with aspirations of becoming both a professional dancer and a sports and entertainment attorney. Driven by a deep passion for educational equity, I joined this HBCU fellowship to advocate for students of color, break down financial barriers, and help create resourceful opportunities for students across Massachusetts.

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### Jolana Thirkill



I am currently a sophomore at Spelman College, majoring in economics on the pre-law track. I joined this HBCU policy fellowship because, as a current HBCU student, I get to experience the unique opportunities that historically Black colleges have to offer to high-achieving minority students in our society, and I want to expand this access as much as possible. I hope to bring my unique insight and perspective to this program in a way that allows our initiatives to flourish and bring about real change!.

## About the Recommendations

Over the summer, the fellows engaged in a multi-faceted research process that directly informed and shaped these policy recommendations. Grounded in extensive research, fellows conducted deep-dive policy analyses to identify systemic barriers and opportunities for enhancing the value and visibility of HBCUs within the Massachusetts educational landscape.

To ensure the viability and strategic impact of their proposals, they also led targeted field advisory sessions with seasoned policy experts and peers, vetting their ideas against real-world governance frameworks and refining them into actionable, student-driven solutions.

After completing the research process, students' recommendations converged into 4 strategic pillars. These buckets are designed to serve as a guiding framework to help Massachusetts chart a path toward more inclusive HBCU representation and help broaden student access and pathways for the Commonwealth's students of color.

## Student-led recommendations for Increasing HBCU Access & Representation in Massachusetts

### Enhance K-12 Outreach, Guidance, and Mentorship

- **Centralize and Integrate Information:** Create a dedicated HBCU online resource page and seamlessly embed HBCUs into existing state college readiness materials and student planning guides.
- **Expand Statewide Outreach and Mentorship:** Launch state-sponsored virtual college fairs and workshops while investing in mentorship networks that connect high school students directly with HBCU students, faculty, and alumni.
- **Train School Counselors:** Provide professional development and updated training guides to ensure school counselors are equipped to advise students on HBCU admissions, programs, and scholarships.

### Establish Institutional Partnerships and Academic Pathways

- **Form an HBCU Partnership Consortium:** Create a unified platform to support institutional collaboration between Massachusetts colleges and HBCUs.
- **Streamline Academic Pipelines:** Develop formal articulation agreements that provide guaranteed admission pathways, dual-degree programs, and simplified credit transfers between Massachusetts institutions and selected HBCUs.
- **Expand Exchange and Research Opportunities:** Facilitate semester-long study-away programs, student exchanges, and joint research/workforce development partnerships between Massachusetts institutions and HBCUs in high-demand fields like STEM, biotechnology, and healthcare.

### Create Targeted Financial Support and Incentives

- **Offset Out-of-State Costs:** Establish dedicated state scholarship programs specifically for Massachusetts students choosing to attend HBCUs to lower the financial barrier of out-of-state tuition.
- **Incentivize Program Participation:** Offer financial incentives to support students engaging in inter-state academic exchange and study-away programs.

### Implement Accountability and Data-Driven Tracking

- **Measure Outreach and Access Metrics:** Monitor short-term engagement indicators, such as state website traffic, counselor resource utilization, and student participation in HBCU outreach events.
- **Leverage Comparative Data for Strategic Impact:** Disaggregate and benchmark Massachusetts MSI performance against broader HBCU trends to uncover gaps, guide targeted investments, and drive equitable postsecondary success.

## Final Thoughts

The policy recommendations presented in this document represent a vision for systemic equity and student-driven change. It is the sincere hope of the fellows that these insights will serve as a foundational guide to ignite a broader, sustained conversation among policymakers, educators and administrators, and community leaders.

By considering ways to implement these policy proposals, Massachusetts can begin to take definitive steps toward expanding HBCU access, strengthening institutional support, and unlocking transformative educational opportunities for students across the Commonwealth.

## Post-program Statements from HBCU Policy Fellows

“This fellowship has broadened my perspective on the underrepresentation of HBCUs in Massachusetts. Being part of this initiative has strengthened my commitment to addressing this important issue. It is encouraging to work alongside others who recognize this challenge and are dedicated to creating meaningful change.”

**-Mizani Benamin, HBCU Policy Fellowship Alumnus**

“During the course of this fellowship, I have not only gained insight into the problems facing students but have also come up with recommendations that could make paths towards making higher education more accessible to all.”

**- Leah Pires, HBCU Policy Fellowship Alumna**

“I am grateful to have had the opportunity to apply my knowledge and lived experience to the work I did in the HBCU policy fellowship. The research I’ve done has been meaningful, deepening my understanding of representation for minority students, and more importantly giving me an outlet to create change for underserved students.”

**- Jolana Thirkill, HBCU Policy Fellowship Alumna**