



Examining the Role of Policy Instruments in Supporting Public HBCUs' College Affordability

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**Examining the Role of Policy Instruments in Supporting Public HBCUs' College
Affordability**

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Abstract

This study uses a multiple-case qualitative research design to examine the fiscal policy instruments that members of State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBC) use to strengthen college affordability and broaden access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. Guided by the Policy Design Theory, this study analyzes nine semi-structured interviews and eleven legislative documents. Findings reveal that SLBC members deploy fiscal policy instruments as part of a broader, multi-pronged approach to affordability at public HBCUs. These design choices reflect strategic efforts to navigate political and fiscal constraints while sustaining attention to public HBCUs within state policy agendas. This study contributes to scholarship on public policy and higher education by highlighting how affordability policy for public HBCUs is constructed through deliberate design choices. In doing so, it illuminates how SLBC members frame and advance fiscal policies in ways that make targeted investments in public HBCUs both politically viable and durable within contested state policymaking environments.

Keywords: State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs), State higher education policy, College affordability, Policy design, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Legislative decision-making

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*“None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps.
We got here because somebody bent down and helped us.”*

— Thurgood Marshall., U.S. Supreme Court Justice (1967 – 1991)

Introduction

State-level college finance policy plays a central role in shaping both college affordability and financial stability for public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). A substantial body of research shows that HBCU students continue to face persistent affordability challenges, even as enrollment at these institutions has grown (Lane, 2016). While tuition at HBCUs is generally comparable to that of other public institutions, these campuses serve far larger shares of low-income and Pell-eligible students. For example, Edwards et al. (2023), report that 61 percent of undergraduates at HBCUs receive Pell Grants, compared with just 32 percent at predominantly white institutions. At the same time, HBCUs operate with fewer financial resources per student while educating populations with greater financial need (Hardy et al., 2019). These pressures are compounded by broader national trends showing that the net price of college has risen faster than household income for Black families and other low-income groups, placing additional strain on students' ability to enroll and persist (Hale, 2023; Jones & Nichols, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2019). Recent research also calls into question the assumption that higher education policy tools are neutral in practice. For instance, Ortagus et al. (2022) find that four-year HBCUs experienced a 23.5 percent decline in state appropriations under high-dosage performance-based funding systems, while Nichols and Schak (2019) show that merit-based aid tends to advantage students from higher-income families and exacerbates racial disparities in college access.

As such, this study examines the fiscal policy instruments that State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) and their constituent members use to strengthen college affordability and broaden access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. For this paper, I define policy instruments as the practical tools governments often rely on to turn policy goals into action, ranging from financial and regulatory mechanisms to informational and organizational approaches (Hood, 1986; Salamon, 2002). Policy instruments reflect political priorities and help determine how authority, resources, and responsibilities are allocated among policy actors (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Howlett, 2023). In this context, policy instruments shape not only policy outcomes, but also which populations and institutions ultimately benefit or bear the costs within a given policy system (Howlett, 2014). While scholars differ on how to define a policy actor (Cairney, 2012; Howlett; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), this study follows Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) definition, which understands policy actors as individuals and organizations actively engaged in a policy problem, working to influence decisions within a policy subsystem, and coordinating through advocacy coalitions shaped by shared belief systems (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988). Viewing members of SLBCs through this lens allows for attention to both individual-level influences such as beliefs, values, and knowledge of college affordability challenges facing public HBCUs and the broader institutional and political contexts that shape their decision-making. In particular, this study focuses on how SLBC legislators interpret affordability problems, frame policy priorities, and navigate contested state finance environments where funding decisions for public HBCUs are shaped by competing coalitions and interests. Drawing on a qualitative dataset of nine semi-structured interviews and eleven legislative documents, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which fiscal policy instruments do state lawmakers, particularly State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBC) and their constituent members, use to strengthen college affordability policies for public HBCUs?

Literature Review

Defining Political Actors in the State Higher Education Policy Domain

Contemporary higher education scholars and researchers now consider many variables to be of significance to higher education that were previously unexplored or as the proper domain of another discipline. For instance, research on state higher education policymaking recognizes that policy outcomes emerge from the interaction of multiple actor types operating within a shared policy subsystem. Rather than treating “policy actors” as a homogeneous group, scholars increasingly differentiate among actor categories based on institutional position, authority, and mode of influence (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Howlett, 2011). Drawing on multiple strands of policy scholarship, I contend with four distinct categories of policy actors. These include legislative, administrative, organizational, and influence policy actors. According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993) Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy actors include both individuals and organizations that engage a shared policy problem and coordinate within policy subsystems to influence decision-making. According to Mayhew’s (1974) theory of congressional behavior and Fenno’s (1978) analysis of legislative action, elected officials constitute a distinct category of policy actors by virtue of their formal authority over agenda-setting, statutory design, and budgetary decisions. According to Hearn and McLendon’s (2012) work on state higher education governance and McLendon’s (2003) analysis of governance reform, administrative agencies function as policy actors through delegated authority for implementation and oversight. According to Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, and

Leech's (2009) study of lobbying and policy change, organizations and associations act as policy actors by shaping agendas and influencing policymakers through indirect means rather than formal decision-making power.

These conceptual debates are particularly salient in the study of higher education policymaking. While scholars have documented the structural underfunding of HBCUs and the disproportionate enrollment of low-income and Pell-eligible students at these institutions (Gasman, 2013), less attention has been paid to the political processes through which affordability policies are constructed at the state level. State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) offer a critical entry point into this question. As organized legislative bodies, SLBCs function as collective policy actors within state policymaking systems, coordinating advocacy efforts, articulating shared priorities, and negotiating with legislative leadership and executive agencies (Haynie, 2001; Lublin, 1997). Research on Black legislative behavior emphasizes that caucus activity is shaped by shared understandings of constituent needs, historical exclusion from policymaking power, and commitments to collective advancement (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 2014). Within the higher education domain, these dynamics position SLBC members as key advocates for affordability, access, and institutional survival at public HBCUs. Conceptualizing SLBC members and their legislative service organization as policy actors, both individually and collectively, enables an understanding of the coordinated action within policy subsystems and provides a lens to analyze and operationalize how their group-based policy priorities shape policy design.

Public Policy Design and Policy Instruments in Higher Education

Literature on policy design emphasizes that policies take shape through instruments such as funding mechanisms, rules, incentives, and accountability systems that structure behavior and distribute resources. There is considerable interest in why some policy designs are chosen, rather than others, and what differences these choices make in policy impacts. Such information becomes internalized into a conception of assumptions about how actors will respond, who is responsible for achieving policy goals, and which outcomes count as success (Schneider & Ingram, 1990, 1993; Howlett, 2011). As a result, policy design is inherently political. Choices about tools reflect priorities, constraints, and power relations, even when framed as technical or administrative decisions (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). Within this context, legislators emerge as central policy designers.

Legislators and policy advocates routinely evaluate postsecondary policy through the economic returns to education, including earnings premiums associated with degree attainment, employment outcomes, and projected fiscal benefits to states. For instance, legislative debates surrounding the Georgia HOPE Scholarship have consistently framed tuition subsidies as a public investment, relying on evidence of college wage premiums and anticipated gains in workforce productivity and state tax revenues to defend sustained funding (Dynarski, 2004; Lee and Allen, 2020). This evidence, largely produced within the economics of education and public finance, plays a powerful role in framing affordability policy as an investment with measurable payoffs. Alongside these economic arguments, a substantial body of research documents the social outcomes associated with higher levels of educational attainment. For instance, Minnesota's statewide higher-education performance reporting explicitly states that greater educational attainment correlates with "better health" and other social and economic benefits,

embedding those social-outcome claims into the rationale for the state's legislated attainment target (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, 2020). Despite this evidence, social outcomes tend to play a more limited role in the design of higher education policy instruments, often invoked rhetorically but less frequently embedded in funding formulas or accountability systems (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Dee, 2004; Chetty et al., 2017; Heckman, Humphries, & Veramendi, 2018). This imbalance raises questions about which forms of evidence are privileged in legislative decision-making and how those preferences shape policy design.

Performance-based funding offers a particularly revealing example of how evidence, priorities, and design choices converge in higher education policymaking. Research on these policies consistently shows that their effects depend less on adoption than on design features, including the share of funding at stake, the selection and weighting of metrics, and the stability of the funding stream over time. Take for example, Ohio which redesigned their performance-based funding system multiple times after early versions produced limited effects, illustrating how metric selection and weighting, particularly the emphasis on course completion versus degree completion shaped institutional responses more than adoption alone (Dougherty et al., 2016; Hillman et al., 2017). While proponents frame performance-based funding as a tool for efficiency and accountability, scholars have documented mixed and context-dependent effects, with particular concerns about unintended consequences for institutions serving higher-need students (Dougherty et al., 2013; Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Ortagus, 2020; Kelchen, 2023). As such, performance-based funding highlights how instrument design reflects legislative judgments about responsibility, risk, and institutional behavior.

Contested State Environments

State higher education policy is shaped within what can be understood as contested policy environments. Contested state policy environments refer to political contexts characterized by persistent disagreement over policy priorities, instruments, and legitimacy, in which public decisions are shaped by conflict over fiscal capacity, values, and the distribution of benefits and burdens rather than by stable consensus (Lowi, 1972; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Jones et al., 2009). In these environments, higher education is rarely insulated from broader state debates over the scope of government responsibility. According to research from McLendon et al. (2009) and Tandberg (2010), funding decisions emerge from conflict over how public resources should be raised and allocated, and which institutions and populations warrant sustained investment. Taxation constitutes a central axis of this contestation. Scholarship on the political economy of taxation demonstrates that constrained or regressive tax systems tend to shift the costs of higher education away from the state and onto students and families, increasing reliance on tuition and fees (Poterba, 1997; Newman & O'Brien, 2011; Mettler, 2011). As a result, taxation debates structure the fiscal boundaries within which higher education policy is designed. Within this context, higher education competes with other state policy priorities. Budgetary tradeoffs among K–12 education, health care, corrections, infrastructure, and social services shape how legislators allocate public funds. Higher education is frequently treated as a discretionary category, making it particularly vulnerable during periods of fiscal stress. Importantly, research shows that disinvestment in higher education reflects political prioritization rather than inevitable budgetary pressure. Legislators weigh short-term electoral incentives against long-term investment considerations, and higher education funding outcomes often

mirror these calculations (McLendon & Ness, 2003; Tandberg & Ness, 2011; Jones, Baumgartner, & Breunig, 2009).

These contested environments are also racialized. Policy debates about taxation, spending, and public investment are shaped by racialized narratives regarding deservingness, dependency, and responsibility. Political science research on policy design highlights how racial meaning becomes embedded in public policies, influencing which populations are viewed as legitimate recipients of public support (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In the context of higher education, funding decisions are inseparable from legacies of segregation, uneven state development, and the historically distinct positioning of institutions that serve racially marginalized populations. As a result, contestation over higher education policy is not race-neutral, even when framed in fiscal or technical terms (King & Smith, 2005; Trounstein, 2018). The concept of linked fate provides a useful lens for understanding how political actors navigate these environments. According to Dawson (1994) and Tate (2003), linked fate captures the belief that individual outcomes are tied to the collective fortunes of one's racial group, shaping how political interests are defined and pursued. Originally developed in the study of Black political behavior, linked fate has been shown to influence policy preferences, political participation, and evaluations of government action (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 1994; Gay, Hochschild, & White, 2016). For Black political actors, perceptions of linked fate often inform how constituents are socially constructed, not simply as individual voters, but as members of a racial group facing shared structural constraints. This orientation influences how policy problems are defined and which institutions are viewed as critical sites of intervention within the state policy landscape.

Black legislators operate at the intersection of these dynamics. Research on descriptive representation shows that Black legislators frequently navigate expectations to represent both

geographically defined districts and broader racial group interests. This dual representational role shapes how they interpret constituent needs and policy priorities, particularly in domains such as education and economic opportunity (Canon, 1999; Haynie, 2001; Fenno, 2003). In contested state environments, Black legislators' social construction of their constituents is often informed by shared racial and socioeconomic conditions, reinforcing attention to policies perceived as advancing collective mobility. Within this framework, Black legislators' conceptions of target populations extend beyond individuals to include institutions closely tied to group advancement. HBCUs occupy a distinctive position in this regard. Empirical research demonstrates that HBCUs disproportionately serve low-income, first-generation, and academically underprepared students, while contributing significantly to degree attainment and upward mobility among African Americans (Allen et al., 2015; Gasman & Nguyen, 2019; Chetty et al., 2020). As a result, HBCUs are frequently understood by Black legislators as institutional vehicles for social mobility rather than simply as components of a higher education system. The economic profile of African Americans further heightens the stakes of higher education policy design in these contexts. Persistent racial gaps in income, wealth, and employment increases sensitivity to tuition increases and reductions in public support. Research in economics and public policy documents how these disparities magnify the consequences of state disinvestment, particularly for students and families with limited capacity to absorb rising educational costs (Hamilton et al., 2015; Hardy, Smeeding, & Ziliak, 2019; Chetty et al., 2020). These economic realities shape how Black legislators assess the distributional implications of policy choices and justify advocacy for institutions and instruments that support affordability and access.

Theoretical Framework

This study of legislative behavior and policy design related to college affordability and access is anchored in policy design theory, drawing specifically on the Social Construction of Target Populations framework (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schneider, Ingram, & deLeon, 2014). Policy design theory is concerned with how public policies are crafted through political processes that assign meaning, responsibility, and value to different social groups. This perspective emphasizes that legislative choices are shaped by underlying assumptions about who deserves public support, who is held responsible for social outcomes, and how state resources should be distributed. The Social Construction framework is particularly well suited to this study because it centers legislators as political actors who actively shape policy tools in ways that allocate benefits and burdens across socially and politically situated groups. In the context of college affordability, instruments such as financial aid programs, institutional appropriations, and funding formulas function as more than administrative mechanisms. They are the means through which lawmakers translate judgments about institutional worth, fiscal responsibility, and public obligation into concrete policy outcomes. Policy design therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how affordability is defined, prioritized, and put into practice within state higher education systems (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007).

At its core, the Social Construction framework rests on several key assumptions. First, public policies reflect shared social constructions of target populations, constructions that signal whether particular groups are viewed as deserving, legitimate, or politically salient (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Second, these constructions interact with political power to shape policy outcomes. Groups with greater political influence are more likely to receive visible and sustained benefits, while marginalized populations are often subject to administrative constraints,

conditional support, or symbolic recognition without lasting redistribution (Schneider et al., 2014). Third, these social constructions carry political meaning and powerful communication. They communicate how government views particular populations and, over time, shape expectations, participation, and relationships between institutions and the state (Ingram et al., 2007).

These legislators operate as policy designers within state legislatures, where their decisions are shaped by institutional factors such as committee assignments and leadership roles, as well as broader political dynamics including partisanship, budgetary pressures, and the racial politics of state governance (McLendon, 2003; McLendon et al., 2006). The system of analysis is the state legislature, and the policy arena is the state-level higher education policy domain. Legislative committees, particularly those responsible for higher education, finance, appropriations, and ways and means, serve as central sites where affordability priorities are debated and translated into policy design choices. Within this arena, the Social Construction framework allows for attention to multiple, interconnected target populations. Low-income Black students and public HBCUs are treated as distinct but closely linked objects of policy design, each shaped by different expectations and political narratives. Students are often framed in terms of individual need, responsibility, or workforce preparation, while institutions are evaluated through assumptions about efficiency, performance, and fiscal stewardship. These differing constructions influence how affordability policies are designed, including the conditions attached to funding, the visibility of benefits, and whether resources are delivered through routine mechanisms or through exceptional and corrective interventions (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schneider et al., 2014).

Research Design and Epistemological Anchoring

Following a case study methodology, this research draws on multiple forms of data. This research is bounded by members of SLBCs who could speak directly about their legislative and policy work to strengthen college affordability and broaden access for undergraduate low-income Black 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.

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). I upheld the transformative paradigm with the PDT to ensure that the analysis not only documents how policymakers design policy for undergraduate low-income Black students and public HBCUs, but also how they confront and reimagine the constraints imposed upon them. 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 examines the fiscal policy instruments that SLBCs and their constituent members use to strengthen college affordability and broaden 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. 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 is anchored in policy design theory, drawing specifically on the PDT framework. This theoretical framework offers 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 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 both the policy formulation and policy adoption stage of the policy process. This study also includes data for the legislative behavior of SBLC legislators.

The first stage of data collection involved a systematic review and collection of 11 legislative documents to map the legislative landscape shaping affordability policies for public HBCUs. Guided by Policy Design Theory, specifically the Social Construction of Target Populations framework, this stage focused on identifying how affordability policy instruments are designed and how they distribute benefits and burdens across socially and politically constructed groups (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007). 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 capture how state legislators, particularly SBLCs and their constituent members, introduced, supported, or advanced college affordability policies 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 Conferences 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 financial 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 PDT 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. By the design of policy mechanisms embedded in legislative texts, this analysis identified recurring thematic areas reflecting how legislators structured and advanced specific policy instruments to address college affordability.

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	# of bills retained	13	7	9	10	8	8	55

(First Screen)	after applying criteria							
3. Primary topical focus (Initial)	# of bills in a distinctive policy areas (IE: 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 (ie: 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 of 9 semi-structured interviews with state legislators representing multiple states across the U.S. South and Mid-Atlantic regions. Given the political status and demanding schedules of state legislators, this phase drew from methodological guidance on elite interviewing (McClure, 2021; Mikecz, 2012). 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.

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.

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

Drawing from PDT framework, the interview questions examined how lawmakers conceptualize higher education access and affordability, how they interpret the relative needs and legitimacy of different target populations, and how these understandings are translated into policy tools and legislative strategies affecting public HBCUs (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007). These questions encouraged participants to describe how they define the policy problem of affordability, how they assess the role of state government in addressing it, and how institutional constraints such as budgets, committee structures, and political opposition shape the design of affordability policies. Participants were invited to reflect on how their personal and political identities inform their legislative behavior, how they define

success for Black students and public HBCUs, and how they design policy for the purposes of racial group well-being, opportunity, and intergenerational mobility. 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 their emails were 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.

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 theoretical framework, PDT.

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 PDT, I coded legislative documents for two primary analytic constructs: policy design logics and constructions of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007). Coding for policy design logics captured how legislators framed affordability and opportunity, the assumptions underlying those frames, and the policy tools and mechanisms proposed to address affordability challenges. Coding for target population constructions focused on how students and institutions, particularly public HBCUs were portrayed in legislative texts, including implicit judgments about deservingness, responsibility, and institutional priority. Themes emerging from this analysis included revenue design as a tool for durability, reflecting how SLBCs and their constituent members tied policy tools to specific revenue streams, so they were viewed as more stable and politically defensible than those dependent on annual appropriations alone. Another theme which emerged was affordability beyond tuition, reflecting an understanding that tuition alone does not determine whether students can remain enrolled and complete degrees at public HBCUs. This underscores the notion that affordability should be defined expansively to include housing, basic needs, and completion support. It also demonstrates a contextual understanding of the socio-economic profile of the students who often attend public HBCUs and the history of these institutions. Throughout this stage, I maintained reflexive memos to document 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 et al., 2019).

The second stage of analysis focused on the semi-structured interview documents. All interview documents were transcribed verbatim and imported into Dedoose for organization and coding. Analysis followed a hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The deductive component drew from PDT. Guided by PDT, I examined how legislators conceptualized higher education access and affordability, how they defined and prioritized different target populations, and how these understandings informed the design and justification of policy tools affecting public HBCUs (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007). Deductive codes captured how participants articulated assumptions about deservingness, responsibility, and institutional value, as well as how budgetary constraints, committee roles, and political context shaped policy design choices. Particular attention was given to how lawmakers described the objectives of affordability policy, the populations targeted by specific instruments, and the practical considerations shaping policy design under institutional and political constraints. This approach allowed for systematic identification of patterns in policy instrument use across cases while remaining attentive to variation in legislative contexts. Inductive analysis complemented this theory-driven coding by allowing themes to emerge from the data through iterative cycles of coding, memoing, and cross-case comparison. Emergent themes included legislative strategy and constraint, including tradeoffs among competing budget priorities, committee and procedural gatekeeping, partisan dynamics, and limitations on available resources. These codes were refined through iterative coding cycles and cross-case comparison to identify commonalities and differences across states. Dedoose’s co-occurrence analysis tools supported this process by enabling code co-occurrence tracking and visualization, which facilitated the examination of patterns across states and the identification of convergence and divergence in how legislators constructed affordability and designed policy responses.

Following Yin's (2018) guidance on pattern matching, I compared emergent themes across sites with the theoretical expectations derived from PDT. For example, PDT predicts that public officials will allocate policy benefits to populations who have positive social constructions. In this way, legislators may heighten attention to affordability and institutional capacity. Comparing across sites will reveal how SLBC members translated shared commitments to college affordability into specific fiscal policy design choices that differentially targeted low-income Black students and public HBCUs under prevailing political and institutional constraints. 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 my dissertation advisor 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).

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.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has several limitations worth noting. First, legislative documents represent the formal record of legislative action but cannot capture informal negotiations, political dynamics, or coalition activities that occur outside public hearings or official transcripts (Bowen, 2009). To account for this, this study included semi-structured interviews with legislators. This dual-source approach allowed for triangulation while remaining feasible within the time and resource constraints of a dissertation study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Second, elite interviews depend on voluntary participation and accessibility of legislators, which may lead to self-selection bias (Mikecz, 2012). Those willing to participate were often legislators more publicly engaged in higher education issues, potentially overrepresenting perspectives aligned with HBCU advocacy or affordability reform. To mitigate these limitations, this study was intentionally bounded to ensure conceptual and methodological focus. The analysis centers on state legislators who are members of State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBCs) serving in states with at least one public HBCU. Within these sites, data collection focused on legislators who held membership on committees directly linked to higher education, appropriations, or finance. This scope aligns with the study's purpose of exploring how legislators representing Black constituencies shape college affordability policies affecting public HBCUs.

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.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the fiscal policy instruments that SLBCs and their constituent members use to strengthen college affordability and broaden access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. This study is situated in six states including Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. This study is bounded by members of SLBCs 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. Which fiscal policy instruments do state lawmakers, particularly State Legislative Black Caucuses (SLBC) and their constituent members, use to strengthen college affordability policies 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 question. In what follows, this study presents 2 findings:

1. Affordability as a Systemic, Not Singular, Policy Challenge
2. Policy Design as Both Substantive Intervention and Political Strategy

Approaches to College Affordability Through State Fiscal Policy

SLBC legislators used policy instruments in a strategic manner and often tailored these policy tools to the political structures within their states. Document analysis revealed substantial variation in the deployment and design of policy instruments, including appropriations bills, scholarship expansion proposals, tuition waivers, emergency aid programs, and committee-based amendments related to affordability. These instruments served as mechanisms through which SLBC members sought to shift conditions for students attending public HBCUs and to protect institutional viability. The analysis demonstrated that legislators leveraged policy instruments differently depending on institutional pathways and partisan dynamics. Most notably, legislation in Delaware that was focused on college affordability or student support was introduced and became law. This exemplified what becomes possible when administrative and political conditions align. By contrast, in states such as Pennsylvania and South Carolina legislation focused on college affordability or student supported was introduced but did not become law. This policy introduction served both substantive and symbolic purposes. Bills were often filed with the expectation of resistance but were used to insert issues into the legislative record, shape public conversations, and build iterative support. In these cases, the instrument was the action, and visibility was the victory. Interview participants described adapting policy tools based on context.

Affordability as a Systemic, Not Singular, Policy Challenge

SLBC members described using a set of recurring fiscal policy instruments to address college affordability at public HBCUs. Across interviews, legislators emphasized that affordability concerns required multiple points of intervention, combining direct student support with broader investments in institutional capacity. These instruments were discussed as

deliberate legislative tools, shaped by both policy priorities and the fiscal constraints of state higher education systems. One prominent instrument involved targeted student financial aid and completion-focused funding. Legislators referenced bills designed to move resources directly to students with the explicit goal of supporting degree completion. According to a **Georgia State Representative on the Higher Education committee**, these efforts were described as attempts to reduce financial barriers that prevent students from persisting and completing degrees, particularly at institutions serving high proportions of low-income students. She shared,

So, we actually had a bill two years ago that is a college completion bill where we put money in, and it's a grant, and it's not based on need. It's just based on the fact that you are 80% finish your four-year degree, and you need extra money to finish. And so, we actually funded that college completion grant, we funded it with more money this year, and our HBCUs public and private have been the recipient of that. Their students have been the recipient.

Several SLBC Members noted the use of state lottery revenues to fund scholarship programs. These were presented as politically salient tools that allowed legislators to expand student aid without relying exclusively on general appropriations. According to a **South Carolina State Representative on the Education and Public Works committee**,

All of those scholarships came out of the out of the lottery money. All those, all that, all those scholarships. Matter of fact, those scholarships were set up after we passed the lottery bill. The Republicans opposed it. But then when it, when it, when it won, they start navigating so well, we can't take it straight to public education. We're gonna have we're gonna do some other things, and that's where these scholarships came, that money

was supposed to go directly to public education, particularly low-income school, to ready them for these scholarships.

In addition to broad student aid, participants highlighted categorical funding aimed at high-need student populations. According to a **Delaware State Representative on the Higher Education committee**, these initiatives were framed as necessary complements to traditional affordability policies, reflecting recognition that college costs extend beyond tuition and fees. Legislators discussed gaps in support for students entering college from foster care systems and emphasized the need for targeted interventions to address those gaps. She explained,

There were some identified gaps in resources, in particular for students who were entering college, HBCUs, particularly Delaware State University, from foster care. Like we talk a lot about first gen, etc., and for almost all foster care kids their first gen, because they don't have family to know. But, but more than that, and down, down to barriers, like when students go home for break, you know, for the semester break, for summer break, even for holidays, formally fosters care children don't have a place to go to, right? And so again, this became a piece of legislation in Delaware. I think it was House Bill 123. But essentially, it created additional funding and support for foster care youth, in particular at all universities, but certainly we heard this specifically from HBCUs to provide additional funding streams to support those students in the times when campus is down, even you know, as specific as when you come into campus.

Similar attention was given to students experiencing housing insecurity, with participants describing legislation intended to ensure that unhoused students could access stable housing while enrolled. As stated by a **Pennsylvania State Representative on the Education committee**,

You know, one of my priorities, for example, and this is sort of morally driven, has been about the Commonwealth 50,000 unhoused students. I have another bill that I worked with, APSCUF the union that I just mentioned, to make sure that adjunct faculty have access to public service loan forgiveness, and that's a bill that sort of comes more from that.

Policy Design as Both Substantive Intervention and Political Strategy

Workforce-aligned funding initiatives represented another category of fiscal instruments discussed by participants. SLBC members described tying higher education investments to broader state workforce goals, including efforts to diversify the workforce in alignment with priorities articulated by governors' offices. According to a **North Carolina State Representative on the finance committee**, funding for higher education particularly at public HBCUs was often justified as a means of supporting economic development and meeting labor market demands. This framing shaped how legislators advocated for education funding within broader state policy agendas. According to a **North Carolina State Representative on the finance committee**,

You know why we need to invest because, again, it comes back to economic that's the bottom line, that if we start to lose our HBCU and that that pool of diverse workers start to dry up, it's going to hurt us in terms of businesses that want to come to our state. And at the strongest point in our state under a Democratic governor, who, who, who had forethought out to build out an RTP, the Research Triangle Park. Who had the forethought to invest heavily in K 12 and strengthen our public K 12 educational system. Who had the forethought to strengthen and shore up our community colleges, recognizing that not

everybody was going to go to a four-year institution who had the fourth out to invest in our HBCU, because he understood that a strong workforce, included a diverse workforce, is when we had our greatest growth.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of institutional capacity and capital investments as part of their affordability strategies. As stated by a **Florida State Senator on the Education Postsecondary committee**, the SLBC used appropriations to support faculty and staff, as well as funds allocated to complete unfinished campus buildings and infrastructure projects. These investments were described as essential to maintaining institutional stability and ensuring that campuses could effectively serve students. While not directed to students directly, such funding was framed as integral to affordability by strengthening the institutions on which students rely. He explained,

Last year, the Black Caucus in Florida, we advocated for record funding for Florida A&M and there was about \$145 million that FAMU got last year. That was something that we advocated for due to a couple of different reasons. One of the reasons was because FAMU wanted to build the morale of the faculty and staff on their campus. So that money was used for that. Some other monies were used for the institution to be able to finish some of the buildings they had started, which were match dollars that FAMU put forth, and the state of Florida came in to help them with the other half from a budgetary standpoint. We were able to get those funds through conversations with leadership in both chambers, the Governor's office, and just honestly talking with Board of Trustees members. We never held a budget hearing per se outside of us just having our caucus meetings.

Summary of Findings

While the higher education literature has paid less attention to how lawmakers strengthen college affordability for public HBCUs. The findings here demonstrate that SLBC members deploy fiscal policy instruments as part of a broader, multi-pronged approach to affordability at public HBCUs. SLBC members articulated a portfolio of fiscal tools that span direct student aid, targeted support for high-need populations, dedicated revenue streams, workforce-aligned investments, and institutional capacity funding. This pattern underscores an understanding of affordability as a systemic challenge shaped by both student circumstances and institutional conditions, rather than a narrow function of tuition pricing alone. Importantly, this analysis shifts attention from policy outcomes to policy choice, highlighting how instrument selection reflects lawmakers' interpretations of need, feasibility, and responsibility within racially contested state policy environments.

Discussion

This study examines the fiscal policy instruments that SLBCs and their constituent members use to strengthen college affordability and broaden access for undergraduate low-income Black students attending public HBCUs. Research on affordability policy has largely centered on the measurable effects of state funding decisions, tuition policy, and financial aid instruments on institutional or student outcomes (Delaney & Doyle, 2011; Li, 2018; Tandberg & Griffith, 2013). Much less attention has been directed toward the political processes and legislative behaviors that shape how such policies come into being (McLendon, 2003, 2014). As McLendon (2003) argues, the field has often treated policymaking as an administrative process rather than a contested political negotiation. This gap is evident in research concerning public HBCUs, where scholars have extensively documented persistent underfunding and systemic

marginalization (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Gasman & Arroyo, 2014; Hawkins, 2021). Yet little empirical work has explored how policymakers attempt to correct structural disparities through legislative and political strategy. The findings from this study fill this gap by demonstrating how SLBC members employ policy tools to address affordability as a systemic challenge shaped by both student circumstances and institutional conditions

The findings expand existing literature by illustrating how state-level higher-education policymaking is shaped by the interplay of race, power, and institutional politics. Much of the current scholarship conceptualizes affordability policy through frameworks which often emphasize budget formulas or market incentives (Delaney & Doyle, 2011; Doyle, 2012), which risks obscuring the political labor required to construct policy pathways for institutions such as public HBCUs. The findings challenge the assumption that affordability policies unfold primarily through neutral budgeting, showing instead that policymaking for public HBCUs is deeply contested and often depends on strategic reframing of affordability within dominant political languages such as workforce development and economic competitiveness. Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that majority parties exert disproportionate negative agenda control, restricting minority legislators' ability to bring policy proposals to a vote. This dynamic was evident across the study states, yet SLBCs and their constituent members used policy instruments both instrumentally and symbolically to circumvent those constraints. By repeatedly introducing bills, and building bipartisan co-sponsorships, they used legislative process as a venue for incremental change rather than solely a vehicle for policy passage. This expands the conceptualization of policy instruments beyond their functional role. In this way, policy instruments are also formal vehicles to mobilize narratives, institutional recognition, and agenda preservation. This reframes evaluation of policy influence such as success cannot be understood

only through enacted laws but also through sustained political presence and issue visibility, echoing Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's (1993) assertion that policy change is often gradual and coalition-driven.

Guided by policy design theory, this study contributes to scholarship on public policy and higher education by shifting attention from the effects of affordability policies to the design choices through which those policies are constructed. Policy design theory emphasizes that public policies are not neutral responses to social problems but are instead composed of instruments whose structure reflects political priorities, constraints, and judgments about responsibility (Hood, 1986; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Howlett, 2011). While this framework has been widely applied in areas such as social welfare, environmental regulation, and governance reform, it has been used less frequently to examine state higher education policy, where affordability is often treated as a technical or administrative challenge rather than a site of political design. This study extends policy design theory into the domain of state higher education affordability for public HBCUs by centering legislators as active policy designers. SLBC members described affordability policy as emerging through deliberate choices about student aid, targeted supports, dedicated revenue streams, workforce-aligned investments, and institutional capacity funding. These choices reflect what policy design scholars describe as an instrument mix or policy portfolio, in which multiple tools are layered to address different dimensions of a policy problem (Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Howlett, 2018).

These findings challenge narrower approaches in the higher education literature that isolate individual policies and instead highlight affordability as a designed, multi-dimensional policy outcome. The study further contributes to policy design theory by illustrating how design choices are shaped by political and institutional constraints within racially contested state

environments. Legislators' accounts reveal that instrument selection is influenced by budgetary limits, intergovernmental dynamics, and ideological conflict, including heightened scrutiny of policies associated with racial equity and public investment in HBCUs. These dynamics underscore policy design theory's emphasis on context, demonstrating that design decisions are embedded in broader struggles over legitimacy, feasibility, and durability (Lascombes & Le Galès, 2007; Howlett, 2011). In this sense, the study shows how affordability policy for public HBCUs is structured through politically situated design decisions rather than purely technical calculations.

These findings raise relevant questions for higher-education research. Prior scholarship has documented the growing influence of states in shaping higher education finance and accountability (McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006; Tandberg, 2013), yet legislators are frequently portrayed as reacting to fiscal pressures or political demands rather than engaging in deliberate design work. The findings here suggest that legislators play a more central role in assembling and calibrating fiscal policy instruments than is often acknowledged, raising important questions about how legislative design choices influence the structure and priorities of state higher education systems. For scholars of HBCUs and institutional stratification, the study raises critical questions about how public policy design reinforces or mitigates long-standing inequalities across institutions. Research has consistently shown that public HBCUs operate with fewer financial resources while serving students with greater needs (Allen et al., 2007; Boland, 2020). This study complements that work by examining how legislators design fiscal instruments that either address or reproduce these disparities. By focusing on policy design rather than funding levels alone, the analysis highlights how state decisions about targeting, revenue

sources, and institutional investment shape the fiscal position of HBCUs within stratified systems of higher education.

The findings further engage higher education finance and higher education policy design research by emphasizing the importance of instrument mixes and revenue design. Rather than relying solely on general appropriations, legislators described combining dedicated revenue streams, categorical funding, and workforce-aligned investments to support affordability. This approach resonates with scholarship on the political and fiscal dynamics of state higher education finance (Zumeta et al., 2012), while adding a design-oriented account of how lawmakers navigate constraints and seek to stabilize funding over time. In this sense, the study raises broader questions about how revenue structures and policy portfolios influence the durability and distribution of higher education resources.

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several important implications for higher education research, HBCU coalitions and advocacy partners, and state legislators committed to expanding college affordability and strengthening public HBCUs. The recommendations below build directly from the evidence presented in this study and respond to the gaps identified in the scholarly literature.

For higher education researchers, this study suggests the necessity of adopting a policy design perspective that centers legislators as active designers of affordability policy rather than treating state policy as a fixed context or downstream constraint. Much of the existing literature evaluates the effects of individual policies such as grant aid, tuition regulation, or accountability systems without examining how those policies are assembled, justified, and adapted through legislative decision-making (Heller, 2001; Perna & Finney, 2014). A design-oriented approach

encourages scholars to ask not only whether affordability policies succeed, but how lawmakers construct policy portfolios, distribute benefits and burdens, and navigate political constraints in the process of governing higher education systems (Howlett, 2011; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). By incorporating qualitative analysis of legislative reasoning and instrument choice, higher education research can better capture the political logic underlying affordability policy and produce more nuanced accounts of how access, institutional capacity, and resource inequality are shaped at the state level. This shift would strengthen the field's ability to explain variation across states and institutions while aligning higher education scholarship more closely with broader theories of public policymaking and governance.

For HBCU stakeholders, coalitions, and partner organizations, the findings underscore the importance of sustained, coordinated engagement with state policymakers that is attentive to how affordability policy is designed and maintained over time. Rather than relying on episodic advocacy tied to moments of crisis, stakeholders should approach policy engagement as an ongoing process that shapes how legislators understand institutional needs, fiscal priorities, and the legitimacy of targeted investment in public HBCUs. This study demonstrates that legislators' design choices are influenced not only by budgetary conditions, but by repeated exposure to consistent narratives about institutional mission, capacity constraints, and the broader public value of HBCUs. The findings also suggest that advocacy strategies should focus on influencing the durability and visibility of policy design rather than solely pursuing immediate legislative wins. As Hawkins (2021) argues, sustained advocacy is critical for institutions that operate in politically constrained environments. This study shows that repeated bill filings, symbolic appropriations, and incremental policy proposals can function as design tools that preserve institutional visibility and shape future funding trajectories. HBCU stakeholders can amplify

these effects by investing in capacity to monitor legislative activity, prepare testimony for committee hearings, and engage consistently with policymakers across budget cycles. According to SHEEO (2026), higher education's role in economic mobility and workforce development is increasingly central to public policy agendas. Additionally, these policies frame top postsecondary education as essential to long-term economic opportunity for low-income students. HBCU stakeholders should frame affordability in ways that connect student access and institutional capacity to broader state priorities, such as economic mobility, workforce development, and demographic sustainability. Positioning HBCU affordability within these broader policy narratives can expand coalition possibilities and increase receptivity among legislators who may not be traditional allies. In contested policy environments where transformative change is unlikely in the short term, such design-oriented advocacy strategies can enhance political opportunity structures and improve the prospects for incremental but durable gains.

For state legislators working on HBCU-related issues, the findings illustrate concrete pathways for strengthening affordability initiatives through coalition coordination and strategic use of policy instruments. Cox and McCubbins (2005) demonstrate that minority-party legislators face substantial barriers to agenda access due to negative agenda control. This study reveals how SLBC legislators navigate these constraints by aligning with bipartisan allies, leveraging external stakeholders to shift committee dynamics, and using symbolic legislative action to maintain visibility for under-resourced institutions. Legislators should continue to deploy a range of policy instruments, including appropriations bills, targeted scholarship programs, emergency support mechanisms, and tuition regulation proposals, understanding that impact may be cumulative rather than immediate. As repeated bill filings in states such as South

Carolina and Pennsylvania demonstrate, policy work is iterative, and symbolic failure can lay the groundwork for substantive change by normalizing HBCU-centered policy discourse. Legislators should also consider training and mentorship structures within SLBCs and their constituent members to support institutional knowledge transfer, preserving strategies that may otherwise be lost due to turnover or political volatility. Finally, the findings underscore the necessity of explicit racial equity framing even when strategic reframing is required for coalition purposes; avoiding race-based language can inadvertently reinforce invisibility, whereas carefully constructed narrative framing can both build coalition viability and protect the historical truth of public HBCU advocacy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that efforts to expand college affordability for low-income Black students at public HBCUs are shaped by the political realities and design work undertaken by state legislators operating within constrained institutional environments. SLBCs and their constituent members explained how affordability policy is constructed through deliberate combinations of fiscal instruments, calibrated to address student needs, institutional capacity, and political feasibility simultaneously. Through integrating the Policy Design framework, this study extends theoretical understanding of how legislators function as active designers of higher education policy, translating priorities and constraints into concrete tools that distribute benefits and burdens across students and institutions. In this sense, policy design choices become a central site through which broader struggles over public investment, representation, and the role of Black-serving institutions in state higher education systems are negotiated.

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