



Strategic Decision-Making in Higher Education: State Legislators and Affordability Policy for Public HBCUs

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**Strategic Decision-Making in Higher Education: State Legislators and Affordability Policy
for Public HBCUs**

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Abstract

This study uses a multiple-case qualitative research design to explore how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. Guided by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH), the study analyzed interview data and state legislative documents to examine how the process of policy change and coalition structure and collaboration informed the policy agenda and the role of power dynamics. The analysis identified SLBCs and their constituent members' advocacy for college affordability at public HBCUs is simultaneously belief-driven and deeply constrained by institutional power. Findings revealed tension between the moral commitment and political constraint. This further demonstrates how that SLBCs and their constituent members transformed limited procedural power into influence through collective strategy and adaptation. This study contributes to higher education research by demonstrating that decisions about college affordability, particularly for public HBCUs, are shaped by power dynamics that occur before formal votes take place. By examining these behind-the-scenes processes, the study helps explain why certain policy proposals advance while others stall, even when there is broad support for affordability goals.

Keywords: State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs), Power dynamics, College affordability, Higher Education Institutional Constraints, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Legislative decision-making

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“You don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines... You make progress by implementing ideas.”

— Shirley Chisholm., Founder of the Congressional Black Caucus

State legislatures are contested arenas of power where agenda control, partisan dominance, and institutional rules shape which policy proposals advance and which are blocked. Extant research demonstrates that majority parties exercise disproportionate influence over legislative agendas, controlling committee leadership, hearing schedules, and floor access (Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Anzia & Cohn, 2011; Shor & Kistner, 2023). Within this context, minority-party legislators face significant structural barriers to shaping policy outcomes, especially on issues that lack bipartisan consensus or that are associated with historically marginalized constituencies. Black state lawmakers, who are mostly Democrats, work together through State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) (Preuhs, 2006). They are often advocating for issues that matter deeply to Black communities while also serving in legislatures where their party does not hold the majority. Although descriptive representation research suggests that legislators who share the identities of historically marginalized communities are more likely to elevate previously neglected policy concerns (Mansbridge, 1999; Brown, 2023), their ability to convert agenda priorities into enacted legislation is conditional on institutional rules, partisan structure, and strategic formation of their coalition (Preuhs, 2006; Orey, 2007). This is particularly evident in states across the South, where Democrats often lack majority control, and where affordability policy proposals addressing public HBCUs must navigate majority-party gatekeeping and racialized perceptions of policy benefit. These political conditions interact with persistent structural disparities in higher education. For instance, Black students continue to face higher

unmet financial need and greater affordability barriers than other student groups (IHEP, 2023; 2025), and public HBCUs remain chronically underfunded relative to predominantly white institutions (Pierre, 2025; EdTrust, 2024). While higher education research has extensively discussed the dynamics around state resource allocation, there is limited discourse on how legislators engage with the politics of college affordability and access in the political domains. As a result, critical questions about the distribution of political power in shaping affordability policy, particularly for institutions historically underfunded and structurally disadvantaged, such as public HBCUs, remain understudied.

As such, this study explores how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. For this paper, this study defines power as the capacity of actors or coalitions to influence policy outcomes by controlling agendas, shaping institutional rules and procedures, and limiting the range of alternatives considered legitimate within a policymaking arena. Power operates not only through visible decision-making, but also through the ability to prevent certain issues from entering debate and to structure the conditions under which policy choices are made (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974). In legislative contexts, this includes authority over committee processes, access to hearings and floor votes, and control of the institutional pathways through which proposals advance or are blocked (Dahl, 1961; Stone, 2002). Although there is little agreement in the literature on what constitutes a policy actor (Cairney, 2012; Howlett; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), I follow Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith in defining them as individuals and organizations actively engaged with a policy problem, who seek to influence decisions within a subsystem, and who coordinate with others through advocacy coalitions guided by shared belief systems

(Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988). By treating members of SLBCs as policy actors, I can make visible the ways that SLBC members navigate uneven power structures, political opposition while leveraging identity, relationships, moral commitments, and the broader institutional contexts that shape their decisions in the policymaking process. Particular attention is directed toward understanding how SLBC legislators leverage caucus solidarity, negotiate across party lines, and challenge institutional gatekeeping. Informed by a qualitative dataset of 9 semi-structured interviews and 11 legislative documents, this study was framed by the following research question:

1. In what ways do state-level power dynamics create challenges and opportunities for State Legislative Black Caucus (SLBCs) and their constituent members working to advance college affordability policy for public HBCUs?

Literature Review

Defining Power and Institutional Constraint in Legislative Policymaking

Classic theories of power underscore this distinction between visible decision-making and the more subtle forms of influence that determine which issues ever reach the policy agenda. For instance, Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) concept of "nondecision-making" and Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional view of power remain foundational for understanding how political actors can exercise influence by limiting debate, structuring institutional procedures, or shaping perceptions of what is politically feasible. Within state legislatures, these dynamics are especially pronounced. Agenda control is often concentrated in committee leadership, chamber leadership, and budget-writing bodies, which possess disproportionate authority over hearings, bill referrals,

and fiscal negotiations (Hall, 1996; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Consequently, legislative outcomes frequently reflect institutional design rather than majority preference. Dahl's (1961) early work on political power underscores this point, demonstrating that access to decision-making venues often matters more than formal voting strength.

While legislative power is often discussed in terms of party control or ideological alignment, much of what determines policy outcomes occurs at a more procedural and institutional level. Committee chairs determine whether bills are heard at all. Leadership often controls the legislative calendar and decides which proposals move forward for consideration. Budget committees and appropriations subcommittees shape the fiscal boundaries within which policy ideas must operate. These procedural controls function as filters that limit the range of policy options deemed viable, regardless of their substantive merit (Hall, 1996; Hacker & Pierson, 2010). As a result, legislators who lack positional authority often face structural barriers long before a bill reaches a floor vote. These constraints are especially pronounced in higher education policymaking. Funding for public institutions is typically negotiated through omnibus budgets, higher education subcommittees, or conference committees where deliberations are opaque and dominated by senior legislators.

Within these constrained institutional environments, legislative caucuses serve as an important mechanism for collective action. While caucuses lack formal lawmaking authority, research consistently shows that they function as strategic organizational actors capable of shaping agendas, coordinating members, and amplifying political influence (Brady, 1985; Hammond, Mulhollan, & Stevens, 1985; Miller, 1989). Bratton (1999) demonstrates that caucuses can influence agenda-setting by coordinating bill sponsorship, signaling priorities to leadership, and serving as focal points for interest group engagement. Similarly, Rocca and

Sanchez (2008) show that caucus membership shapes legislative behavior, particularly in areas affecting historically marginalized communities. This collective dimension is particularly important for legislators who operate with limited formal power. Individual lawmakers, particularly those representing racially or economically marginalized constituencies, often lack the seniority, committee assignments, or leadership positions necessary to advance legislation independently.

State Legislative Black Caucuses and their Constituent Members as Policy Actors

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that legislators from historically marginalized groups are more likely to prioritize policies that address group-based inequalities, even when doing so carries political risk (Canon, 1999; Tate, 2003). This form of substantive representation extends beyond symbolic advocacy to include active engagement in policy design, coalition-building, and agenda-setting. At the same time, scholars caution against assuming that descriptive representation automatically translates into policy success. Preuhs (2006) shows that the effectiveness of minority legislators depends heavily on institutional context, including party control, committee assignments, and legislative rules. As a result, Black legislators often must pursue policy goals through indirect or strategic means. Coalition-building becomes central under these conditions. Mansbridge (1999) argues that group-based representation frequently requires collective action, particularly when individual legislators face structural disadvantages. This dynamic is evident in how SLBCs and their constituent members frame policy proposals in ways that resonate beyond racial identity, emphasizing economic development, workforce readiness, or fiscal responsibility to build broader coalitions. Contemporary examples illustrate this pattern. Efforts to expand state funding for HBCUs are often framed not solely as equity initiatives but as investments in teacher preparation, healthcare workforce pipelines, or regional

economic growth, frames that resonate with both Democratic and Republican legislators. This strategic reframing reflects what Curry and Lee (2020) describe as the growing necessity of coalition-based policymaking in polarized legislatures, where formal party alignment alone is insufficient to move legislation forward.

For SLBCs and their constituent members, this reality necessitates a strategic approach to policymaking. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) provides a useful lens for understanding this dynamic. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) argue that policy change occurs through the interaction of coalitions composed of actors who share core beliefs and coordinate their efforts over time. These coalitions typically include legislators, executive branch officials, advocacy organizations, institutional leaders, and policy experts who work collectively to shape problem definitions and influence decision-making venues. In the context of HBCU policy, SLBC members frequently serve as intermediaries within such coalitions. They link campus leaders with appropriations and budget brokers, connect advocacy organizations to legislative negotiators, and translate community priorities into policy language that resonates with fiscal and political constraints. This reframing allows legislators to build broader coalitions that include business groups, workforce boards, and executive agencies, actors whose support can help overcome institutional resistance. Importantly, coalition-building does not eliminate gatekeeping. Instead, it provides a way to navigate it. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) note, policy change is most likely when actors succeed in shifting how an issue is defined or when they gain access to new venues of decision-making. Yet these strategies operate within clear limits. Institutional rules continue to shape whose voices carry weight, which proposals receive consideration, and how resources are allocated. Even when SLBC members secure policy wins, those gains are often incremental, contingent, or vulnerable to reversal in subsequent budget cycles. This pattern

reflects what Hacker and Pierson (2010) describe as the asymmetric nature of political power, in which well-positioned actors are better able to defend the status quo than marginalized groups are to enact change. Understanding institutional gatekeeping in this way clarifies why SLBC members rely heavily on caucus solidarity, long-term coalition-building, and strategic negotiation. Policy change in this context is rarely the product of a single legislative action. Instead, it emerges through sustained engagement with institutional processes, careful management of political relationships, and continual efforts to expand the boundaries of what is considered politically feasible.

Frameworks

This study is guided by two primary frameworks aligned with the research question on power dynamic creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs.

First, this study of policy agendas and legislative behavior surrounding college affordability and access is anchored in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). ACF is a conceptual framework which seeks to explain the dynamics of policy change and stability within complex political systems (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible & Sabatier, 2007). The ACF rests on three foundational premises. First, analyzing policy change and learning requires a longitudinal perspective, typically spanning a decade or more, since meaningful shifts in belief systems, coalition alignments, and institutional arrangements evolve gradually (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Weible et al., 2009). Second, such analysis is best undertaken through the lens of a policy subsystem, defined as a semiautonomous arena of actors across institutions such as legislators, agency officials, interest groups, and researchers - who share an interest in a

substantive policy area (Sabatier, 1988; Weible, 2008). Third, the ACF conceptualizes public policies as expressions of belief systems, comprising value priorities and causal assumptions about how to achieve collective goals (Sabatier & Weible, 2014).

This study explores how this power dynamic creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. These legislators act as policy actors within this coalition, whose strategies and choices are influenced both by their institutional roles (e.g., committee assignments, leadership positions) and by broader structural forces such as partisanship, budget priorities, and the racial politics of state governance (McLendon, 2003; McLendon et al., 2006). In this study, the system of analysis is the state legislature, and the policy subsystem is the state-level higher education policy domain. I specifically focus on legislative committees such as higher education, finance, appropriations, and ways and means. Within this subsystem, state legislators interact and engage with stakeholders throughout the state-level higher education policy domain shape the direction of college affordability, financial aid, and institutional funding policy. These stakeholders include higher-education agencies, executive offices, and advocacy organizations.

Drawing on the Advocacy Coalitions Framework, this study examines how SLBC members' belief systems shape their advocacy for affordability policies at public HBCUs and how coalition strategies evolve within the multi-state higher-education policy subsystem. The analysis spans 2019–2023, a period marked by COVID-19 federal recovery funding, partisan polarization, and heightened attention to racial disparities in higher education. Within this context, “affordability” is conceptualized as a contested belief construct, a policy idea interpreted differently across ideological and institutional lines. For some policy actors, affordability

represents a deep core commitment to public responsibility and racial uplift. For others, it is a policy core principle linked to efficiency, workforce development, or accountability (Dougherty & Reddy, 2013; Tandberg & Griffith, 2013). Specifically, I explored the key elements of ACF: process of policy change (i.e., what are the policy priorities) and coalition structure and collaboration (i.e., how does their roles as members of SLBCs inform the policy agenda and how does power dynamics play a role?)

The second framework is the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH) theoretical framework. The BUH seeks to explain and contextualize collective political behavior among African Americans. Dawson argued that because of the shared historical experience of slavery, segregation, and systemic exclusion, Black Americans developed a sense of “linked fate,” which is the belief that their individual well-being is tied to the status and progress of the racial group as a whole (Dawson, 1994). This shared perception of interconnected destiny shapes political decision-making, encouraging support for policies and candidates perceived as advancing the collective interests of Black communities rather than solely individual self-interest (Gamble, 2007; Gilliam & Whitby, 1996). BUH is particularly appropriate for this research because it emphasizes that Black policymakers evaluate policies not only through personal or partisan benefit but through the lens of group advancement, a process grounded in historical experience and ongoing structural inequality.

The BUH posits that group-based utility, the assessment of policies through the lens of collective benefit, serves as a guiding principle for Black political engagement. Rather than evaluating political choices through material or individualistic criteria, Black voters and leaders often make decisions grounded in what best advances the group’s long-term position within society (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 2003). The Black Utility Heuristic framework provides a means of

interpreting how SLBCs and their constituent members approach advocacy for HBCU affordability as both a political strategy and an expression of collective responsibility. Specifically, four elements of the BUH: linked fate, group consciousness, historical memory, and strategic calculation under constraint align directly with the study's analytic focus. “Linked fate” explains how legislators connect their advocacy for public HBCUs to the broader advancement of Black communities, seeing these institutions as essential to expanding opportunity and mobility. “Group consciousness” illuminates how a shared sense of racial identity and community obligation drives policy prioritization. “Historical memory” provides a lens for understanding how awareness of past inequities informs current legislative strategies. Finally, “strategic calculation under constraint” captures how SLBC members pursue community-centered goals within politically restrictive environments.

Philpot and Walton (2007) find that “linked fate” and “group utility” are empirically distinct but complementary mechanisms that sustain collective alignment among Black elites and mass publics alike. Subsequent studies have extended the heuristic’s application to Black elected officials, emphasizing how collective consciousness informs policy priorities and advocacy behaviors. Brown (2014) argues that Black legislators in state and local government often use racial group interests as a lens for policy entrepreneurship, prioritizing issues such as education access, voting rights, and economic development. Likewise, Gay (2002) and Whitby (2007) find that Black legislators’ behavior in majority-white institutions is guided by a sense of responsibility to their racial group, even when doing so imposes political costs or limits access to mainstream coalitions. In this regard, the BUH operates as both a cognitive orientation and a normative commitment, a guiding principle shaping what Black legislators view as politically possible and morally necessary.

In this context, these frameworks will enable an account of a robust, nuanced, and contextually grounded account of the legislative process that considers both the institutional processes shaping policy outcomes and the group-based consciousness guiding Black legislators' choices within those structures. The ACF explains how actors with shared policy beliefs coordinate within policy subsystems to shape legislative agendas, resource allocation, and implementation strategies (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible & Jenkins-Smith, 2016). In contrast, the BUH (Dawson, 1994) reveals the racialized motivations and collective consciousness that drive Black legislators' engagement with policy issues affecting their communities. For instance, an SLBC legislator may introduce a bill to expand need-based financial aid at public HBCUs, but because the majority party controls committee leadership and decides which bills receive hearings, the proposal stalls despite strong support within the caucus. ACF helps explain this through the concept of coalition-building across belief systems, where legislators identify overlapping goals and coordinate across ideological lines to move policy forward (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018). The BUH, however, clarifies *why* Black legislators remain committed to this advocacy despite structural and partisan barriers: their sense of linked fate and group consciousness (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 2010) compels them to view HBCU affordability not simply as an education issue but as a moral imperative tied to the collective well-being and upward mobility of Black communities.

Compactly, these frameworks offer a multi-dimensional analysis that accounts for both institutional processes and identity-based motivations, providing a more robust, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the legislative process.

Research Design and Epistemological Anchoring

Following a case study methodology, this research draws on multiple forms of data. This research is bounded by SLBCs and their constituent members who could speak directly about their legislative and policy work to expand college affordability and access for Black low-income students at public HBCUs. This study is also bounded by legislative documents relevant to this study. Consistent with Yin's (2018) guidance for empirical inquiry through case study design, the study defines clear parameters to examine a contemporary policy phenomenon, such as the policymaking process for college affordability, within its real-life context. Each state functions as a bounded case within the broader state-level higher education policy subsystem, enabling cross-case comparison while preserving the particular political and institutional conditions that shape each site.

Informed by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH), the case study design captures how state legislators, particularly SLBCs and their constituent members, navigate complex political systems to advance college affordability for public HBCUs. The ACF provides the structural foundation for understanding how these legislators operate as policy actors within the higher education policy subsystem, where belief systems, coalition structures, and resource exchanges shape policy design and implementation (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018). It directs attention to how SLBC members interpret the problem of affordability, align with allies, and negotiate influence across legislative arenas such as higher education, appropriations, and finance committees. The Black Utility Heuristic (BUH) (Dawson, 1994) deepens this analysis by foregrounding the role of collective identity and group consciousness in shaping legislative advocacy. Whereas the ACF highlights coalition dynamics and institutional behavior, the BUH explains why SLBC members engage in persistent advocacy for HBCUs despite limited

institutional power or partisan control. It posits that their political behavior is informed by linked fate and a commitment to advancing the collective well-being of Black communities (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 2010; Gay, 2001). This orientation influences how legislators frame affordability issues, define success, and sustain engagement in legislative processes often resistant to redistributive agendas.

While this study followed Yin's (2018) structure for case delimitation, it also drew from Mertens' (2017) transformative paradigm, which situates inquiry within a framework of social justice, cultural responsiveness, and critical reflection on power. The transformative paradigm provides a lens through which to interrogate how race, history, and structural inequality shape the policymaking process for public HBCUs. This orientation recognizes that legislative action unfolds within systems historically marked by racialized funding structures, political exclusion, and differential access to institutional resources (Allen et al., 2007; Gasman and Commodore, 2014). Integrating the transformative paradigm with the ACF ensures that the analysis not only documents how policymakers act and learn within a subsystem, but also how they confront and reimagine the constraints imposed by these legacies.

Prior research has shown that policymaking spaces, even those involving legislators of color, are characterized by hierarchies, negotiation, and tension (Brown, 2014; Gamble, 2007). Accordingly, this study remains attentive to the diverse perspectives, strategies, and belief orientations among SLBC members. Grounding the research within Afrocentric and emancipatory traditions further aligns with the transformative paradigm's goal of producing knowledge that affirms the agency, expertise, and policy innovation of Black legislators (Mertens, 2017; Patton, 2016). This approach positions SLBC members as central policy actors

within the state higher education policy subsystem, whose advocacy for affordability reflects both individual conviction and collective struggle.

Methodology

This study explores how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to advance college affordability policy for public HBCUs. This study includes six states: Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. It employs a qualitative, multiple case study design situated within a transformative worldview, recognizing that policymaking unfolds within racialized and unequal structures of higher education. This study employs two primary frameworks to explore how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to advance college affordability policy for public HBCUs. These two are (1) the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and (2) Black Utility Heuristic (BUH) theoretical framework (Dawson, 1994; Sabatier, 1988). These frameworks offer a multi-dimensional analysis that accounts for both institutional processes, identity-based motivations, and provides a robust, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of policymaking.

Case Context

This study grew out of an interest in how state policymaking environments shape college affordability for public HBCUs, particularly in settings marked by enduring racial and fiscal inequalities. Rather than treating affordability as a uniform policy problem, the study approaches it as something that is constructed and negotiated within distinct state contexts. The selected states share a legacy of segregation in higher education and maintain a significant public HBCU presence, yet they differ sharply in their political orientations and approaches to financing

college access. Compactly, these cases offer a useful vantage point for examining how legislators as core policy actors navigate affordability policy in relation to public HBCUs, with specific attention to the role played by SLBCs and their constituent members.

The study focuses on several interconnected aspects of state higher education policy, including legislative decision-making around affordability, the use of fiscal policy instruments, and the positioning of public HBCUs within broader state systems. Each state included has at least one public HBCU, many of which have faced persistent underfunding, enrollment pressures, and heightened performance expectations amid broader shifts in higher education finance. At the same time, these institutions continue to serve as key pathways to upward mobility for Black students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Freeman et al., 2022). This tension between structural constraint and social importance makes public HBCUs a revealing site for understanding how affordability policy is defined and pursued.

Variation across states further clarifies the analytical scope for this study. Political control across the sites ranges from Republican-led legislatures in states such as Florida and South Carolina to more Democratic-leaning governance in Delaware, creating meaningful contrasts in legislative priorities and investment strategies for higher education. Several of these states also have active SLBCs that function as organized blocs within their legislatures and play visible roles in debates over college affordability and institutional funding. Across these cases, differences in governance structures, tuition-setting authority, and the availability of need-based aid shape the strategic choices available to legislators and influence how affordability policy is designed and implemented (Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020).

Researcher Positionality

My path into public policy has been shaped by both personal experience and professional insights, each reinforcing the other in ways that make my contributions to this study promising. As a Haitian and Queer Cisgender male, my lived experience has informed my understanding of barriers to economic opportunity. As a first-generation, low-income college graduate, I have firsthand experience with the barriers to higher education. For instance, receiving the Florida Student Assistance Grant showed me firsthand how need-based aid expands access to education and socioeconomic mobility. While I have experienced hardships due to social and economic limitations, I was fortunate enough to matriculate through higher education and achieve a moderate degree of socioeconomic mobility. Coming from Broward County, where Black and immigrant communities face some of the highest poverty rates in the region, I have seen how policy decisions directly shape economic opportunity.

Now, as a policy professional, I work to eliminate financial barriers and ensure equitable access to education and for low-income and racially minoritized communities. I approach this research through a transformative lens, seeking to uncover and challenge the power dynamics and ideologies that perpetuate inequality within educational systems. Recognizing the importance of reflexivity in research, I continuously strive to examine my biases and assumptions while engaging with diverse stakeholders. By amplifying the voices of my participants, I hope to contribute to a more just and equitable educational landscape. In sum, my positionality as a researcher is deeply intertwined with my personal experiences and commitment to social justice.

Data Collection

This study draws on multiple forms of data. Data corresponds to the policy-making process of the policy subsystem and the legislative behavior of the state legislators.

The first stage of data collection involved a systematic review and analysis of 11 legislative documents to map the legislative landscape shaping affordability policies for public HBCUs. Guided by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), this stage sought to identify the actors, belief systems, and policy instruments that define the higher education policy subsystem across multiple states (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). This approach was complemented by the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH), which provided an interpretive lens for understanding how collective racial interests and shared experiences of structural disadvantage may shape legislative behavior and agenda-setting among SLBCs and their constituent members (Dawson, 1994). Compactly, these frameworks informed the structural power dynamics and identity-driven motivations that are realized in the data analysis phase.

Following Yin's (2018) guidance for multiple-case study design, this study employed a collection and review of documentary evidence. The method was employed to establish a clear "chain of evidence" and to develop a case study database that could support within-and cross-case comparisons. This process sought to understand how power operates within state legislatures and how those conditions shape the ability of SLBCs and their constituent members to influence policy outcomes for public HBCUs. The legislative document collection covered the time period from January 2019 to December 2023. This timeframe was selected to reflect a full legislative cycle across the states in the study, ensuring that both introduced and enacted bills could be examined. To maintain focus and accuracy, the search concentrated exclusively on legislative documents, as formal legislation represents one of the most direct expressions of policymaking behavior within a subsystem (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). Consistent with Yin's (2018) emphasis on systematic data procedures, the search was conducted three distinct times, September 2024, February 2025, and June through October 2025,

to ensure data completeness and capture bills introduced or acted upon at different stages of the legislative calendar. The initial search examined the official legislative websites for each state to identify higher education policy bills. I cross referenced this search with higher education research and policy organizations for accuracy and clarity. Some example organizations include National Conference of State Legislatures Higher Education Tracker; College Access Network; and Education Commission of 50 States. This search yielded a total of (N= 268) pieces of legislation across all sites (**see table 1**). The bills were documented at varying stages in the policymaking process, including introduction, committee passage, chamber passage, full legislative approval, gubernatorial veto, or enactment. To maintain analytic precision, a series of screening procedures followed.

The first screening applied inclusion criteria to identify legislation substantially relevant to the study's focus. Bills were included if they involved changes to governance, tuition policy, funding formulas, or program oversight affecting public institutions, particularly those referencing public HBCUs. Additionally, bills related to scholarships, financial aid, tuition-free initiatives, debt relief, or student basic needs (such as food or housing assistance) were retained. A further refinement considered whether a member of the SLBC either sponsored or co-sponsored the legislation. Given the study's attention to affordability for Black and historically marginalized students, bills referencing African American, minority, underrepresented, or low-income students were also included. This process yielded (N= 55) relevant legislative items. Next, a more targeted screening identified legislation introduced or co-sponsored by SLBC members. To verify caucus membership and committee assignments, each SLBC website and official state legislative directory was reviewed. In cases where caucus websites were incomplete or outdated, official state legislative databases were used for confirmation. This screening

reduced the dataset to (N= 38 bills). A final review isolated the subset of legislation that successfully passed or was enacted, resulting in (N=11) pieces of legislation for detailed analysis. The database included the bill title, year, sponsoring member, membership status (active or former), legislative committee, explicit references to public HBCUs, the policy mechanism or tool (e.g., need-based aid, performance funding, tuition regulation), a concise summary, and final legislative status. Each entry was coded in alignment with the ACF and BUH framework which defined categories and policy scopes. This standardized categorization facilitated both within-case and cross-case comparison across states, enabling the quantification of legislative activity and thematic analysis of patterns related to affordability and HBCU support (Bazeley, 2013; Yin, 2018). The finalized dataset thus served as a legislative document matrix, which offered a comprehensive overview of legislative behavior and the policy environment shaping affordability for HBCU students. These findings informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocols in the subsequent phase of data collection, consistent with Yin's (2018) recommendation to use sequential data collection to strengthen analytic depth and triangulation. The insights gained from this phase directly informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocol. By analyzing patterns in bill sponsorship, committee activity, and policy mechanisms, I was able to identify thematic areas, such as advocacy strategies, coalition-building, and resource allocation, that shaped the interview questions.

Table 1.

Summary of Legislative Documents Included in the Legislative Landscape Analysis (2019-2023)

Analytic Goal	Indicator	FL	GA	SC	NC	DE	PA	Total
1. Legislative Volume (Initial)	# of higher-education related bills identified in first search	63	46	46	49	19	45	268
2. Topical Refinement (First Screen)	# of bills retained after applying criteria	13	7	9	10	8	8	55
3. Primary topical focus (Initial)	# of bills in a distinctive policy areas (I.E., affordability, workforce, governance)	Affordability and Financial Aid	Underrepresented / Minority / Low-Income Support	Affordability and Financial Aid	Financial Aid & Affordability	Underrepresented / Low-Income Support	2	45
4. Legislative Narrowing (Second Screen)	Number of bills remaining after deeper relevance review	5	3	6	10	7	7	38
5. Final Thematic Distribution	Final topics address (i.e., basic needs, funding formulas, scholarships)	Financial Aid and Affordability	Underrepresented / Minority / Low-Income Support	Affordability and Financial Aid	Financial Aid & Affordability	Underrepresented / Low-Income Support	3	22
6. Policy Outcomes	Number of enacted bills	0	1	1	2	7	0	11

The second source of data comprised 9 semi-structured interviews with state legislators representing multiple states across the U.S. South and Mid-Atlantic regions. Consistent with McClure’s (2021) guidance on interviewing elites in higher education research, I approached participants as policy experts whose insights required both respect for their institutional roles and sensitivity to the power dynamics embedded in elite research. Following Mikecz’s (2012) model of “transformational elite interviewing,” the interview process was designed to be dialogical

rather than extractive, centering reciprocity, trust-building, and shared meaning-making. This meant creating conversational openings for legislators to reflect on their motivations, constraints, and experiences as members of SLBCs within the broader context of state policymaking.

Although this study initially aimed to recruit 16 legislative participants, the final sample consisted of nine interviews. Research consistently documents the challenges of accessing state legislators, particularly those involved in high-stakes education and budget negotiations, due to the demands of elite political roles (McClure, 2021; Mikecz, 2012). During the period of data collection, rapid political changes following the 2025 Trump administration placed increased pressures on legislators' schedules and redirected attention toward constituent needs. Scholars note that elite policymakers often work within compressed and unpredictable timeframes that limit availability for research participation (McClure, 2021; Mikecz, 2012). Access also requires navigating multiple layers of staff and gatekeepers, making scheduling and follow-through difficult to sustain (Mikecz, 2012). These conditions influenced recruitment feasibility and produced a sample shaped by the practical realities of qualitative research with elite political actors rather than shortcomings in research design.

Table 2.*Characteristics of State Legislators Interviewed for the Study*

State	Position (Sen/Rep)	Race	Gender	Years of experience	Political Affiliation	Committee	HBCU Grad (Y/N)
FL	Sen	Black/African American	M	13	D	Education Postsecondary	Y
GA	Rep	Black/African American	W	25	D	Higher Education	N
SC	Rep	Black/African American	M	29	D	Education and Public Works	Y
NC	Sen	Black/African American	M	5+	D	Higher Education	N
NC	Rep	Black African American	W	20+	D	Finance	Y
NC	Rep	Black African American	W	20+	D	Higher Education	N
DE	Rep	Black African American	W	13	D	Higher Education	N
PA	Rep	Black African American	M	5	D	Finance	N
PA	Rep	Black African American	Non-Binary	10	D	Education	N

Despite recruitment challenges, the final sample offered analytically meaningful variation that aligned with the aims of this study. Qualitative scholarship emphasizes that in-depth, positional diversity, and theoretical relevance determine sample sufficiency in elite interviewing rather than just numerical volume (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Although all nine participants were members of State Legislative Black Caucuses and affiliated with the same political party, they represented different legislative chambers, held varied committee assignments, served in states with distinct policy environments, and understood the historical relationships to public HBCUs. Participants also varied in tenure and professional experience, including backgrounds in education, law, nonprofit leadership, and municipal government. These differences produced meaningful variation in how legislators interpreted

affordability challenges, evaluated the role of the state in addressing them, and approached the design of policy tools affecting public HBCUs. This variation supported comparative insight into how members of SLBC Caucuses understand and operationalize affordability policy across contexts and enabled cross-case pattern analysis consistent with the study's theoretical framework.

Insights from the legislative document collection directly shaped the design and focus of the interview phase. By systematically tracing which legislators introduced, co-sponsored, or supported affordability-related bills, the first phase revealed patterns of legislative engagement and coalition activity within each state. In keeping with Yin's (2018) guidance of data triangulation, the legislative document collection served as a sampling frame and an analytic bridge between the policy environment and individual legislative behavior. These legislators were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961; Patton, 2015) (**see Table 2**) to ensure variation in political affiliation, committee assignment, and institutional experience within the state higher education policy subsystem. Each participant was directly involved in, or knowledgeable about, legislative or budgetary processes related to higher education funding, financial aid, or HBCU issues.

For this study, the policy subsystem in this case is state-level higher education policy domain. I specifically focused on legislative committees such as higher education, finance, appropriations, and ways and means. A list of respondents, which uses generic titles to protect anonymity, appears in Table 2. Given this study's focus on the state-level higher education policy domain and the advocacy coalitions, I employed a purposive sampling technique to identify the actors who met the criteria of this study. I also employed snowball sampling to identify actors who were also knowledgeable and was active advancing college affordability and access policies

for students of public HBCUs. I used the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH) to guide the development of the semi-structured interview protocols. Drawing from the ACF, the interview questions examined how SLBC members define the affordability problem, set policy priorities, and work within partisan and institutional power structures to advance solutions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). These questions encouraged participants to describe how they interpret the policy problem of affordability. The Black Utility Heuristic theoretical framework (Dawson, 1994) further shaped the protocol by centering legislators' motivations, values, and sense of collective responsibility. Participants were invited to reflect on how they navigate power dynamics, build coalitions, and work within institutional rules and partisan constraints to advance affordability policies for public HBCUs. Data Collection took place from Summer 2024 through Fall 2025. Each interview ranged from 35 to 55 minutes and was conducted via Zoom or phone to accommodate participants' schedules. To preserve confidentiality, participants were assigned generic identifiers, and a list of respondents appears in Table 2.

To facilitate access, I developed a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the study's focus on legislative actors involved in higher education policy. Inclusion criteria required participants to be (1) past or present members of SLBCs, (2) serving on committees such as higher education, finance, appropriations, or ways and means, and (3) active between 2019–2023, a period marked by renewed state attention to HBCU enrollment and affordability. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals who were not SLBC members, not serving on the relevant committees, or who worked in related policy domains without legislative roles. Following these criteria, I systematically reviewed SLBC websites and official state legislative pages to verify caucus membership and committee assignments. Because some caucus websites

were incomplete or outdated, official state databases were used to confirm participant eligibility. Once potential participants were identified, I located their public email addresses and sent an invitation describing the purpose of the study. When available, I also included staff members on the correspondence to facilitate scheduling and follow-up. Notably, the participation of many lawmakers was made possible through the responsiveness and support of their staff, who helped coordinate interview logistics and confirmed availability.

Each of the states represented in this study contained SLBC members who identified as Democrats. The majority of these states were under Republican legislative control, with Delaware serving as exceptions. In Pennsylvania, Democrats controlled the House while Republicans controlled the Senate. This variation in partisan control across states likely influenced the types of responses and legislative perspectives I received, particularly regarding higher education funding and policymaking for public HBCUs. To supplement direct recruitment, I also leveraged my professional and academic networks developed through various legislative and education policy fellowships. I reached out to trusted points of contact within these networks to identify legislators who might be interested in participating or to facilitate introductions with their offices. This strategy was essential in gaining access to participants and establishing credibility as a researcher within legislative environments that often operate on trust and professional reputation.

Access to participants was grounded in principles of respect, transparency, and trust-building, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidance on negotiating entry into research settings. Rather than relying solely on formal recruitment, I cultivated authentic relationships with participants and their offices by demonstrating a clear commitment to understanding their legislative roles, institutional priorities, and broader policy context (Maxwell, 2013; Roulston &

Shelton, 2015). This relational approach not only facilitated access but also supported richer, more candid discussions during interviews.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data analysis process for this study was conducted in two interrelated stages. Legislative document analysis and interview analysis. These stages employ an iterative, comparative approach consistent with Yin's (2018) multiple-case study design. Both stages were guided by the study's conceptual frameworks, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH), to capture the institutional, behavioral, and identity-based dimensions of state legislative policymaking. The analytic process was designed to link what legislators did, as evidenced in bills, sponsorship patterns, and committee actions. Also, this analytic process focused on how they understood and justified their roles in advancing affordability for public HBCUs.

The first stage focused on the analysis of legislative documents collected from state legislative websites and official archives. Following Yin's (2018) multiple-case logic, each state served as an embedded case, and legislative bills represented distinct data units within each case. The analysis was conducted manually to preserve contextual nuance and to ensure interpretive depth (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I began by reviewing each bill to identify its purpose, policy instrument, and sponsoring legislator, noting whether the legislation explicitly or implicitly referenced public HBCUs or populations relevant to the study's focus, such as Black, low-income, or first-generation students. I developed an analytic matrix that recorded details including bill title, year, sponsor, committee assignment, and policy mechanism. This structure allowed me to organize data for within- and cross-case comparison while maintaining consistency across states.

Guided by the ACF, I coded legislative documents for two key constructs: belief systems and coalition structure and collaboration (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). Coding for belief systems captured how legislators framed affordability and opportunity, the values underlying those frames, and the policy solutions they proposed. Coding for coalition structure captured evidence of collaboration, such as co-sponsorship patterns, bipartisan partnerships, and participation in relevant committees. I then applied the Black Utility Heuristic as a complementary interpretive lens to examine how shared racial identity, notions of linked fate, and group-based representation shaped legislative behavior (Dawson, 1994). This process helped identify patterns where members of State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) leveraged collective interests to influence higher education agendas within politically constrained environments. Themes emerging from this analysis included strategic coalition-building, racialized advocacy, and policy invisibility of HBCUs, reflecting the ways legislators used both structural and identity-based strategies to navigate their roles. Throughout this stage, I maintained reflexive memos to record analytic decisions, contextual observations, and potential researcher biases. These memos, along with an audit trail of the coding matrix and source documents, strengthened analytic transparency and credibility (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

The second stage of analysis involved the semi-structured interview data, which provided interpretive insight into the beliefs, motivations, and decision-making processes underlying the legislative patterns identified in the first stage. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into Dedoose for organization and coding. Analysis followed a hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The deductive approach drew primarily from the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and the Black Utility Heuristic (BUH). Specifically, I

explored two central elements of the ACF: process of policy change and coalition structure and collaboration. Belief systems guided the analysis by helping to explain how SLBC legislators understand affordability challenges facing public HBCUs and how their values and policy orientations shape the priorities they pursue within the legislative process. The focus on coalition structure and collaboration directed attention to how SLBC members work together and with other legislative actors to move affordability proposals forward, and how political power and institutional gatekeeping influence these relationships and strategies (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011). Drawing from the Black Utility Heuristic, I applied deductive codes related to linked fate, collective responsibility, and representational motivation (Dawson, 1994) to understand how racial identity, shared experience, and accountability to Black communities inform their approach to advocacy. These constructs helped illuminate how SLBC members navigate partisan constraints, build coalitions, and respond to barriers and opportunities in their efforts to advance college affordability policy for public HBCUs. These emergent themes included strategic tradeoffs, racialized accountability, budgetary constraints, and policy invisibility of HBCUs. Through iterative cycles of coding, memoing, and cross-case analysis, these inductive themes were refined and integrated into broader categories that captured the interplay of belief, strategy, and structure in legislators' policymaking behavior. Dedoose supported this process by enabling code co-occurrence tracking and visualization, which allowed me to examine patterns across states and to identify areas of convergence and divergence in belief systems and coalition dynamics.

Following Yin's (2018) guidance on pattern matching, I compared empirical themes with the theoretical expectations derived from both frameworks. For example, an SLBC legislator may prioritize a proposal to expand need-based aid at public HBCUs based on a belief that

students facing the greatest financial barriers should receive targeted support. When majority-party gatekeeping prevents the bill from advancing, the legislator works through the SLBC to coordinate testimony, build bipartisan support, and reframe the proposal, illustrating how belief-driven advocacy, coalition strategy, and power dynamics intersect in the policymaking process. Comparing these expectations with the data revealed how SLBC members mobilized both strategic and identity-based approaches to pursue affordability and access for students at public HBCUs. To enhance trustworthiness, I employed triangulation across data sources, member checking for clarification when needed, and reflexive documentation of analytic choices (Mathison, 1988; Yin, 2018). I also engaged in peer debriefing with academic mentors to assess the coherence between the emerging patterns and the theoretical propositions. Together, these strategies supported credibility, dependability, and confirmability in the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several limitations. First, legislative documents provide only the formal record of legislative action and do not capture the informal negotiations, political maneuvering, and coalition-building strategies that shape how affordability proposals for public HBCUs move or fail to move through state legislatures (Bowen, 2009). Because these relational and strategic processes are central to the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), relying solely on legislative documents would overlook critical aspects of how SLBC members navigate power and institutional constraints. To address this, the study incorporated semi-structured interviews with legislators, which allowed for triangulation while remaining feasible within the time and resource constraints of a dissertation study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, elite interviews rely on voluntary participation, which introduces the possibility of self-selection bias (Mikecz, 2012). Legislators who agreed to participate tended to be those more publicly engaged in higher-education issues, which may elevate perspectives aligned with HBCU advocacy and affordability reform. To mitigate this limitation, the study was intentionally bounded to maintain conceptual focus and data collection was limited to SLBC members serving in states with at least one public HBCU and who sat on committees directly connected to higher education, finance, or appropriations. This sampling strategy aligns with the study's purpose of understanding how legislators representing Black constituencies work to shape college affordability policies within constrained policymaking environments.

Third, following Yin (2018), the goal of this study is to further develop transferrable insights that extend theoretical understanding of policymaking behavior and coalition dynamics. This design prioritizes depth and contextual richness over breadth. The timeframe of 2019–2023 was selected to examine a contemporary moment in which affordability and college access re-emerged as legislative priorities, and public HBCUs were the focus because they fall directly under state governance and are most affected by legislative funding decisions and policy instruments. The bounded case structure reflects Yin's (2018) guidance for case studies that seek to facilitate transferrable insights.

Finally, the use of the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the Black Utility Heuristic as interpretive lenses places theoretical boundaries around the analysis. These frameworks highlight belief systems, coalition behavior, and shared racial identity as central drivers of policy advocacy (Dawson, 1994; Weible et al., 2011), which may foreground some dynamics while giving less attention to others such as bureaucratic influence, lobbying pressure, or media framing. To strengthen credibility and transparency, triangulation, memoing, and reflexive journaling were

employed throughout the analytic process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. This study entails six states including Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. This study is bounded by SLBCs and their constituent members who could speak directly about their legislative and policy work to expand college affordability and access for Black low-income students at public HBCUs. This study is also bounded by legislative documents relevant to this study. This section outlines findings related to the research questions:

1. In what ways do state-level power dynamics create challenges and opportunities for State Legislative Black Caucus (SLBCs) and their constituent members working to advance college affordability policy for public HBCUs?

The findings reported below are based on data collected from nine semi-structured interviews with SLBC members and eleven legislative documents. Themes are organized by the research questions. In what follows, this study presents 2 findings:

1. Navigating Institutional Power and Strategic Adaptation
2. Belief-Driven Commitment to Affordability for Black Communities

State Level power dynamics in Legislative Policymaking for public HBCUs

For SLBC members, state-level differences significantly shaped both strategy and outcome. Through legislative document analysis, Delaware emerged as an example in where

policy pathways, administrative alignment, and bipartisan cooperation enabled affordability initiatives to advance. Legislative documents showed legislative movement across multiple affordability-related bills, including the Inspire Scholarship and emergency housing assistance, positioning Delaware State University for more stable resource access. In contrast, Pennsylvania legislators operated in a fragmented policy environment with diffuse authority and procedural gatekeeping. Legislative records indicated that proposals advanced through initial committee stages but did not receive full floor votes, reflecting the constraints of divided governance.

Navigating Institutional Power and Strategic Coalition Adaptation

SLBC members described introducing affordability legislation related to scholarship creation and student support services, but bills stalled at the committee level due to structural and ideological barriers. According to a **Pennsylvania State Representative on the Education committee,**

The non-preferred schools, meaning the four state-related universities such as Lincoln, Penn State, Temple, and Pitt, fall into a category where budget increases require a higher voting threshold. For PASSHE institutions like Millersville, Cheyney, or Shippensburg, an increase requires fifty percent plus one in both chambers. For the state-related schools, it requires two-thirds. That higher threshold makes funding changes more difficult. A small block of legislators can more easily slow or block increases for the state-related institutions than for PASSHE schools, and we have seen that play out in recent budget cycles.

Although legislators entered the policy process motivated by belief-driven commitments, they consistently emphasized that advancing affordability proposals required navigating the structural power of agenda gatekeeping controlled by the majority party. Participants described

numerous instances in which bills addressing college affordability at public HBCUs stalled without hearings, regardless of bipartisan interest or public support, because committee chairs or leadership declined to place them on the calendar. Legislators characterized this form of power as both silent and consequential, an obstacle that is difficult to challenge publicly because it leaves no formal record and rarely generates media attention. Legislators also described agenda control as the quiet way policy dies. As a **South Carolina State Representative on the Education and Public Works committee** stated,

Well, here in South Carolina, the General Assembly now is like a majority minority. Those Republicans, they don't need us for anything. So, what we have to do is use our influence, not necessarily get everything we want, but to get some of the things. And don't let the hurt be so bad. Don't let the fall be so bad. So, we are constantly talking to our peers around the clock. Hoping and asking that they take a look at these HBCUs, where, what 90% of engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, come from, and help us to preserve those but it's a mean time right about now. South Carolina, North Carolina, all across this country. It's a mean spirit that we are having to contend with, you know? And so just do what you do. Just try to politic get what you can get, what you can get, basically the sentiments in DC have made their way to the states. Have made their way to states, and that was by design, particularly from an educational perspective.

Legislators described relying on coalition-based strategies to create openings where formal authority was limited. Legislative documents underscored that collaboration within the SLBC offered a structure for coordinated messaging, identifying bipartisan co-sponsors, and reframing affordability proposals in terms of economic competitiveness and workforce development. Legislators characterized these strategic decisions not as compromise, but as pragmatic

adaptation necessary to advance policy in political environments where race-based claims triggered immediate resistance. However, legislators reported that this approach is not without shortcomings, noting that internal political divisions often stifle opportunities for policy advancement. According to a **Delaware State Representative on the Higher Education committee**,

There is a really interesting dynamic happening in Delaware. I'm not I'm not tracking as closely how and if it's happening in other states. But there, there is a bit of a division in the Democratic Party, which translates to a division in the Black Caucus around policy, and approach to things. There's, there's a bit of a working class party movement that's been happening in Delaware, and again, I'm not tracking how that's translating in other states, but has caused some, I think, like, again, division and difference of opinions on approach, on certain policies, and so I just say that to also shade In some of the larger connotations around what's happening nationally, right? Like the we're hearing all this language around progressive, dem versus not progressive and far left and all you know, etc.

Despite the challenges with internal conflict, SLBC members described caucus solidarity as essential for surviving legislative fatigue. Legislators emphasized the relevance of coalition-based strategy as turning limited position into influence. As a **North Carolina State Representative on the Finance committee** stated,

For us, last cycle, it was the sports betting bill. That bill could not move without Democratic vote. And then within the Democratic caucuses, black folks make up the majority of the party, we were not prepared to go in and maximize that opportunity. So we got, we got some crumb, and they were big crumb, but we could've got a whole side

had we already had our legislative agenda and understood what that meant. Um. As for as us as a Black Caucus. So, one of the things that I'm doing again is working with the chair, as we work with the caucus to determine what are four or five big things. And it's not, it can't just be HBCU, because they know that that is something that is near and dear to us, and they will manipulate that so HBCU is a part of that conversation, but it's not the only thing that you can offer us in terms of making sure you get your legislation done. So, I want to make sure that we don't find ourselves in that situation again, and that we are able to get something that has statewide impact and that the dollar amount for our support is so large that it's going to be worth it, and so that that's, that's what I would say about being a part of the Black Caucus.

Although SLBC legislators lack formal power to control legislative agendas, they create opportunities through strategic coalition-building, narrative reframing, and coordinated action. Their work is shaped by ongoing negotiation within power-constrained environments and reflects constant adaptation to structural barriers.

Belief-Driven Commitment to Affordability for Black Communities

SLBC legislators described entering the policymaking process with a clear sense of responsibility to address the financial barriers faced by students attending public HBCUs, many of whom are first-generation and from low-income backgrounds. Their commitment to affordability was shaped not only by evidence but also by personal histories and an understanding that their constituents experience higher levels of unmet financial need than students at predominantly white institutions. Legislative documents underscored how legislators viewed affordability as a lived reality tied to the experiences of their communities, shaping their sense of urgency and obligation. Legislators noted that addressing affordability for HBCU

students is rooted in the lived experiences they carry. As a **Florida State Senator on the Education Postsecondary committee** explained,

I mean, we have no choice in Florida, but for the Black Caucus to advocate for our HBCUs, because if we don't do it, then they will see it as not of importance to us. So, it's always at the top of our, top of our agenda. So, I feel, I feel as if it's a mandate that we do.

Across states, legislators framed advocacy for public HBCUs as a continuation of generational responsibility. Participants described a deep commitment to “protecting the institutions that protected their communities,” positioning affordability as a historical obligation. This identity-rooted motivation sustained participation in policy processes characterized by repeated setbacks, contentious debate, and limited access to power. According to a **North Carolina State Representative on the Higher Education committee**,

I think the biggest roadblock is basically racism in America. When you look at the funding, and I don't have the numbers in my head, but I've seen them. When you look at the amount of money allocated to the UNC system, which is predominantly white institutions, versus the HBCUs, you can see it is much less for HBCUs over time. That goes back purely to racism. Are they going to give us money willingly? No. Just enough to keep us in those schools.

Legislators emphasized the moral weight of continuing the fight even when legislative resistance was exhausting. According to a **North Carolina State Representative on the Finance committee**,

We're not included in the substantive conversations or the committee work that's done prior to the community committee hearing or the building of the budget. We're not a part of that. And so, it's important for us to find allyship with individual members that are

drawn that on those committees. And again, that is because the Republicans have control of both chambers, both the House and the Senate and as well as the Supreme Court, and so they do not include us in that at all.

At the individual level, SLBC members' motivations reflected both personal experience and collective identity. Many legislators drew from their own educational trajectories, family histories, and community commitments. Their advocacy was often described in interviews as “a moral inheritance” - a duty to protect institutions that had historically protected their communities. Yet this sense of duty coexisted with realism. Legislators understood the fragility of political capital and used it strategically. They cultivated relationships across the aisle, built quiet consensus within committees, and pursued what one Georgia legislator called “the long game”—a vision of success measured not only in enacted laws but in sustained attention to the populations they served.

Summary of Findings

These findings reveal that SLBCs and their constituent members advocacy for college affordability at public HBCUs is simultaneously belief-driven and deeply constrained by institutional power. Across states, the outcomes differed. Delaware achieved cohesion, North Carolina achieved adaptation, the southern states achieved persistence, and Pennsylvania achieved experimentation, but the underlying process was the same: lawmakers navigating constraint through advocacy for public HBCUs. Important to note, SLBC members often used the legislative process itself as a form of advocacy, introducing bills they knew might not pass but that would keep the needs of under-resourced institutions visible in the public record. Their strategy and commitment were rooted in identity, lived experience, and accountability to Black

communities, yet advancing policy requires navigating partisan control and agenda gatekeeping that limit access to formal legislative pathways. In response, legislators employ coalition-based strategies to create openings where structural barriers restrict progress. These findings highlight the tension between moral commitment and political constraint and demonstrate how SLBC members transform limited procedural power into influence through collective strategy and adaptation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how power dynamics creates challenges and opportunities for SLBCs and their constituent members working to broaden college affordability and access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. The findings reveal that, although SLBC legislators enter the policymaking arena guided by belief-driven commitments, representational responsibility, and accountability to Black communities, their efforts unfold within legislative environments where agenda control and procedural gatekeeping significantly constrain their ability to move affordability proposals forward. This contributes to higher education research by shifting analytical attention away from policy outcomes alone and toward the political labor, negotiation, and collective strategy that underpin affordability advocacy, dimensions that remain largely absent from the literature on higher education governance, HBCU policy, and legislative behavior. Research on HBCU funding predominantly documents chronic resource disparities and their consequences (Minor, 2008; Gasman & Nguyen, 2019; EdTrust, 2024) but rarely examines the political processes through which legislators attempt to intervene in those resource conditions. By illuminating how Black lawmakers navigate constrained policymaking structures, this study addresses a notable gap

which considers the interplay between higher education policy, legislative politics, and racialized policymaking.

The findings reinforce and extend scholarship on Black legislative behavior, representational responsibility, and linked fate (Mansbridge, 1999; Preuhs, 2006; Brown, 2023; Dawson, 1994), demonstrating that moral conviction and identity-based obligation significantly shape how SLBC members conceptualize affordability and their role in advancing it. However, the findings complicate prior literature that positions descriptive representation as inherently linked to substantive policy gains (Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Griffin & Newman, 2008) by showing that even committed and strategically coordinated legislators struggle to influence policy outcomes when structural power such as agenda control, committee leadership, floor access, rests with opposing partisan interests. As Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue, the majority party functions as a gatekeeper that determines the flow of legislation, and Anzia and Cohn (2011) demonstrate that minority-party proposals are frequently suppressed regardless of merit. This study extends these insights by revealing how these mechanisms shape the fate of affordability policy proposals for public HBCUs specifically, illustrating the often-invisible ways policy ideas are silenced long before public deliberation. The findings therefore push higher education scholars to interrogate not only what policies exist, but what policies never surface because legislators lack the procedural power to advance them.

The study also advances the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) by demonstrating how coalition behavior and belief systems operate within racially stratified policy arenas. ACF assumes that shared beliefs motivate sustained collective action oriented toward policy change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al., 2011), but this study shows that for Black legislators, beliefs are lived, historically rooted commitments shaped by community

accountability and the Black Utility Heuristic (Dawson, 1994). Integrating BUH into ACF reveals that belief alignment in this context is grounded in identity and collective responsibility, not only policy preference similarity. In doing so, the findings challenge ACF's relative silence around racialized political structures, power asymmetry, and institutional histories, elements that fundamentally shape coalition behavior in legislative systems where Black lawmakers hold limited formal power. The findings suggest the need for theoretical expansion to account for contexts where coalition persistence is driven not by anticipated success but by moral obligation and community representation under structural constraint. This positioning offers a critical contribution to policy process scholarship by showing that in racially stratified subsystems, belief systems and identity commitments do not simply coordinate coalition activity, they sustain it in the absence of institutional power.

These findings raise important questions for higher education researchers and for scholars applying ACF or BUH. First, how might future research more directly investigate the informal political work underlying policy development. Some examples such as negotiation, framing, relationship-building, and strategic adaptation, which are largely absent from legislative proposals but central to understanding why some higher education proposals advance while others stall? Second, what methodological tools are necessary to study policymaking environments in which agenda control produces silence rather than visible conflict, and where the absence of action, not the presence of debate, signals the exercise of power? Third, how should scholars theorize substantive representation for public HBCUs when political success is constrained not by lack of advocacy but by structural limitations on procedural access? Finally, how should ACF and similar frameworks be adapted to incorporate racial identity, linked fate, and historical memory as core analytic components rather than supplementary considerations,

particularly in research involving Black legislators and the policy futures of Black-serving institutions?

Compactly, the findings show that advancing college affordability for students attending public HBCUs requires far more than policy design or evidence-based argumentation. It requires navigating state policymaking architectures structured around unequal power. Understanding these dynamics is essential if higher education research hopes to account for the political conditions shaping access, affordability, and institutional survival for HBCUs. Expanding the policy process conversation to include race, power, identity, and coalition adaptation is critical to building a more complete understanding of how change is pursued and resisted within state governance structures.

Recommendations

The findings demonstrate that efforts to advance college affordability for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs are shaped less by the technical details of policy design and more by the political processes and power structures that determine whether proposals are even allowed to surface. Higher education research must move beyond studying policy outcomes alone to interrogate the underlying policymaking environments that shape those outcomes. Scholars should examine agenda control, minority-party constraints, and informal negotiation processes that shape higher-education policy development (Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Anzia & Cohn, 2011). Doing so requires methodological approaches that capture the invisible exercise of power, such as ethnographic observation of policymaking spaces, process tracing, and analyses that integrate interview-based accounts of political work that is not recorded in public transcripts (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2018). Additionally, researchers should more directly examine the political labor of Black legislators, whose advocacy is motivated by linked fate and

representational commitment rather than transactional legislative logic (Dawson, 1994; Preuhs, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999). Incorporating identity-based political behavior into studies of higher-education policymaking expands theoretical understanding by showing how representation and belief systems shape policy priorities even when formal power is limited (Bratton & Haynie, 1999; Brown, 2023).

The findings show that SLBC legislators must navigate institutional gatekeeping and partisan control to advance affordability proposals for public HBCUs, often leveraging coalition strategy and collective action to create openings. HBCU leaders, advocacy organizations, alumni associations, national associations, and philanthropic partners should intentionally build structured coalitions that align with legislative timing and strategy rather than relying on episodic mobilization. Research on Black legislative politics demonstrates that coalition coordination amplifies the influence of lawmakers serving in minority-party positions (Preuhs, 2006; Bratton & Haynie, 1999), and the findings of this study illustrate that coordinated testimony, shared messaging, and reframing affordability proposals in economic terms can help bypass agenda-setting barriers. Partnerships should include preparation of narrative framing, data packets specific to state funding disparities, and real-time response infrastructure to support legislators as they negotiate political resistance (Gasman & Nguyen, 2019; EdTrust, 2024). Coalitions must also invest in long-term policy capacity, tracking legislative calendars, appropriations cycles, and committee structures, to strategically support SLBC efforts rather than reactively responding once bills stall.

For legislators inside and outside of SLBCs, the findings highlight the importance of strategic adaptation when advancing affordability proposals related to public HBCUs. Research on agenda-setting shows that coalition expansion and bipartisan alignment increase the

likelihood that minority-party priorities gain institutional visibility (Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Anzia & Cohn, 2011). The study demonstrates that reframing affordability in terms of workforce development, state competitiveness, and regional economic benefit can create leverage in spaces where racialized proposals trigger resistance. Legislators should develop collaborative messaging strategies and proactively cultivate relationships with committee leadership and appropriations chairs to mitigate procedural gatekeeping. Additionally, policymakers should recognize the importance of representation and linked fate (Dawson, 1994; Mansbridge, 1999) in shaping the priorities of SLBC members and support decision-making that acknowledges the historical underfunding of public HBCUs documented in higher-education finance research (Minor, 2008; Gasman & Nguyen, 2019; Pierre, 2025; EdTrust, 2024). Legislative offices should also implement internal tracking mechanisms to monitor stalled proposals and identify structural barriers to policy advancement.

Altogether, these recommendations underscore the need for higher-education policy scholarship and practice to center the realities of political power, race, and coalition behavior when examining college affordability and public HBCUs. The findings show that structural constraints, not a lack of commitment or evidence, often determine policy outcomes. Future work must actively confront how policymaking systems produce silence, exclusion, and adaptation, conditions that shape the futures of institutions central to Black student opportunity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that advancing college affordability for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs is deeply shaped by the political conditions under which SLBC legislators operate. The findings reveal a landscape defined by procedural gatekeeping, partisan control, and uneven access to formal decision-making channels. These

conditions significantly constrain the ability of Black lawmakers to move affordability proposals forward. Yet within these limitations, SLBC members draw upon belief-driven commitments, linked fate, and collective responsibility to sustain advocacy efforts and develop coalition-based strategies that create openings where institutional power restricts direct legislative influence. By integrating the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the Black Utility Heuristic, this study extends scholarship on state higher education policymaking and Black legislative behavior, demonstrating the need to account for race, identity, and historical context when examining how policy goals emerge, evolve, and are contested in state legislatures. Ultimately, understanding the futures of public HBCUs requires attention not only to policy outcomes, but also to the political labor required to pursue them. As affordability challenges intensify and legislative conditions grow more polarized, research and practice must continue to interrogate the mechanisms of power that shape which institutions, and which students, are positioned to thrive.

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