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President and Chancellor Turnover in the United States: Impact and Implications for STEM Broadening Participation and Research Capacity Building

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Abstract

During the dual pandemic (COVID-19 pandemic and national-level social injustice), several higher education institutions experienced changes in president and chancellor positions, which has continued into 2023. For historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), in 2022 alone, 23 leadership changes were announced, and in 2023, 41 position changes were announced, almost double within one year. Essentially, one in every four 4-year HBCU institutions experienced a resignation or termination at the highest level. Additionally, research shows that presidents and chancellors at HBCUs have significantly shorter tenures, with an average of 3.3 years than those of other four-year institutions, with an average tenure of 7 years. These changes have been deemed a "crisis" and an added challenge to the ongoing recovery efforts of many HBCUs disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic.

Two areas that are critical for higher education institutions related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education are (1) the role they play in broadening the participation of historically excluded individuals and (2) research activity, particularly research capacity building. For the latter, even organizations with the higher research activity ranking (R1) are continuously searching for avenues to increase their research activity, including recruiting and hiring faculty, administrators, and executive cabinet members who can assist in these two areas. HBCUs are considered key players in helping the nation stay competitive globally, a precious asset considering the increasingly diverse student population in the United States. Unfortunately, excessive executive leadership turnover could negatively impact those efforts.

Based on the information shared above, the focus of this research study is to answer the following research question: How are president and chancellor turnover at HBCUs impacting broadening participation efforts and research capacity building through the eyes of HBCU stakeholders? To address this research question and overarching research goals, our team (1) clearly defined how and why this is a national, urgent issue, (2) shared the survey development process, (3) discussed the survey piloting process that took place during the 2023 HBCU Week conference in Washington, D.C. area and (4) provide preliminary findings from the survey results. The implications and future work section provides insight for the research community on the type of challenge or problem that would qualify as a RAPID grant per the National Science Foundation (NSF). Most importantly, this research study allows the broader higher education community to understand the impact of changes in president and chancellor positions on activities related to STEM, broadening participation efforts, and research capacity building at HBCUs.

Background

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) continue to play a significant role in broadening the participation of historically excluded individuals within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. They are also considered key players in assisting the nation with staying competitive globally within these fields, a precious asset considering the

increasingly diverse student population within the United States. HBCUs have also seen success within the realm of research activities. As of 2022, 11 HBCUs were designated as Carnegie Classification Research 2 status (Weissman, 2022), with several receiving record dollars through recently awarded grants within the past 10 years. Lastly, considering the recent decision on student admissions in higher education by the Supreme Court (Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College, 2023), HBCUs have already begun to witness an influx of applications from students who are prioritizing their institutions for higher education.

Regarding the focus of this study, STEM broadening participation and research capacity building at HBCUs, a particular area could threaten the institution's progress. In 2022, HBCUs announced 23 leadership changes; in 2023, 41 position changes were announced, almost double within one year (Broussard & Doman, 2023). Essentially, one in every four 4-year HBCU institutions experienced a resignation or termination at the highest level. Presidents at HBCUs have a significantly shorter tenure, with an average of 3.3 years, than those of other four-year institutions, with an average tenure of 7 years (Kimbrough, 2017; Gagliardi et al., 2017; Washington Lockett, 2019). These changes have been deemed a "crisis" and an added challenge to the ongoing recovery efforts of many HBCUs that are disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic. Particular examples highlighting the extent of this crisis include the state of Mississippi, which saw four presidents leave their eight public institutions within one year (Moody, 2023). Two of the four were Jackson State University and Alcorn State University, both HBCUs. More alarming, these institutions have had seven different presidents, including those who were interim, since 2010.

Given the critical and influential role HBCUs have played for nearly 200 years in the U.S., it is vital that these institutions are prepared to adjust to meet the increased demands in areas such as rising interest leading to increasing student enrollment, research demands in critical workforce areas (i.e., computing, cybersecurity, AI) and industry's need to hire and attract top talent (Skinner et al., 2002; Thang & Quang, 2005). When it comes to the role, impact, and importance of leadership, research suggests that leader behaviors impact employee performance (Bass, 1985), innovation (Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997), and organizational effectiveness (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Organizational leadership is critical in the institutional ability to implement organizational change (Nordin, 2012; Freeman Jr. & Palmer, 2020). Therefore, it's vital to understand the impact of leadership turnover at HBCUs on the goals and outcomes of the institutions.

While most research on leadership focused on various organizations, research by the Center of the Advancement of STEM Leadership has identified various leadership characteristics and styles in deans at HBCUs, which support the broadening of participation in STEM at HBCUs (Clavier et al., 2021). While they identified many different themes and characteristics to support the broadening of research, two common characteristics across several themes were a requirement for experience (through training or time in the field) and connection to the HBCU community (both in their institution and with others) (Clavier et al., 2021). While the research by Clavier and colleagues (2021) was done on deans, it is reasonable to posit that it would also apply at the presidential and chancellor levels.

Unfortunately, the identified characteristics require stable tenure to be appropriately developed. As noted above, there is excessive leadership turnover at HBCUs. This turnover could negatively impact the institutions' ability to retain leaders and facilitate the required changes to meet their

demands. Further, research on leadership turnover suggests that, even with change strategies in place, unanticipated turnover (such as resignation or termination) threatens to disrupt change initiatives (Latta & Myers, 2005). Thus, when instituting the required changes to build research capacity at an institution and its highest leaders, we suggest that leadership stability in executive-level roles will have a significant impact.

Research Overview

In 2018, a study released by the National Academies on Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) stated that increased resources to HBCUs and increased focus on research and evaluation of activities linked to HBCUs were highly recommended and required for the nation to stay competitive (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). The report clearly articulates the needed prioritization of STEM education and research at HBCUs, and, unfortunately, the instability in organizational leadership could be hindering progress in that arena. Recognizing this as an added challenge to the ongoing recovery efforts of many HBCUs disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic (Fletcher et al., 2023), this study aimed to gain insight from HBCU stakeholders, explicitly targeting the impact of the leadership turnover crisis. Specifically, the effect of this issue on broadening participation efforts and research capacity building at HBCUs. The first step to capture this phenomenon was for our team to design a survey deployed at the 2023 HBCU Week conference in the Washington, D.C., area. The following sections highlight details on the target population, instrument development, dissemination, and data analysis are shared below.

Target Population

The target population for this research study consists of current and former HBCU stakeholders, including presidents and chancellors, board members, executive cabinet members (i.e., vice presidents/chancellors), faculty, staff, students, and leadership from industry and partner organizations who support and fund HBCU efforts. The inclusion criteria encompass individuals who have experienced the repercussions of president and chancellor turnover or are interested in ensuring success at HBCUs. To ensure diversity in responses and the entirety of the research question is captured, the survey was administered to individuals belonging to every level of HBCUs' organizational structure. The rationale for including current and past HBCU community members is so the data collected consists of results that collate the perceptions past HBCU members have toward the impact inflicted upon HBCUs' participation and research capacity-building efforts, based on their experiences without significant turnover rates in association to the effects current HBCU members are experiencing during this crisis. While this research aims to uncover the impact on critical areas for higher education institutions related to STEM education, there were no restrictions placed on respondents' involvement in STEM disciplines or delineations between the gamut of HBCU classifications (i.e., medical, technical, agricultural, or liberal arts institutions.)

Development of Survey

The *HBCU Leadership Impact and Implications Survey* was developed by the research team for HBCU stakeholders to determine factors impacting President/ Chancellor turnover within HBCUs. A thorough design, redesign, and review process was implemented to develop the survey using relevant research questions and best practices. Questions within the survey asked

participants to report their relationship with HBCUs, their current role related to HBCUs, their time affiliated with HBCUs, information about the HBCU with which they were affiliated, factors impacting president/chancellor turnover, the impact of turnover on the university, and participant demographic information. The survey consisted of Likert, open-ended, and closed-ended questions. The survey was developed and deployed using Qualtrics. The approach to this survey design followed a very methodological and research-driven style similar to work our team has done in the past centered around STEM education and HBCUs (Fletcher et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2023; Jefferson et al., 2023).

Survey Dissemination

In partnership with the White House Initiatives on HBCUs, the *HBCU Leadership Impact and Implications Survey* was administered at the 2023 National HBCU Week Conference (September 24-28) centered around our research question above. In combination with informal discourse promoting the survey between conference sessions, the survey was distributed via official HBCU-week posters strategically positioned around conference entrances and exits. Individuals scanning a QR code with their personal mobile devices easily accessed the survey form. To limit the possibility of duplicated responses, the survey form enabled only one response per device login. Singular flyers with information corresponding to the posters were placed in the seats of highly sought-after conference sessions, which were identified through conversations with research team members and conference attendants. With support from the 2023 National HBCU Week Conference leadership team, the HBCU Leadership Impact and Implications Survey flyer appeared on digital screens around the conference, where vital information was circulated. Additionally, digital flyers were presented on ballroom projectors post-opening ceremony and before the keynote events on days one and two. Immediately following the conference, the QR code and a link to the survey were shared via researchers' individual and/or research group social media platforms (i.e., Twitter/X). Additionally, before the conference, a general email was shared with direct contacts of the research team members that included information on the research study, and email recipients were asked to share the survey.
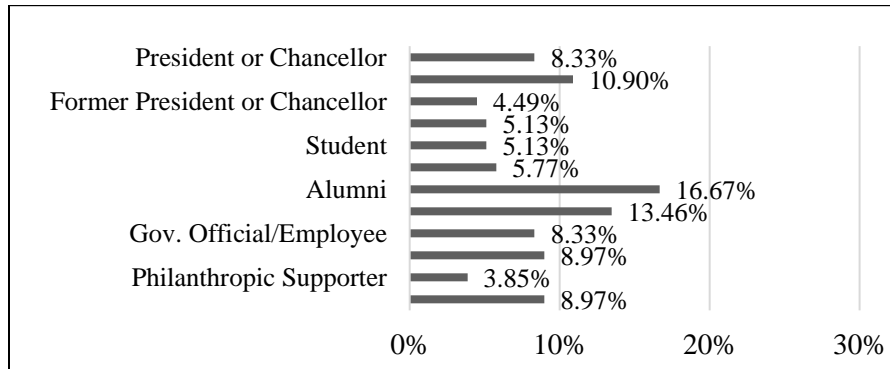
Data Storage and Analysis
The data collected from survey administration was stored and analyzed on secure devices accessible only by the research team. The research team conducted initial analyses on data collected from responses to the quantitative questions. Data was collected using Qualtrics and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS. All data will be presented in aggregate form to ensure no identifiable information can be determined based on the results.

Results and Discussion
Results for the *HBCU Leadership Impact and Implications Survey* administered in early fall 2023 included 176 surveys opened, with 156 participants completing at least some or all the survey, giving us an effective response rate of 87%.

Participant demographic data: Approximately 85% of participants fell between the ages of 25 and 64, 63.8% identified as female, 34.8% as male, and 1.5% as non-binary/non-gender confirming. 49% of respondents currently work at or attend an HBCU; 51% did/do not. Table 1 below highlights the positions/roles of individuals with HBCUs.

Table 1: Respondents' roles connected to HBCUs

President or Chancellor — 8.33%, 10.90%
Former President or Chancellor — 4.49%, 5.13%
Student — 5.13%, 5.77%
Alumni — 16.67%, 13.46%
Gov. Official/Employee — 8.33%, 8.97%
Philanthropic Supporter — 3.85%, 8.97%

Core Research Findings: 78% of respondents indicated that "Institutional fundraising," 75% indicated that "industry partner engagement" is highly impacted by leadership turnover, while 58% stated that "research capacity building" was highly affected by this turnover. While Moody's article details the current state of HBCU leadership affairs, the *HBCU Leadership Impact Survey* captured how those leadership affairs are impacted and what nuanced areas they feel are affected most, ranging from "No Impact" to "High Impact." Overall, six of the seven areas covered had over 50% of respondents say that leadership turnover would highly impact those areas, all coinciding with the "range of issues" Dr. Terrell Strayhorn laid out for Moody's article. Table 2 below highlights these findings from the survey.

Table 2: What, if any, impact do you feel the President/Chancellor turnover at HBCUs has on the following areas?
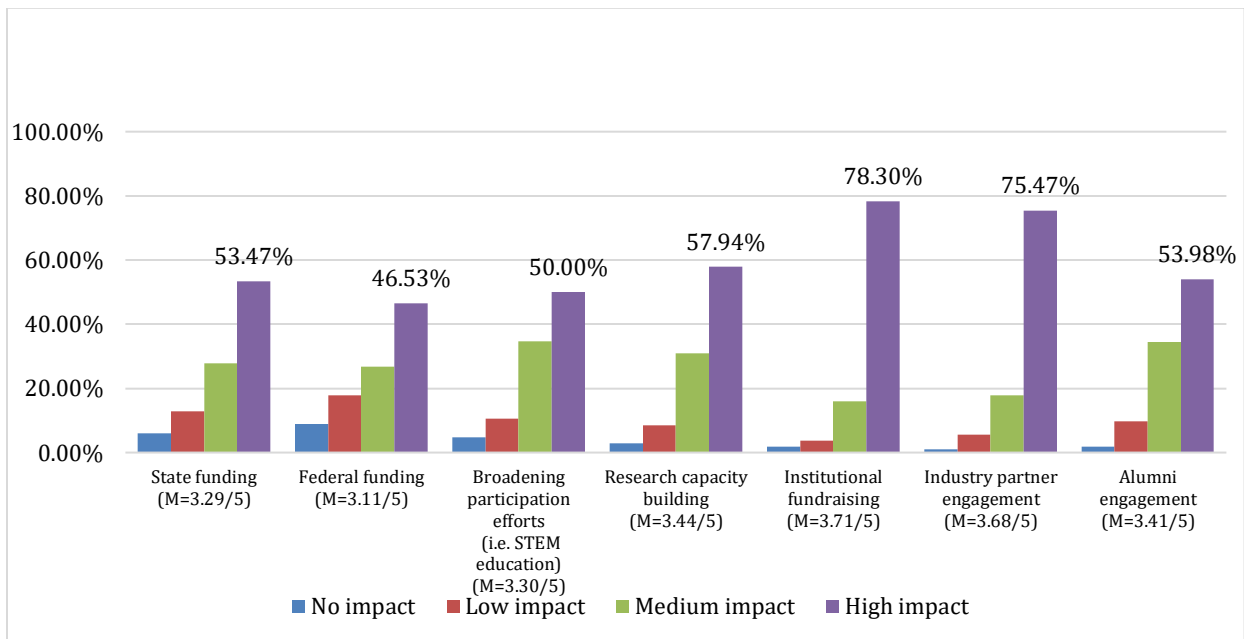
The *HBCU Leadership Impact Survey* identified institutional resource constraints, challenges with state-level funding, the institution's financial position, and challenges with boards, which

almost 90% of survey respondents selected. Furthermore, the findings of the *HBCU Leadership Impact Survey* suggest that the impact on internal stakeholders is just as much of a concern. Our survey found that 69% of HBCU stakeholders felt that president/chancellor turnover at the institutions has a "high impact" on faculty engagement, and 52% felt the same about student engagement. This is highlighted in Table 3 below.

Table 3: What, if any, impact do you feel the President/Chancellor turnover at HBCUs has on the following areas?
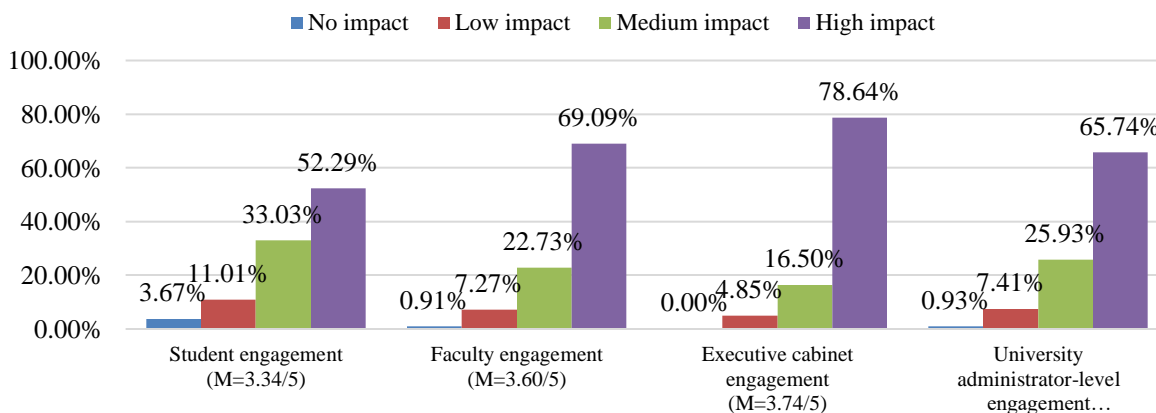
This is primarily a concern because student and faculty engagement is essential to the vitality of universities. To further emphasize this point, EducationWeek reports found that positive teacher and student engagement is associated with "practically every measure" of success that schools value. This tells us that if this crisis is not handled with urgency and intentionality, the institutional impact of trickle-down effects can be detrimental to continuing HBCUs' achievements. This is particularly true when considering their vital role in assisting the nation with staying competitive by increasing the number of historically marginalized populations pursuing degrees in high-demand areas such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

Future Work

National Science Foundation (NSF) Rapid Response Research (RAPID) Proposal

While designing the survey and collecting data from the 2023 HBCU Week conference, our team met with the National Science Foundation (NSF). That meeting determined that this issue met the requirements of a Rapid Response Research (RAPID) proposal. The proposed research plan included the planning and executing a convening of HBCU presidents, chancellors, executive cabinet members, and industry partners. Before the convening, a proposed schedule will be developed, and invited attendees will be finalized. As a part of the convening agenda, our team would have a section discussing the data found within the initial survey. This would serve as an opportunity for us to conduct a form of validation of the findings. Essentially, the attendees would review and discuss the findings from the pilot survey while our research team simultaneously captures this feedback and discussion points. This process would serve as a critical data collection component for the grant. Additional data collection would include qualitative data centered around individual and focus group interviews to gain a more prosperous, more profound understanding of the survey responses and additional knowledge

related to the research question from their perspective. Once the data is collected and analyzed, we propose an in-depth and intentional dissemination plan, starting with getting feedback from the members at the convening so that they also have a voice in that process. Our initial thoughts of what we plan to do for dissemination that would be added to what we collect at the convening include creating an official final report of all findings, a nationally broadcasted live webinar presentation, at least one conference proceeding in a higher education-based outlet, journal publication and a presentation of findings at an international level. On April 1, 2024 (after the first draft of this paper had already been submitted), our team was awarded the RAPID grant to conduct the convening with HBCUs' executive leadership and key stakeholders. That part of the research (building on our pilot survey – the focus of this paper) will begin in the summer of 2024 and be fully executed between April 1, 2024, and March 2025.

Policy Implications
While analyzing the survey results, our team realized various implications for this study. Most notably, insights that appear to have policy implications. Within higher education institutions, requirements for students, faculty, staff, and leadership are driven by plans and processes agreed upon by a group within that organization. Within some instances, decisions will be made by a governing body at the state level that can have implications all down to the students (i.e., funding for scholarships, faculty pay, age-out retirement policies, etc.).

When considering this and aligning it alongside the survey findings, our team developed a list of five (5) essential policy implications that should be considered. These considerations include:

(1) the contributions to the literature through research-driven knowledge around standards, best practices, and lessons learned related to the hiring, supporting, and navigating challenges related to HBCU executive leadership,

(2) the importance of the evaluation and selection of board members and the role and impact of governing boards, overall, at HBCUs

(3) the need to reassess and/or reimagine the role of HBCU Presidents and Chancellors' onboarding and training processes for long-term success

(4) the need for HBCUs to do an individual, institutional evaluation of the impact on broadening participation and research capacity-building efforts based on turnover at their institutions, if relevant.

(5) each institution develops guiding discussion points for conversations with state and national-level policymakers about HBCU executive leadership sustainability based on our findings and the referenced literature.

The notes highlight opportunities for direct, positive impacts for HBCUs related to this crisis, especially where applicable. Additionally, the research findings and notes above can assist executive hiring firms, governing boards, institutional leaders, and other individuals and groups closely tied to the recruitment, retention, and success of HBCU presidents and chancellors.

Conclusion
By using pilot data collected at one of the largest annual convenings of HBCU executives *related to the impact and implications of HBCU leadership* turnover, our proposed convening to collect rich qualitative data and their feedback back on the survey data results will dynamically and strategically allow us to gain undocumented insight on this unprecedented challenge. By convening HBCU executives and leadership from partnering organizations, our team can build

trust, understand this challenge's specifics, and document proposed changes and best practices through an engaging experience for the researchers and participants. Results will aid HBCUs with increased stability and advancement in STEM, broadening participation and research capacity building: all areas of focus for the NSF.

This research will collect and share knowledge of best practices and recommended changes across the broader HBCU community. Results will contribute towards internal and external collaborations and partnerships cultivated within HBCU communities to ensure short and long-term success and sustainability around executive leadership positions, including board positions/appointments. By understanding the impact of this crisis at HBCUs, findings will be generalized to support and educate non-HBCU institutions facing leadership turnover challenges. While this project focused solely on HBCU leadership, it serves as a pilot study, and our team looks forward to using these results to explore the more significant issue of leadership turnover and the implications of broadening participation and research capacity across other minority-serving institutions and higher education overall.

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