



EQUITY IN EXCELLENCE

**A Strategy for Universal HBCU
Access in Massachusetts**

Femi Stoltz

An Introduction to Our Organizations

[Building Bridges Education](#) is committed to providing continuous wraparound support from middle school through college completion, ensuring that students not only access higher education but persist and graduate. As a student-identity-centered organization, we intentionally work to address persistent disparities in college access, retention, and completion – advancing equitable outcomes for all students.

[uAspire](#)'s mission is to improve the economic mobility of underrepresented students by creating financial solutions to diverse postsecondary pathways. Through our four Impact Pillars – Advising, Training, Policy, and Consulting – we help underrepresented students access capital from which they can build a better future.

Our partnership was forged through a shared commitment to educational equity and a collective vision for the future of the Commonwealth. Recognizing that institutional fit is as vital as financial feasibility, our collaboration is dedicated to ensuring Massachusetts students have clear, affordable pathways to culturally affirming colleges that celebrate their identity and accelerate their success.

The HBCU Advantage & Economic Impact

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are mission-driven colleges and universities established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the primary goal of providing high-quality education to Black Americans when other doors were closed. Today, they stand as vibrant hubs of academic excellence and cultural heritage, recognized for fostering environments that empower students to become leaders and innovators.

Black students who attend public and private bachelor degree-granting HBCUs see 4-year completion rates of [62% and 65%](#), respectively, in comparison to the national average of just 21% for Black students. HBCUs create a supportive, high-energy environment where Black excellence is the standard, leading to [higher satisfaction rates](#) among students and long-term [mental well-being](#). By prioritizing a culturally relevant campus environment, HBCUs equip graduates with the interpersonal skills needed to lead in a diverse workforce.

A Legacy of Leadership in the Commonwealth

Home to the [Abiel Smith School](#), the first public school building in the country constructed for the education of Black children, and subsequent academic hub for transformative Black leaders such as [W.E.B. DuBois](#) and [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#), Massachusetts has a history deeply intertwined with the foundation of Black academic pursuit and achievement in the United States.

Despite this deep-rooted intellectual history, there are no HBCUs in Massachusetts – or within the broader New England region – leaving a geographic gap between the Commonwealth's students of color and the campuses historically built to serve them. To honor Massachusetts' long-standing commitment to higher education, we must create and strengthen pathways that connect Black students to the institutions designed for their success: HBCUs.

Disconnected Signals: The Reality of HBCU Awareness in Massachusetts

Because Massachusetts lacks any in-state HBCUs, local students heavily depend on high school counselors whose guidance is often limited by information gaps regarding these institutions. Instead of proactively presenting HBCUs as viable paths, counseling networks routinely write them off as financially prohibitive, offer minimal guidance on specialized scholarships, and disproportionately promote local state colleges.

Massachusetts currently has a transfer articulation [agreement](#) and dual admission agreement between Massachusetts community colleges and 6 HBCUs. Highlights include:

Transfer and Testing Policies

- Community college graduates are exempt from College Entrance and ACT exams
- Students will need no more than 68 additional credits to graduate with a Bachelor's degree
- Transfer students follow the same graduation requirements as students who started at the HBCU institution

Policy Protections & Timelines

- Students cannot be held to new degree requirements established less than three years before they matriculate
- The dual admission agreement protects the student for three years from the time they apply until they matriculate
- Students can apply for dual admission anytime between entering community college and up to one year before transferring

While these existing institutional relationships are a powerful foundational tool for equity, they are currently undermined by a lack of marketing that has led to low visibility among Massachusetts' current and prospective college students. The Commonwealth should actively advertise these opportunities in public-facing materials for diverse student bodies.

How Other States are Helping Create an HBCU Pipeline: California

California also does not have any HBCUs, so the state established the [Cal-HBCU Transfer Grant Program](#) to support students of color transitioning to these out-of-state schools. This initiative allows eligible California community college students who have earned an Associate Degree for Transfer to receive a one-time grant of up to \$5k to attend a participating HBCU.

The program's primary funding mechanism is the Cal Grant, redesigned to ensure financial aid portability for Black students and to help close racial wealth gaps by making out-of-state education more affordable. To qualify, students must commit to returning to California after graduation, ensuring that the skills and degrees earned contribute back to strengthening the state's professional workforce and economy.

Strategic Recommendations: Strengthening the Massachusetts – HBCU Pipeline

1) Visibility as an Equity Strategy: For many Massachusetts students, discovering an HBCU happens by chance because state agencies dedicate minimal marketing resources to promoting Historically Black institutions. Changing this starts with closing the information gap in schools so students have equal access to discovering a range of postsecondary options that center their success. Massachusetts should include the transfer articulation agreements about HBCUs in all state-funded college readiness programs and encourage high schools to represent HBCUs in college discussions and materials.

2) Investing in the Return of Massachusetts HBCU Grads: Massachusetts faces a persistent [diversity gap](#) across its professional workforce. While HBCUs produce a disproportionate share of the nation’s Black talent – including [50%](#) of Black teachers and [25%](#) of Black STEM graduates – the Commonwealth has yet to make a targeted attempt to capitalize on this talent pool. Implementing a “Return-to-MA” grant program to support students attending HBCUs and incentivize graduates to bring their expertise back to Massachusetts after graduation would fuel the state economy across a range of industries and reduce the long-term costs of gaps in systemic representation.

3) Bridging Gaps and Creating Pathways: While Massachusetts has a foundational articulation agreement with 6 HBCUs, the current framework must expand to incentivize deeper collaboration. The Commonwealth must establish stronger bridge agreements that go beyond basic credit transfers to include reverse transfer options, proactive advisor engagement, and fiscal resources for students. Future agreements can be strengthened by negotiating targeted tuition rates where Massachusetts residents receive in-state equivalent rates at out-of-state HBCUs, and establishing a formalized reverse transfer program to allow retroactive associate degree completion.

4) Establishing a Regional Footprint: The Case for a Massachusetts HBCU Satellite: Without a regional HBCU, Massachusetts students have to travel far to enroll in these institutions. Establishing a satellite HBCU campus would introduce a proven model to simultaneously address racial opportunity disparities and the Commonwealth’s urgent need for diverse talent. This type of expansion would meet a critical regional need for the culturally and academically specialized environments uniquely provided by the HBCU experience.

Creating Universal HBCU Access

To bridge the physical gap between the Commonwealth and the nation’s premier HBCUs, Massachusetts should adopt a multi-faceted growth strategy that includes: broadening marketing and exposure to ensure students are aware of the HBCU advantage, establishing seamless transfer and bridge agreements with local community colleges, and evaluating the feasibility of an HBCU satellite campus in-state. Massachusetts leaders should also give strong consideration to the implementation of portable state grant funding, allowing financial aid to follow students to these culturally affirming environments before returning to the Commonwealth to lead.

By removing existing financial, informational, and physical barriers to HBCUs, Massachusetts can honor its intellectual legacy, advance the state’s [equity agenda](#), and strategically diversify the Commonwealth’s professional workforce while enhancing the academic experiences of the Commonwealth’s students.