Understanding How HBCUs Leverage Partnerships to Support Students' Basic Needs

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Land Acknowledgement: The authors wrote this manuscript in the ancestral lands of the Anacostans (also documented as Nacotchtank), and the neighboring Piscataway and Pamunkey peoples. We acknowledge the Native Peoples on whose ancestral homelands we occupy, which today is known as Washington, D.C.

Abstract

Basic needs insecurity has become a pressing equity issue in U.S. higher education, yet little research examines how historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) address students' holistic needs. Guided by a practice-based, pragmatic analytic orientation and informed by a basic needs services implementation rubric and an HBCU-based theoretical model, this qualitative case study explored how 66 faculty, staff, and students across three HBCUs engaged in partnerships to support students' basic needs. Findings reveal that while HBCUs rely on external partnerships to address resource gaps, these collaborations remain underleveraged. Findings highlight the need for intentional, mutually beneficial partnerships and improved internal coordination to strengthen holistic student support.

Keywords: HBCU, Basic Needs, Partnerships, Case Study

Introduction

Basic needs insecurity has emerged as a critical issue in U.S. higher education, with food and housing instability increasingly recognized as barriers to student success (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately four million college students experience food insecurity, while an additional 2.3 million face marginal food security (McKibben et al., 2023). For students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), these challenges are especially acute. Recent studies show that nearly two-thirds of HBCU students experienced basic needs insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that almost half of those students also faced food or housing insecurity within that year (Dahl et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, research on basic needs within the context of HBCUs in higher education remains scant.

The link between basic needs insecurity and academic outcomes is well-documented (Broton et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2022), and research shows that students facing food or housing insecurity are more likely to experience poor academic performance, mental health challenges, and increased risk of dropping out (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). A study by Martinez et al. (2020) highlighted that students who experience basic needs insecurity are twice as likely to fail a course compared to their peers. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2019) found that nearly half of community college students and one-third of four-year college students reported food insecurity, emphasizing the pervasive nature of this issue across institutional types. These challenges are well-known at HBCUs, and research at the HBCU Character and Leadership Initiative (CLEI) at Howard University, for example, has begun to document students' basic needs and capacity building in this sector. Through multiple single-site study explorations, CLEI has collected extensive data on how HBCU students, faculty, and staff experience and address basic needs (Burmicky et al., 2024a; Burmicky et al., 2024b).

HBCUs serve a disproportionately high number of Pell Grant recipients, many of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). For these students, financial strain, compounded by broader systemic inequities, makes addressing basic needs not just a matter of individual student success, but a critical component of HBCUs' broader mission to promote social mobility and equity (Palmer et al., 2010). On the other hand, staff and faculty are often left with minimal support and guidance on how to address students' basic needs, which is exacerbated by growing pressures to increase enrollment and operational budget constraints (Elliott, 2022).

Given that HBCUs have historically experienced significantly more disinvestment than their predominantly white institution (PWI) counterparts (Harris, 2022), it is essential to adopt an approach that elevates research-to-practice partnerships. For example, scholar-practitioners have adopted research-practice partnerships (RPPs), which are long-term, collaborative relationships between researchers and practitioners in which partners engage in joint work to co-define problems of practice, co-produce knowledge, and iteratively use evidence to inform action and improvement within real-world educational contexts (Coburn et al., 2013; Penuel et al., 2015). Although HBCUs frequently "punch above their weight" in terms of outcomes relative to their resources (UNCF, 2018), they cannot be expected to bear the burden of these systemic and historical inequities alone. Therefore, this paper utilizes frameworks that are intentional about translating research to practice and long-term sustainability efforts, which we explain in detail in our conceptual framework.

Given this context, this paper explores how HBCUs engage in partnerships to better support their students' basic needs. For this paper, we define partnerships as collaborations involving both internal (within the university) and external (outside the university) entities, such as departments and divisions, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and community groups, that work with HBCU faculty and staff to address students' basic needs. Similarly, we define students' basic needs as the constellation of physical,

mental, and emotional resources required for students to persist, engage, and thrive in college. This includes, but is not limited to, access to food, housing, transportation, healthcare, and financial stability, as well as mental health supports, a sense of safety, belonging, dignity, and emotional well-being. Grounded in a holistic understanding of student success (Burmicky & Duran, 2022; Stebleton et al., 2020), this definition recognizes that unmet basic needs extend beyond material deprivation and are deeply intertwined with students' psychological health and lived experiences within institutional and societal systems

This paper investigates the nature of these partnerships and the concrete strategies and applied principles that faculty and staff use to cultivate and sustain them. Informed by data from three HBCUs, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do HBCU faculty and staff engage in internal and external partnerships to ensure timely and accessible basic needs resources and services for students?

2. In what ways do HBCU undergraduate students experience or benefit from these partnerships in addressing their basic needs?

By examining these research questions, this study contributes to higher education scholarship by theorizing and concretizing partnerships as institutional capacity-building mechanisms, particularly for institutions with limited resources.

Literature Review

To anchor this research within existing scholarship, we present a review of literature on partnerships in higher education. This literature review is organized into three sections: (1) conceptual and theoretical perspectives on higher education partnerships, (2) higher education partnerships and student basic needs, and (3) the unique role of HBCUs in advancing equity through collective action.

Partnerships in higher education emerged from broader social and institutional movements that viewed collaboration as a strategy for addressing complex societal challenges (Maurrasse, 2001; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). The field of community engagement, shaped by the social movements of the 1960s, served as an early catalyst by encouraging colleges and universities to partner with local organizations, schools, and public agencies to combat poverty and advance civil rights (Stanton et al., 1999). In the early 1970s, approximately 500 U.S. colleges and universities had established community service or service-learning initiatives, many supported by the Higher Education Act of 1965 and its Title I and Title III provisions, which promoted community development and institutional equity (Stanton et al., 1999; Maurrasse, 2001). These early efforts demonstrated a growing national commitment to civic engagement and reinforced the expanding role of higher education in addressing social and economic disparities. New organizational and policy challenges that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as declining state funding, increased accountability measures, and the growing complexity of student needs, made partnerships increasingly important to higher education (Kezar, 2018; Kania & Kramer, 2011).

This recognition led to the adoption of cross-sector collaboration models that emphasized shared leadership, data-informed decision-making, and long-term sustainability (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Kezar & Lester, 2011). Within this framework, partnerships evolved as a more comprehensive and integrated approach to collaboration, bringing together faculty, staff, students, and external partners to design collective strategies for institutional improvement and systemic change.

Despite their potential, higher education partnerships continue to face significant critiques. Scholars note that many remain transactional rather than transformational, often shaped by short-term grant cycles, external mandates, or reputational motives instead of authentic reciprocity and shared purpose (Sandmann et al., 2008). This is where the field has seen more proliferation of research-practice

partnerships (RPPs), with sustained collaborations in which researchers and practitioners jointly produce

and use knowledge to address problems of practice in context (Coburn et al., 2013; Penuel et al., 2015).

For instance, education-focused philanthropies such as William T. Grant, Spencer, and ECMC foundations

have funded RPP-related work. Others argue that institutions frequently lack the infrastructure,

leadership continuity, and shared governance mechanisms necessary to sustain partnerships over time

(Kezar, 2018). For HBCUs, these challenges are further intensified by chronic underfunding, limited

administrative capacity, and the competing demands of serving high-need student populations (Smith et

al., 2017; Williams et al., 2022). However, these critiques also illuminate new opportunities. They invite

institutions to reimagine coalitions as catalysts for systemic change rather than temporary initiatives.

Through this exploration, HBCUs can strengthen their organizational resilience while advancing their

institutional missions.

Student Basic Needs in Higher Education: Partnerships and Collaborative Efforts

Early research often focused on specific elements such as food insecurity or homelessness, but

by the late 2010s, scholars advanced a more comprehensive term, basic needs insecurity, to reflect the

interconnectedness of these challenges (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; The Hope Center, 2023). Initial

awareness of basic-needs challenges in higher education emerged during the early 2010s when reports

and surveys revealed that significant numbers of college students were experiencing food and housing

insecurity. Dubick et al. (2016) documented these realities through the Hunger on Campus report, which

identified that many students lacked consistent access to meals and affordable housing. Around the

same period, campus pantries, emergency funds, and informal support networks began to appear,

signaling the first wave of institutional responses. These efforts were largely fragmented, reflecting

limited administrative coordination and minimal policy infrastructure. Altogether, this shift reframed the

issue from one of individual hardship to a matter of educational equity and institutional responsibility. It

also established a foundation for collaborative responses that bridge campus services with community

and policy systems (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Brey & Hodara, 2023).

Between 2016 and 2020, the field underwent significant expansion as national research and

advocacy organizations amplified attention to student needs. For instance, the Hope Center for College,

Community, and Justice introduced large-scale surveys that quantified the prevalence of basic-needs

insecurity across institutional sectors (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Their findings, showing that over half of

college students experienced some form of basic-needs insecurity, pushed the issue to the forefront of

higher-education policy. During this same period, system-level and nonprofit partnerships began to form.

The California State University Basic Needs Initiative provided a model for coordinated multi-campus

collaboration that integrated student affairs, financial aid, and community services (Crutchfield &

Maguire, 2018). Nonprofit efforts such as Single Stop and Swipe Out Hunger linked campuses with public

benefits and philanthropic partners, illustrating how cross-sector collaboration could extend institutional

capacity (Daugherty et al., 2023). These developments reflected a shift from charitable responses to

structural, equity-driven strategies.

HBCUs and Basic Needs: Partnerships and Collaborative Efforts

For HBCUs, these collaborative approaches reflect and extend their long-standing traditions of

collective action, mutual aid, and community-centered leadership (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Palmer et

al., 2020). In recent years, the urgency of such partnerships has intensified due to rising enrollment and a

continued commitment to supporting students holistically amid enduring structural barriers (Smith et al.,

2017; Williams et al., 2022). Enrollment of Black undergraduates at HBCUs rose modestly - from roughly

8 percent in 2014 to about 9 percent in 2022 (NCES, 2022). Yet persistent inequities in state funding

continue to limit HBCUs' institutional capacity to expand their responsiveness and scale student support

systems. As HBCUs confront their growing enrollments and increasingly complex student needs,

partnerships have become not only strategic tools for institutional sustainability but essential

frameworks for advancing equity and reinforcing the collective mission of Black higher education.

HBCUs are different from many other institution types due to being mission bound to serve a

demographic of students who were systematically excluded from many higher education institutions.

Rooted in community partnerships, activism, and student development, HBCUs work as a bridge to

success, often countering stereotypes and misconceptions about Black people and Black higher

education institutions while serving its students (Smith et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2020; Walker, 2018).

The concept of serving students exists in creating a space for social mobility, cultural alignment, and

self-development (Johnson & Winfield, 2022; Smith et al., 2017; Walker, 2018; Williams et al., 2022). The

aforementioned benefits found in HBCUs lead them to become home away from home (Walker, 2018;

Williams et al., 2022). Therefore, providing student basic needs is imperative to drive the purpose of

HBCUs and continue the uplift of those who pursue higher education and proceed to become the

pioneers of the future. Serving more than 65% of Pell eligible students, while facing decades of funding

disparities compared to predominately white institutions (PWIs), HBCUs continue to find innovative ways

to ensure their students receive necessary services through creating third spaces to promote mental

wellness, practices of othermothering, and basic student support (Gross et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2019;

Mueller et al., 2024; PNPI, 2024; Walker, 2018). Despite the significant contributions of HBCUs,

additional resources must be leveraged to enhance their mission of serving students. Challenges such as

geographic constraints, limited partnerships for providing nutritious food options, and inadequate

information dissemination to ensure students are aware of available services highlight areas for

improvement (Antwi et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2019; Vilme et al., 2022).

Conceptual Framework and Epistemological Assumptions

This study was guided by two complementary conceptual frameworks that informed the design, data collection, and analysis of how HBCUs engage in partnerships to address students' basic needs.

First, we drew on Brey and Hodara's (2023) *Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric* as both an evaluative tool and an analytic lens for understanding institutional capacity. Although often used as an assessment instrument, the rubric is grounded in an organizational implementation and continuous improvement orientation, which assumes that institutions move through identifiable stages of development as they respond to student needs. Implicit in this framework is a practice-based, pragmatic epistemology that centers how institutions operationalize care through structures, processes, and relationships rather than through isolated programs alone. Works such as those by Coburn and colleagues (2013) and Penuel and colleagues (2015) have relied on pragmatic epistemologies to develop frameworks that center on partnership work to facilitate the translation of research into practice.

The rubric reflects a systems-level understanding of basic needs support, emphasizing that student well-being is shaped not only by the presence of services but by how those services are organized, resourced, coordinated, and normalized within institutional contexts. Indicators such as reducing stigma, providing targeted case management, ensuring timely access, and collecting systematic data signal an underlying assumption that effective basic needs work requires intentional design, integration across units, and responsiveness to student experiences. In this sense, the rubric aligns with holistic and equity-oriented approaches to student success that conceptualize unmet basic needs as structural rather than individual failings.

In our study, we used the rubric not simply to categorize institutions by stage of implementation, but as a sensitizing framework (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006; Patton, 2015) that shaped how we approached data collection and analysis. Sensitizing frameworks, as defined by Blumer (1954) and Bowen (2006), provide a general sense of reference and guidance for inquiry by highlighting where to

look and what to attend to in the data, without prescribing definitive variables, hypotheses, or

outcomes. Specifically, the rubric informed the development of interview protocols, guiding our

attention to questions of organizational structure, staffing and resource allocation, service coordination,

data use, and partnership roles. Analytically, it provided a lens through which we interpreted how

partnerships functioned within broader institutional ecosystems, whether as stopgap solutions,

capacity-extending mechanisms, or integrated components of a coordinated basic needs strategy. This

approach allowed us to identify both institutional strengths (e.g., centralized food pantry management

or cross-campus referral systems) and constraints (e.g., reliance on informal labor or short-term funding)

as manifestations of underlying capacity and implementation stage rather than isolated deficiencies.

Table 1 shows a summary of Brey and Hodara's (2023) rubric.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Second, we used Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based theoretical model to situate

institutional capacity within historical, cultural, and mission-driven contexts. This framework foregrounds

how HBCUs' founding purposes, collective commitment to access and equity, and culturally affirming

environments shape institutional decision-making. Importantly, Arroyo and Gasman (2014) emphasize

that HBCUs are not monolithic; variation in size, governance, resources, and local context influences how

institutions enact their missions. This perspective was essential for interpreting differences across our

case sites in how partnerships were formed, sustained, and aligned with student support efforts. Further,

Arroyo and Gasman (2014) helped us better translate elements of Brey and Hodara (2023) into the

unique settings of HBCUs.

Together, these frameworks allowed us to conceptualize partnerships as both capacity-building

mechanisms and mission-driven expressions of institutional identity. While the Basic Needs Services

Implementation Rubric oriented our analysis toward organizational processes and implementation

maturity, the HBCU-based model ensured that these processes were interpreted within the context of

historical disinvestment, cultural values, and long-standing commitments to student care. In this context,

partnerships emerged not only as strategic responses to heightened student need, including recent

enrollment growth across our case sites, but also as relational and values-driven practices rooted in

HBCUs' holistic definitions of student success.

Consistent with this framing, we understand HBCU student success as extending beyond

academic outcomes to include well-being, belonging, and access to essential resources (Burmicky et al.,

2022). Our conceptual framework therefore attends to how institutional context and organizational

capacity interact to shape the ways HBCUs mobilize internal and external partnerships to meet students'

basic needs.

Methodology

This paper draws on data from a study of six HBCUs using qualitative single-site case study

methodology (Yin, 2018). Guided by case study principles, we bounded our site selection by mostly

residential, bachelor's degree-granting HBCUs with infrastructure (i.e., personnel, protocols, policies) for

supporting students' basic needs (Stake, 2006). From the six HBCUs in our broader study, we purposely

selected three institutions that demonstrated active engagement in partnerships to address students'

basic needs. These sites were chosen to provide a deeper understanding of how HBCUs with similar

contexts mobilize internal and external collaborations to support student well-being. In doing so, we

explored the types of basic needs services and resources that students sought based on their location.

Each institution was treated as an individual case study to allow for within-case and cross-case

analysis (Snyder, 2010). We collected data one HBCU at a time, ranging from 2024-2025 to immerse

ourselves into the culture of each institution, interviewing undergraduate students, faculty, staff, and

institutional leaders. At each campus, we sought to understand: 1) their most pressing issues as it relates

to students' basic needs insecurities; and 2) their capacity (i.e., infrastructure, personnel, policies,

protocols) for serving students' basic needs.

Description of the Sites

The first HBCUs is a private, research-intensive HBCU located in the Mid-Atlantic, with 25

participants. According to Fall 2023 data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(IPEDS), this university enrolls roughly 10,000 undergraduate students. Most students (92%) attend

full-time. Nearly two-thirds (67%) of the undergraduate population identify as Black or African American,

and women make up more than 70%, while men account for just under 30%. This site counts on a

relatively well-staffed student affairs division, allowing it to make better investments in students' basic

needs. At the same time, due to the institution's high enrollment, mental health services and resources

aren't sufficient to adequately serve its student body. The second site is a public, research-intensive

HBCU, also in the Mid-Atlantic, with 25 participants. Fall 2023 IPEDS data show that the institution has

approximately 8,200 undergraduates, with 86% enrolled full-time. A large majority (73%) identify as

Black or African American. Women represent just over 62% of the undergraduate population, while men

comprise nearly 39%. This site also counts on having a strong student support services division, but

generally struggles to provide adequate advising and financial aid services that their student population

demands. The third site is a public, regional comprehensive HBCU in the South, with 16 participants. As

reported in Fall 2023 IPEDS data, this institution enrolls about 6,300 undergraduate students. Roughly

75% of students attend full-time. The student body is predominantly Black or African American (76%),

and women make up more than 70% of the undergraduate population, compared to just under 31%

men. This site had a much smaller student support services personnel, and several individuals served in

various capacities (e.g., "wearing multiple hats").

These institutions have served as critical pathways to higher education and socioeconomic

mobility for Black students and other marginalized groups in the United States. These institutions, many

of which were established during the era of segregation, continue to be a lifeline for students from

low-income backgrounds (Commodore & Njoku, 2020). The unique mission of HBCUs has played an

instrumental role in shaping the lives of students who, in many cases, face substantial financial barriers

to achieving a college education.

Data Collection

To secure entry into each site, we leveraged sponsored connections, who were individuals that

served as campus liaisons between our research team and the institution (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;

Maxwell, 2013). These connections were instrumental in introducing us to key faculty, staff, and students

and facilitating the initial stages of access. Beyond this formal sponsorship, we cultivated in-depth

relationships with participants by demonstrating our investment in understanding their experiences and

perspectives (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

For this study, gaining access to a single HBCU site required persistence, cultural attunement,

and strategic communication. Our team's familiarity with the institutional cultures of HBCUs, coupled

with prior experiences working in these contexts, enabled us to negotiate entry points that might

otherwise have remained closed (Patton, 2016; Milner, 2007). By drawing on this form of capital, we

were able to secure access to multiple sites and participants who were essential to answering our

research questions.

Data collection took place from Spring 2024 through Spring 2025. We conducted interviews and

focus groups with 66 participants across three sites. Interviews lasted about 60 minutes; focus groups

ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview and focus group protocols were closely guided by Brey and

Hodara's (2023) rubric. Questions explored campus policies, interventions, and practices designed to

support HBCU students' holistic well-being. We focused on responses about how participants leveraged internal and external partnerships to meet students' needs. Participants also discussed coalition building, within and beyond the institution, and how they conceptualize capacity building. Students were asked whether and how these partnerships addressed their needs. Exploring community partnerships helped us address our research questions by giving us insight into the ways these partnerships impact and influence overall student support and success.

In terms of participant demographics, the majority of our participants identify as members of the African diaspora. Demographic data were collected through a brief Qualtrics questionnaire that participants completed while consenting to be a part of the study, as required by IRB. Among the 66 participants, 91% identified as Black, 4% as Asian American or Asian, 4% as Hispanic or Latino, 4% as White or Caucasian, and 2% as another or unlisted identity. By gender, 64% identified as women, 34% as men, and 2% declined to state.

Regarding staff, our participant pool included frontline, student-facing personnel such as academic advisors, residence life staff, and student involvement professionals. We also included mid-career staff, including assistant directors and mental health counselors. Across all campuses, we recruited senior leaders in student affairs, such as the dean of students or the VP/AVP for student affairs, as well as case managers when that role existed.

For faculty, we included individuals across all ranks and appointment types who teach undergraduate students, with particular attention to those leading large seminar or gateway courses that enroll diverse student populations. This included tenured and tenure-track faculty, clinical faculty, lecturers, adjuncts, and staff who also held teaching responsibilities. We were intentional about recruiting undergraduate students and faculty from a wide range of academic disciplines.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed using a third-party transcription service. To ensure accuracy, members of the research team conducted line-by-line reviews of each transcript while listening to the corresponding audio files, correcting any discrepancies as needed. Because our interview and focus group protocols included targeted questions related to partnerships, our analysis focused on data connected to these areas. Given the diversity of participants—students, faculty, and staff—the specific wording and focus of our questions varied. For example, faculty were asked about internal offices or point people to whom they refer students to ensure timely access to resources and services, as aligned with Brey and Hodara's (2023) *Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric*. Staff participants were asked about their involvement in partnerships or targeted case management, as well as their perceptions of additional collaborations that would strengthen their work. Student participants were asked about the campus partnerships or services that supported their access to basic needs resources. Each of these questions was intentionally mapped to dimensions of Brey and Hodara's rubric. The rubric structured our analytic attention to organizational processes rather than program presence alone, enabling us to interpret partnerships as indicators of institutional capacity rather than isolated interventions

Because our protocols were semi-structured, participants also discussed partnerships in response to other questions. To capture these emergent data, our team conducted another line-by-line review of all transcripts to identify additional relevant passages. Rather than relying on qualitative data analysis software, we employed a manual coding process. This meant that team members independently extracted all references to partnerships and compiled them into a shared document. This document served as a collaborative space for iterative discussion, comparison, and interpretation relative to our research questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Throughout the analysis, we drew intentional connections to our conceptual framework, particularly Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based theoretical model,

to interpret how institutional context shaped the formation and function of partnerships. As themes

began to emerge, we engaged in multiple rounds of discussion to refine and consolidate them. We also

prioritized rigor through intercoder reliability and reflexivity practices (Miles et al., 2019). This included

consistent check-ins among team members to ensure analytic alignment and ongoing reflection on our

positionalities as researchers, recognizing how our experiences and assumptions might influence

interpretation. In addition, we reviewed and shared preliminary findings with each of our campus

liaisons to make sure that our interpretation resonated with their lived experiences and perceptions of

their own campus culture. This final step with the campus liaison added another layer of member

checking which we found highly beneficial to fleshing out our findings.

Researcher Positionalities

As a research team, we bring diverse lived experiences, social locations, and institutional roles

that shape our engagement with this study. Collectively, we represent African American, Haitian, Latinx

immigrant, and white backgrounds, as well as cisgender men and women, including queer and

intersectional identities. Our positions span doctoral students, graduate assistants, and one faculty

researcher, all with deep connections to HBCUs as sites of scholarship and community. We acknowledge

how our varied cultural identities and professional roles influence the ways we frame questions,

interpret findings, and understand the HBCU context. Some of us draw on personal and professional

investments in student success, belonging, and retention; others engage critically with issues of

anti-Black racism, access, and equity in higher education. Together, we approach this work with a shared

commitment to honoring the mission and cultural contexts of HBCUs, while remaining attentive to how

our own positionalities inform the research process.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several limitations. First, access to each site and its respective participants were shaped by the availability of sponsored-connections, specifically through our campus liaisons, and our ability to build relationships within each institution. This reliance on existing networks, which were essential for gaining trust and entry, may have influenced which voices were represented in our study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). That is to say, it is possible that some voices, particularly those less connected to institutional leadership or coalition activities, were not fully captured in this study. Second, our positionalities as researchers also shaped the study. While we engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process and used collaborative coding to interrogate assumptions, we recognize that our own cultural backgrounds, professional roles, and commitments to HBCU communities influenced how data were interpreted. Reflexive attention to positionality is central to qualitative inquiry (Milner, 2007; Pillow, 2003), and while we view this as a strength, it also highlights the interpretive nature of the findings

In terms of delimitations, the study was intentionally bound to focus on institutional partnerships around students' basic needs. We did not attempt to capture the full range of HBCU initiatives related to student success or affordability, nor did we seek to compare HBCUs with non-HBCU institutions. Additionally, we limited our analysis to the perspectives of administrators, faculty, and staff. While students' voices are central to understanding basic needs insecurity, our focus on institutional actors reflects our interest in how organizational structures and relationships are mobilized to address these challenges. As Yin (2018) emphasizes, clear case boundaries are essential to strengthening internal coherence and analytic clarity

Findings

This study explored how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) develop and sustain partnerships to address students' basic needs. Across all three participating institutions, faculty, staff,

and students emphasized the importance of collaboration as a critical strategy for supporting student

success amid constrained resources and increasing student need. Although sites were analyzed

individually, we present cross-case data to provide a more holistic view of how these three HBCUs

leveraged partnerships to meet students' basic needs. In what follows, we present three findings:

1. External partnerships help address resource gaps but remain underleveraged

2. Intentional, mutually beneficial partnerships support holistic student development, and

3. Gaps in internal coordination and capacity limit the overall impact of external collaborations.

External Partnerships Help Address Resource Gaps but Remain Underleveraged

Across all three campuses, participants described how external partnerships help bridge critical

resource gaps, particularly in addressing food insecurity. These partnerships often emerged out of

necessity, driven by limited institutional capacity and a shared commitment to student well-being. One

upper-level administrator who oversees student experience noted a collaboration with campus dining

services that aimed to reduce food waste and redirect surplus meals to local needs:

> I have a pretty good relationship with them [Sodexo]. My biggest frustration is waste … at
>
> the end of the day, and they'll tell you, they waste about 25% of the food, it's just thrown
>
> away … if you walk down the main street, there is a massive homeless population. At
>
> minimum, pack the food up and take it.

As this administrator did, several of our participants emphasized the need for more reciprocal and

sustained engagement with community-based partners who can provide wraparound support,

particularly in student services, technology, and mental health. The dean of students at one of our public

campuses discussed the need to establish strong partnerships with mental health services, especially

since reported mental health-related cases have been on the rise on their campus. At the same time,

although her institution had made significant investments in mental health services, which helped

solidify stronger internal partnerships, she also noted that "student affairs come last," meaning the

institution isn't quite yet serious about fully investing in critical basic needs services. In particular, the

mental health partnerships described by these participants sought to address the need to provide

culturally and racially affirming mental health services for their students, which is especially hard

considering the shortage of Black mental health professionals in the country (Ajluni & Michalopoulou,

2025). In her own words,

> We have in our new strategic plan ... and it's connected to the need that we're seeing in our
>
> students. The first strategic item or focus area is student success and well being, so that has
>
> been added into the strategic plan. There's been a concerted effort to increase particularly
>
> mental health services. So we've expanded the number of counselors. We have also added
>
> online services for students that are available, 24/7, in terms of health, we're building out case
>
> management.

Although this dean of students reported having increased the number of mental health personnel, she

noted that these efforts alone are not enough. She emphasized the need to partner with mental health

and wellbeing services that can provide more on the ground solutions for students who are experiencing

isolation and who are seeking more readily available mental health resources. She also stressed the need

to "keep [their] services hybrid ... so that they still have online appointments as well as walking

appointments, traditional appointments in the office." These approaches emphasized the need to be

both flexible and innovative in the types of partnerships and student services our participants offered.

Even though many of our staff participants articulated growing efforts and partnerships to serve

students' needs, student participants shared a different perspective. For many students, although their

campus advertised certain basic needs services such as food pantries and campus closets, not all of them were relevant to their actual needs. For instance, one student expressed his frustrations with the Career Closet, a popular service on his campus,

> As a business major, they push us to go to the Career Closet, but it's like, how can you push us to do something when there's all these limitations to where you're pushing us to go. I have benefited from the JCPenney sale myself. I got a couple, you know, jackets, blazers and everything from the sale, which I love very much. But like he said, I drive, so it's easy for me to get to [name of mall], but there's a bunch of people that they cannot get there in that short amount of time. So yes, bringing them to campus would be 10 times easier.

This student shared that although he personally benefited from the Career Closet, many of his peers could not. Because the campus partnership was located at the local mall, which was several miles away from campus, students without access to a personal vehicle were effectively excluded, as public transportation did not provide a viable route to the mall. Thus, while campus leadership had good intentions in partnering with the mall to offer professional clothing, they overlooked basic needs related barriers such as transportation. This issue illustrates how certain partnerships remain underleveraged and require more thoughtful planning to ensure equitable access for all students.

In addition to more traditional partnerships including food and clothing, participants also highlighted the absence of technology-focused partnerships that could meet students' digital access needs. One staff member explained:

> Another partner that I would love to see is somebody in the tech world… a lot of our students show up without adequate technology. And you don't need a MacBook; you need

a computer… I would love to have a partnership where students can get what they need

and no questions asked.

This gap points to a missed opportunity for corporate partners, particularly in the technology sector, to

play a more active and equitable role in addressing the material needs of HBCU students.

Several participants further distinguished between sustainable corporate relationships and

one-time philanthropic gestures, emphasizing the importance of ongoing investment:

We want sustainable assistance… [A grocery store] gave us a $50,000 donation… that's

sustainable. But [a corporation] came in one time with [a professional sports team] and

gave us turkeys for Thanksgiving. That's cool, but that's not going to keep us afloat for a

long period of time.

Across our data, it became evident that although external partnerships were forming and brought

positive changes that were welcomed by the campus communities, many needed to be thought of

in terms of relevance, true maximization, and long-term sustainability.

Intentional, Mutually Beneficial Partnerships Support Holistic Student Development

Participants repeatedly emphasized that the most effective partnerships are those rooted in

shared values, reciprocity, and mutual benefit. This was especially relevant considering that HBCUs are

mission-driven organizations that promote access to high percentages of Pell-grant recipients (Johnson &

Jackson, 2024). One upper level administrator that oversaw auxiliary services shared a partnership with a

licensing company that advanced both professional development and institutional branding, especially

to students who haven't had exposure to corporate partners and paid opportunities,

> We approached them [graphic design company] to do a student design competition… our
>
> students would get paid, they'd also get to see their collections sold in the bookstore and
>
> showcased in the homecoming fashion show.

Such partnerships illustrate how collaboration can extend beyond transactional exchanges to support

holistic student development, integrating career readiness, creative expression, and institutional pride.

For many staff, working at an HBCU meant that they were able to be connected to the mission of their

university, which in many ways was centered around opportunity, racial uplift, cultural expression, and

social mobility. As articulated by a faculty member in nursing sciences,

> I do see Black joy in my students. There is a sense of community, which is amazing at HBCUs. …
>
> that is essential there, and they are happy to be in an HBCU, where they feel they belong, that is
>
> there…

This faculty member shared that although there are many issues regarding students' basic needs, she

was fully aware of the power of HBCUs, which meant that many found sense of belonging in their

everyday lives. She noted that in terms of mission-driven partnerships, there is a need for "more general,

friendship, connections between students." Students, too, agree about having partnerships that are

attuned to their holistic needs, especially attuned to the general wellbeing of Black communities. As

shared by one student,

> We do have some good partnerships, like I know, like our food resource center works with a lot
>
> of local farms and Black farmers and just just some of those different things…

This student also highlighted other corporate partnerships she's benefitted from, such as the ones for

"career development, working with companies such as Target and different places to shop." However,

what stood out the most is the partnerships that not only benefitted the holistic wellbeing of the students but of the broader Black community. This led to some insightful conversations about what it meant to have mutually benefiting partnership with an aim toward holistic wellbeing. Many of our faculty and staff participants shared that what keeps them at an HBCU is the mission-centered work. Namely, although they recognize that other, more affluent neighboring institutions do a better job at providing more resources to students to serve their needs, they are committed to serving the Black diaspora in ways that are mutually beneficial for partners and the community. This is something our participants shared that was hard to replicate outside of HBCUs.

Gaps in Internal Coordination and Capacity Limit the Impact of External Partnerships

Although external partnerships were widely valued, participants noted that their impact often depends on internal coordination and staffing. Many described siloed departments, limited personnel, and inconsistent communication channels that hinder the integration of external resources into student support systems. As one staff member explained:

> We are trying to connect students to employers for experiential learning and internships…
> some departments work with us, and some we're still trying hard to bridge that gap.

Others underscored the heavy reliance on informal networks and personal relationships to connect students to resources, often requiring faculty and staff to perform duties outside their formal roles. According to a faculty member,

> I don't have a point person, but I have a colleague in social work who volunteered to help
> our freshman seminar students… she already has her own clients, teaches, and runs
> grants, but she still wanted to support our students.

Most faculty noted that they routinely went above and beyond, including contributing additional service hours, to ensure these partnerships succeeded, despite knowing that this work extended far beyond their formal responsibilities. A student shared,

> We have a Career Closet on the third floor at [Residence Hall]. Um, you can use it. The only thing is you can only use it one time. You can only use it once a semester, because it's limited.

This same student also mentioned the lack of coordination from staff members to ensure that students are able to use certain services in a way that makes sense for their needs. Another student was able to articulate bandwidth issues that persist among staff members, and the critical need to have the "manpower" to staff these basic needs initiatives,

> We can find a lot of external vendors and people who, you know, donate and different things, but we don't have the bandwidth to staff these things, or to make sure that it's reliable and consistent for students. That's kind of what I see. ... I think it's getting the manpower and university support for these areas, whether it comes to staffing, funding, some of these things that would help

These findings illustrate that HBCU partnerships are deeply relational, mission-driven, and often initiated from the ground up rather than through top-down mandates. They operate within a context of constrained resources yet abundant commitment, where collaboration becomes both a coping strategy and a mechanism of institutional care. However, without sustained coordination and investment, many of these efforts risk remaining fragmented. The findings suggest that coalition-building, rather than short-term partnership development, offers a more sustainable model for advancing student basic needs at HBCUs.

Discussion

Drawing on the Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU-based theoretical model and Brey and Hodara's (2023) *Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric*, this study examined how HBCUs engage in partnerships to address students' basic needs. Our findings underscore that HBCUs approach basic needs work as an extension of their historic mission of collective uplift, belonging, and equity. Faculty and staff described collaboration as an act of institutional care, rooted in community traditions and sustained through personal commitment rather than formalized systems. However, students described the opposite, perceiving collaboration as inconsistent and largely unsupported by institutional structures. These results reaffirm prior scholarship that highlights how HBCUs' distinctive campus cultures and values of mutual aid foster environments where student well-being is considered integral to academic success (Palmer, et al., 2010; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014).

This study contributed to the literature by centering HBCUs, often underdiscussed in basic needs research, as sites of innovation, resilience, and community-engaged institutions for historically marginalized students (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Palmer et al., 2020). By examining how HBCUs use partnerships to address students' holistic needs, the study highlights both the challenges these institutions face and the mission-aligned strategies they employ to overcome them (Williams et al., 2021). The findings extend the field's understanding of capacity building in under-resourced settings by showing how collaboration compensates for limited infrastructure and staffing (Brey & Hodara, 2023; Kezar, 2014). HBCUs bridge the effects of systemic underfunding by creating sustainable partnerships with internal and external organizations, even as institutional capacity constraints remain (Mueller et al., 2024). In this way, coalition-building emerges as a structural adaptation to policy and resource pressures, further demonstrating how HBCUs continue to advance access, stability, and student well-being through their collective efforts (Gross et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2019; Walker, 2018).

As Arroyo and Gasman (2014) argue, HBCU institutional behavior cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the sociocultural context that guides decision-making. Partnerships among faculty, staff, students, and community partners mirror long-standing traditions of communal leadership and cooperative action that have historically enabled HBCUs to thrive within exclusionary higher education systems. These partnerships, often formed informally, reflect a culturally grounded approach to leadership that values empathy, reciprocity, and trust. However, Brey and Hodara's (2023) rubric also revealed tensions between institutional culture and formal implementation frameworks. While the rubric offers valuable indicators, such as service accessibility and coordinated case management, it does not adequately capture mission-driven or relational forms of implementation. For example, in our study, many HBCUs relied on interpersonal networks or voluntary collaborations to connect students with resources. These efforts were often highly effective in meeting immediate student needs. We argue that the rubric could be strengthened by integrating dimensions of cultural responsiveness, relational trust, and collective efficacy, factors that are central to HBCU approaches but currently absent from mainstream models of institutional capacity. In doing so, the framework would better reflect the diversity of pathways through which institutions achieve equity-centered outcomes.

Our findings also suggest that partnership provides a theoretical bridge between HBCU mission and implementation capacity. Kezar and Lester (2011) describe partnerships as vehicles for systemic change that depend on shared purpose and cross-boundary leadership. Within the HBCU context, partnerships embody both. For example, they link academic and administrative units with community stakeholders in ways that reconfigure how support services are organized and delivered. Yet, unlike the collective impact models typical in predominantly white institutions (Kania & Kramer, 2011), HBCU partnerships are often grassroots and relational rather than technocratic. This distinction highlights the

importance of reframing capacity not only as material infrastructure but as social capital, the trust, networks, and shared values that enable institutions to mobilize under constrained conditions.

Lastly, our findings underscore the need to further develop research–practice partnerships (RPPs) that can sustain research-informed, long-term, and collaborative efforts to address students' basic needs. Although many of the partnerships documented in this study demonstrated strong alignment with institutional missions, they were often underleveraged as sites for shared learning, data use, and continuous improvement. This underutilization points to the limitations of short-term or transactional collaborations and underscores the importance of sustained engagement between researchers and practitioners to achieve transformative, scalable outcomes. Relatedly, RPPs, particularly within the context of HBCUs, position partnerships as sites of knowledge production, demonstrating how practice-focused inquiry can generate consequential knowledge for both scholarship and institutional improvement (Bensimon, 2007).

More broadly, these findings reinforce the need for scholarship that is epistemically anchored in practice (Patton, 2015; Penuel et al., 2015). This means that we need research that emerges from, is informed by, and remains accountable to the everyday work of institutions. Practice-anchored inquiry enables researchers to generate knowledge that is responsive to institutional constraints, organizational dynamics, and student realities, while simultaneously supporting practitioners' capacity to reflect on and improve their work. As demonstrated in this study, RPPs offer a promising infrastructure for producing such knowledge by positioning research not as an external evaluation of practice, but as a collaborative process that evolves alongside institutional efforts to support student well-being. Expanding this approach will be critical for advancing both the scholarship and practice of addressing students' basic needs in higher education.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings from this study illustrate that understanding students' basic needs within the context of HBCUs is essential for both researchers and practitioners seeking to advance equity-centered student success efforts. Further, our research showed the innovative nature of partnerships at HBCUs, posing opportunities to share implications for research and practice in higher education.

Implications for Research

For researchers, this study reinforces the importance of examining how institutional culture and history shape the ways colleges organize support for students. Traditional research on basic-needs initiatives has primarily focused on predominantly white institutions or well-resourced systems with formalized infrastructures (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). By contrast, HBCUs often rely on social networks, personal relationships, and shared community values to build support systems. Future studies should explore these relational forms of capacity as a legitimate and powerful form of institutional strength rather than a sign of deficiency (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Palmer et al., 2020). Frameworks like Brey and Hodara's (2023) Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric provide useful structure for assessing capacity, but they can be strengthened by integrating relational and cultural dimensions, such as trust, shared purpose, and cultural responsiveness. Drawing on work by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1995), future research could measure how these forms of social capital influence program effectiveness and student outcomes. This would allow for a more holistic understanding of what capacity looks like in institutions whose success depends on community-based, rather than hierarchical or bureaucratic, approaches.

Coalition-building also offers an emerging lens for higher education research. Kezar and Lester (2011) describe coalitions as dynamic spaces that bring people together across boundaries to pursue a shared purpose. In the HBCU context, coalitions operate as engines of innovation, linking academic, student-affairs, and community actors in ways that redistribute leadership and expand institutional

reach. Future studies should document how these coalitions evolve, what governance structures sustain them, and how they shape institutional resilience and student well-being.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners, the findings highlight that partnerships at HBCUs thrive when they are reciprocal, mission-aligned, and rooted in trust. Effective collaborations extend beyond transactional exchanges to foster mutual learning and shared value. Institutional leaders can strengthen partnerships by framing them as long-term relationships rather than one-time interventions, and by ensuring that external collaborators understand and respect HBCUs' cultural contexts and student populations (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Commodore & Njoku, 2020). Building sustainable partnerships also requires stronger internal coordination. Many HBCU staff and faculty in this study relied on informal networks to connect students to resources, a reflection of deep personal commitment but this also demonstrates the structural limitations. Institutions can improve continuity and reduce burnout by creating cross-functional teams or basic-needs councils that formalize collaboration among academic affairs, student services, and external relations. Doing so can transform basic-needs work from individual acts of care into institution-wide systems of support (Brey & Hodara, 2023).

At the policy and funding levels, there is a need to recognize the relational and cultural labor that underpins HBCU innovation. Traditional measures of institutional capacity, such as staffing levels or technological infrastructure, often overlook the social capital that sustains basic-needs initiatives. Funding models and grant programs should therefore account for coalition-building, community partnerships, and mission-driven leadership as key indicators of institutional strength (Nichols & Harris, 2020). Finally, HBCUs and their partners should continue to design collaborations that are mutually beneficial for both students and communities. Partnerships that integrate experiential learning, workforce development, and community engagement can help students meet basic needs while

preparing them for meaningful careers. These approaches align with HBCUs' dual mission of fostering

individual success and advancing collective progress, ensuring that partnership work remains both

student-centered and community focused. Altogether, these implications suggest that advancing

basic-needs security at HBCUs requires viewing collaboration not as an administrative task but as a

cultural and relational practice. For researchers, this means broadening frameworks to capture social and

cultural dimensions of institutional capacity. For practitioners, it means creating the structures and

partnerships that translate long-standing values of care and equity into sustainable systems of support.

Conclusion

This study examined how HBCUs develop and sustain partnerships to address students' basic

needs within contexts of persistent resource constraint. Across institutions, collaboration emerged as

both a practical strategy and an expression of deeply held institutional values. Faculty and staff described

these efforts as extensions of care and collective responsibility, while students pointed to uneven

coordination and limited visibility that shaped how support was experienced. These perspectives

highlight that collaboration at HBCUs is most effective when personal commitment is reinforced by

structures that ensure consistency and transparency. Strengthening coordination while maintaining the

cultural foundations of care can enhance both access and trust among students. In doing so, HBCUs can

continue to demonstrate how they achieve their mission and shared purpose through mobilizing

partnerships to advance student well-being under challenging conditions.

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