



THE HBCU BLUEPRINT

**A STRATEGIC GUIDE TO HBCUs
TRANSFORMING AND THRIVING**

**HERMAN J. FELTON
ELFRED ANTHONY PINKARD
HAKIM J. LUCAS**

**MELVA K. WALLACE
RODERICK L. SMOTHERS
TASHIA L. BRADLEY**

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*To all that love, labor and live for HBCUs.
On behalf of our ancestors and the unborn – we salute
the gladiator in you.*

- The Authors

Abstract

This manuscript explores HBCUs as vital institutions of heritage, innovation, and leadership. The work presents thematic chapters with visual metaphors, arguing that HBCUs are not just part of higher education but serve as hubs of resilience, creativity, and cultural preservation. The text places HBCUs in their historical role as nation-builders, focusing on their mission to prepare African Americans for civic engagement, cultural affirmation, and leadership while also tackling current issues like accreditation, funding disparities, enrollment competition, and digital transformation.

The manuscript redefines typical deficit narratives by presenting HBCUs as bold centers of excellence with distinct advantages: the blending of racial, intellectual, and leadership identity development; their deep ties to Black communities; and their similarity to the Black church as places of cultural significance. Visual themes like “We Can’t Let Them Out-Black Us” and “It’s not the rising costs—it’s the lack of imagination” serve as strategic guides, emphasizing the importance of creative financial models, collaborative partnerships, faculty growth, digital storytelling, and alumni accountability. The concluding chapters emphasize self-sufficiency via the H.E.L.F. framework—Heritage, Excellence, Leadership, and Future—encouraging HBCUs to focus on internal accountability, foster innovation ecosystems, and embrace prophetic leadership that challenges authority.

This manuscript ultimately asserts that HBCUs should not wait for external approval to lead; instead, they must embrace their identity, cultural sovereignty, and visionary governance with confidence. By embracing these principles, HBCUs will remain vital forces for equity, culture, and democratic renewal in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); cultural heritage; innovation ecosystems; Black church; sacred institutions; leadership pipeline; self-sufficiency; shared governance; prophetic leadership; equity and diversity; higher education transformation; Heritage Excellence Leadership Future (H.E.L.F.)

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Foreword

On the heels of the tenth anniversary of the Higher Education Leadership Foundation (H.E.L.F.), our community of scholars and practitioners felt an undeniable calling—to capture the spirit, lessons, and visionary insights that have emerged from a decade of leadership convenings, courageous dialogue, and transformative action across the HBCU sector. *The HBCU Blueprint: A Strategic Guide to Transformation and Thriving* was born from that conviction. It is both a celebration of how far we have come and a roadmap for how boldly we must now move forward.

This volume presents a timely and transformative vision for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It invites readers to see HBCUs not merely as institutions within the landscape of higher education, but as vibrant engines of heritage, innovation, leadership, and cultural resilience. It challenges us to look beyond survival toward strategic thriving—to design futures anchored in our historic mission yet alive with contemporary imagination.

The Blueprint foregrounds the historical role of HBCUs as nation-builders—preparing generations of Black Americans for civic engagement, cultural affirmation, and principled leadership—while boldly addressing the modern realities of accreditation pressures, funding inequities, enrollment challenges, and digital transformation. Yet these are not presented as insurmountable barriers, but as fertile ground for courageous reimagining. Here, HBCUs are reframed not as institutions in deficit but as bold

centers of excellence—places where racial identity, intellectual rigor, and leadership development converge to create distinctive strengths. Opportunities and capacity collide to create magic.

Throughout the work, visual metaphors and compelling themes—such as “*Created by Us, For Us*” and “It’s not the rising costs—it’s the lack of imagination”—serve as anchors for strategy and reflection. They provoke us to rethink institutional design, urging investment in creative financial models, faculty innovation, robust partnerships, and digital storytelling that carries our narratives into the next century. The emphasis on alumni accountability, collaborative ecosystems, and transformative governance reframes institutional advancement as an act of community restoration and renewal.

At the heart of this work lies the H.E.L.F. framework—**Heritage, Excellence, Leadership, and Future**—a philosophy that transcends theory to become a living blueprint for institutional self-sufficiency and enduring relevance. The concluding chapters call HBCUs to lead with internal accountability, cultivate innovation ecosystems, and embrace prophetic leadership that questions convention while remaining rooted in community and faith. The message is clear: HBCUs do not need external validation to lead. We must embody our identity, assert our cultural sovereignty, and govern with visionary confidence.

As a practitioner, leader, and lifelong student of organizational renewal, I am deeply moved by the courage and clarity of this work. *The HBCU Blueprint* offers not simply a collection of essays, but a declaration—a set of actionable imperatives that can accelerate meaningful transformation across campuses, communities,

and the broader fabric of American democracy. It calls trustees, faculty, students, alumni, funders, and policymakers alike to invest in the intrinsic strengths of HBCUs: our heritage, our excellence, our leadership, and our limitless future.

May this book ignite imagination, embolden collaboration, and fortify our collective resolve. And may every reader find within these pages a reminder that the story of HBCUs is not merely about preservation—it is about possibility. When we lead with vision and act with conviction, we do not simply survive history; we shape it.

Introduction: The blueprint begins here

This book was born not in a boardroom, but in a room full of belief. On the walls were bold illustrations—visions sketched in real time as presidents, trustees, executive leaders, faculty and students at historically Black college and universities (HBCU) reimagined the next century of higher education. For 72 hours, 80 of the most innovative, scholar practitioners in the HBCU space were convened by the Higher Education Leadership Foundation (HELFF) as part of the Innovation, Ideation and Collaboration Conference to wrestle with the past, present and future of the U.S.'s most treasured institution, HBCUs. This was a sacred work documented in marker and motion. Every phrase captured from “Caring is not a sin,” to “Education is the mission, not just the degree”—was evidence of a people determined not only to ensure the survival of HBCUs but their thriving.

As HBCU leaders, we have witnessed firsthand the grit, the faith, and the brilliance that have sustained our institutions for generations. We have also experienced the headwinds—political shifts, inequitable funding models, the constant need to prove our worth

in spaces that should already recognize it. The Blueprint you hold in your hands is more than a strategy guide. It is a declaration that HBCUs are not broken. We are not behind. We are not outdated. We are leaders in higher education innovation and are at the forefront of demonstrating what it requires to educate a diverse world with a purpose for equity and inclusion—and we are essential.

Drawing on research, lived experience, and the wisdom exchanged in innovation pods and visual facilitation sessions, this book distills what emerged: a set of strategies, models, and guiding principles for transformation. We translate conversations into actionable frameworks—ethical research practices rooted in care, governance driven by values, sustainable business models, and partnerships built on mutual benefit. We highlight the leadership profile needed for a new era of the HBCU presidency and affirm identity as a competitive advantage.

This book honors the resilience that HBCUs have shown for more than a century. It reflects our ability to adapt to shifting political landscapes, overcome persistent systemic oppression that has created inequitable resourcing and underfunding, and still graduate leaders, innovators, and advocates who champion the causes of the disenfranchised and underserved in communities and industries. Every chapter embraces these historical facts, which have motivated us to act boldly in the present, forging our advocacy and agency.

HBCUs need this book because the stakes have never been higher. In an era of rapid change—technological disruption, economic uncertainty, shifting demographics—HBCUs must navigate challenges that threaten not only our sustainability but our

very mission. Trustees, presidents, administrators, faculty, staff, alumni, and supporters need proven strategies to ensure these institutions continue to thrive. This is not simply about preserving tradition; it is about advancing equity, fostering innovation, and strengthening our capacity to serve as community anchors and engines of opportunity.

We wrote this book not as observers, but as people who feel the weight of these decisions every day. We know what it means to look into the eyes of students whose futures depend on the choices we make. We know the urgency of balancing a budget without sacrificing the soul of an institution. And we know that our story is one of possibility, not pity.

Woven throughout these chapters are reminders of what makes HBCUs sacred: our faith, our students, our legacy, and our responsibility to do for ourselves what history often tried to deny us. This is not simply an academic exercise—it is a moral imperative.

How to read this book

The Blueprint is both a roadmap and a tool chest. You can read it cover to cover to follow a sequential arc—from understanding the heart of HBCUs to implementing structural change—or you can move directly to the chapter most relevant to your current challenge.

If you are a board member or trustee, pay close attention to Chapters 2, 3, and 9, where governance, vision alignment, and self-sufficiency are addressed in depth.

If you are a president or senior leader, Chapters 1, 6, and 7 will help you navigate the human and relational dimensions of

leadership, from ethical research to sacred collaborations to leading with empathy.

If you are a faculty member or researcher, Chapter 1 offers a reimagined research ethic that honors community, while Chapters 4 and 5 connect academic work to economic and innovation ecosystems.

If you are a student or alumni leader, Chapters 8 and 9 will help you claim identity as an asset and see the bigger picture of institutional legacy and future impact.

We encourage readers to treat each chapter as both insight and invitation. At the close of each section, you will find prompts and reflective questions designed to spark dialogue within your institution. These are opportunities to adapt the ideas to your own context—because while the strategies are grounded in shared experience, the application must be local, intentional, and bold.

Throughout the book, you will also encounter case examples, historical snapshots, and leadership profiles that illustrate key points. These are meant to inspire and challenge, showing how others have navigated similar terrain and what lessons can be drawn.

This is not a book to be read passively. It is a book to be discussed in boardrooms, faculty meetings, student unions, and alumni gatherings. Mark it up. Debate it. Share it. Use it to imagine what has not yet been built, and to strengthen what already stands.

Think of this book as a living document—something that evolves with you and your institution. As you implement ideas and strategies, return to these pages. Revisit the questions. Reassess your

progress. The Blueprint is meant to accompany you on a journey, not just sit on your shelf. Let this be your starting point. Your framework. Your guide.

Welcome to *The Blueprint*. Step into these pages with the resolve to act, the courage to challenge the status quo, and the faith to build what does not yet exist. This is not just a book—it is an invitation to lead, to innovate, and to leave an indelible mark on the future of HBCUs and the generations they will serve.

1

Caring is a strategy: Ethical research and cultural integrity

Caring about the people you research is not a sin.

-Dr. Ivory Toldson

These words form the lens through which this chapter invites you to see the work of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In a higher education culture that often prizes distance over connection, we declare that care is not a weakness to be managed, but a strength to be harnessed. At HBCUs, caring is not an afterthought—it is the strategic foundation for how we teach, lead, and generate knowledge. It demands that our research honor the dignity of our communities, that our methods reflect their realities, and that our scholarship is measured not only by citations but by its power to heal, inform, and transform. This is where the blueprint begins: with the conviction that scholarship without care is incomplete, and that humanity belongs at the center of academic rigor.

Make no mistake—what follows is not an abstract ideal, but a disruptive force aimed at reshaping the way scholarship is valued and practiced. In a landscape where detached observation

is often rewarded over human connection, our insistence on care challenges the metrics, hierarchies, and traditions that have long dominated academia. It asserts that the humanity of our participants is as critical as the validity of our results, and that true success lies not only in publication impact factors but in the tangible, lasting good our research brings to the communities whose stories we seek to understand.

In integrating this ethic of care, we draw from a broad base of scholarship and practice. Michael Quinn Patton's concept of "empathetic neutrality" reminds us that it is possible to remain impartial in our analysis while making our concern for participants' welfare explicit, countering the myth that objectivity requires emotional detachment.¹ Insider-researcher perspectives further demonstrate that deep community connection can enrich interpretation and contextual understanding, even as researchers remain vigilant against bias.² These insights reinforce our assertion that caring is not bias—it is strategy, and it can be practiced with rigor.

The STEM Caring Intelligence Framework offers a clear example of how caring can be operationalized as strategy, identifying five dimensions—STEM caring, academic caring, administrative caring, leadership caring, and champion-driven caring—that translate values into institutional levers.³ It is a powerful framework to consider paired with Atherton et al.'s advocacy for asset-based approaches to education, which emphasizes on recognizing and leveraging the strengths students bring to their learning environments rather than focusing on perceived deficits.⁴ We can also draw from Whitlow and Paulus's call to democratize access to technology and integrate equitable, inclusive practices into

STEM education.⁵ Together, these perspectives show that caring manifests not only in interpersonal relationships, but also in institutional policy, curriculum design, and infrastructure development. By embedding these perspectives in HBCU research cultures, we aim to dismantle deficit narratives, expand epistemological canons, and codify care as a driver of innovation and equity.

Before delving into the substance of this chapter, it is necessary to ground the reader in the historical and moral reality that undergirds our work. For generations, HBCUs have been more than academic institutions; they have been guardians of communities, incubators of leadership, and safe harbors for inquiry that affirms rather than exploits.⁶ This legacy demands a research posture that treats every study as an act of service and stewardship. Caring is not an optional sentiment—it is the lens through which we choose topics, frame questions, design methods, and interpret findings.

In this chapter, we begin with a clear conviction: research at HBCUs is never a sterile exercise in gathering data. It is a living practice grounded in relationship, dignity, and mutual respect. The visual theme of “Caring about the people you research is not a sin” allows our minds to capture our core belief that empathy and ethical responsibility are not obstacles to scholarship—they are essential strengths that shape our research culture and set our mission apart.

Why we begin with care

We write as administrative leaders charged with stewarding research cultures across our HBCUs. We oversee budgets and

boards, faculty evaluations and accreditation reviews, crisis response and long-horizon strategy. From that vantage point, we are clear: caring is not sentimentalism; it is institutional design. At HBCUs, research has never been merely about discovery. It has been about dignity—of students, families, faculty, alumni, and the communities that trusted us long before anyone else would. To study Black life without love is to distort it. To extract knowledge without reciprocity is to miss the point.

The dominant academic script often treats objectivity as the highest virtue and emotion as a contaminant. That script produces distance where relationship is needed and turns living communities into datasets to be mined. We reject the false choice between rigor and empathy. Our research can be both exacting and humane, both methodologically sound and deeply accountable to the people whose lives it represents. This chapter advances a framework for HBCU inquiry that centers care, cultural integrity, and community benefit as strategic assets—drivers of innovation, magnets for investment, and foundations for long-term institutional thriving.

Drawing from the STEM Caring Intelligence Framework, we see care as multidimensional: STEM caring that ensures socio-cultural responsiveness in research, academic caring that nurtures ethical conduct in programs, administrative caring that fosters transparency and collegiality, leadership caring that embodies authenticity and fairness, and champion-driven caring that advocates for and inspires the next generation.⁷ These dimensions are not abstract ideals; they are operational levers that directly shape how our institutions produce, validate, and disseminate knowledge.

For example, academic caring is evident when faculty integrate culturally relevant pedagogy into their research design, ensuring that students' identities are affirmed while pursuing rigorous inquiry.⁸ Administrative caring might mean revising IRB protocols to include cultural anchoring questions, so that potential harms are evaluated not just in biomedical terms but in relation to community norms and histories.⁹ Leadership caring is visible when presidents and provosts model participatory engagement—attending community meetings about research topics, co-authoring with local stakeholders, and adjusting project scopes based on feedback from those most affected.¹⁰

These dimensions become more tangible when paired with concrete scenarios. Imagine an engineering department redesigning its capstone projects to partner with local municipalities, addressing infrastructure issues that residents have identified as priorities. This is STEM caring and academic caring in action—students apply technical skills to real-world challenges while respecting community input. Or picture an administrative team revising grant application processes so that proposals demonstrating deep community engagement receive equal or greater weighting than those promising high publication output. That is administrative caring influencing institutional priorities.

Atherton, Hines, Clarida, and Graham (2019) remind us that an asset-based approach is critical: shifting from deficit narratives to recognition of the strengths, gifts, and talents that students and communities bring.¹¹ This perspective demands that we interrogate our methodologies: are we coding for resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness as rigorously as we code for barriers and deficits? Are we engaging community partners not just as

informants but as co-analysts and co-interpreters? Asset-based education reframes the researcher's task from diagnosing problems to amplifying capacities. For instance, a public health study might highlight existing grassroots health initiatives as models to expand, rather than focusing solely on gaps in care.

Whitlow and Paulus (2025) expand this lens into the realm of technology and equity, urging HBCUs to democratize access to advanced technologies and to lead in ethical AI development and policy advocacy.¹² Caring here means designing programs in quantum computing or AI that are accessible to first-generation college students; it means leveraging Lean Six Sigma methodologies to mitigate unintended effects of technology adoption; it means pushing for equitable distribution of federal research dollars.¹³ For example, an HBCU-led AI ethics lab could partner with local schools to develop algorithms that support, rather than replace, teacher judgment—reducing bias while enhancing educational outcomes.

Nurturing as a core value is woven through all these domains. Hendrickson and Askew (2022) note that faculty and administrators who provide individualized mentoring and support cultivate a sense of belonging that is itself a form of ethical practice.¹⁴ When students feel seen and supported, they are more likely to engage in research that is courageous, community-centered, and ethically sound. Administrative leaders can scale this nurturing by embedding mentorship into promotion criteria, funding community-engaged scholarship, and recognizing faculty who bridge academic excellence with cultural stewardship. Consider a faculty mentorship program where senior researchers guide

junior faculty in integrating community voices into research design—building both skill and institutional memory.

Pluralistic multiculturalism, as advocated by Atherton et al. (2019), deepens our understanding of care by pushing beyond token inclusion of cultural content.¹⁵ It challenges us to design research and curricula that examine multiple cultural frameworks, dismantle stereotypes, and promote genuine respect. For administrators, this means ensuring faculty development in intercultural competency, auditing syllabi for breadth of perspective, and supporting research that draws from a diverse array of epistemologies. A concrete example could be a cross-disciplinary seminar series bringing together historians, sociologists, and engineers to examine how cultural context shapes problem-solving in their fields.

Addressing systemic biases is another core element. This requires proactive measures—bias training for faculty and staff, curriculum reviews to root out exclusionary frameworks, and funding structures that reward equity-focused research.¹⁶ It also requires humility: the willingness to confront inequities within our own institutional practices and to make changes that align our operations with our espoused values. One example might be a faculty hiring initiative that incorporates community representatives into search committees to ensure candidates are evaluated for cultural competency alongside academic credentials.

With this, we assert that beginning with care is not a rhetorical flourish; it is a deliberate, research-informed strategy. By integrating the dimensions of caring intelligence, asset-based approaches, technological equity, nurturing mentorship,

pluralistic multiculturalism, and systemic bias reduction into our research culture, we strengthen the integrity, relevance, and impact of HBCU scholarship. Care becomes both the starting point and the throughline, ensuring that the knowledge we generate not only meets academic standards but also fulfills our responsibility to the people and communities at the heart of our mission.

Champion-driven caring: Multiplying leadership

Great research cultures do not rely on one charismatic leader; they cultivate champions across every level and discipline. These champions might be provosts expanding STEM participation, department chairs safeguarding community-engaged scholarship in tenure reviews, or program directors forging robust pipelines from high school to undergraduate research. Such leaders consistently model respect, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to ethical, culturally grounded inquiry. They actively mentor emerging scholars, advocate for resources that advance community priorities, and foster cross-campus networks so that the ethic of care becomes embedded in the institution's daily research life.

Champions are not simply figureheads—they are builders of systems that outlast any one tenure, ensuring that the values of care, equity, and cultural integrity continue to shape the research mission for generations to come. They inspire others to join the work, creating a multiplier effect in which more leaders rise with the same commitment to ethical practice and cultural stewardship. This cultivation of champions becomes a safeguard