

HBCU Mental Health Survey Summary

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Background

In 2024, the Steve Fund partnered with the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) and Healthy Minds Network at the University of Michigan to analyze a survey of students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly Black institutions (PBIs).

This survey is part of a multiyear collaborative effort between UNCF (United Negro College Fund) and the Steve Fund to improve student mental health and well-being outcomes with a focus on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly Black institutions (PBIs).

The purpose of the research effort was to describe the state of mental health among Black college students in order to help respond impactfully to mental health challenges faced by HBCU students and to develop proactive resources and interventions customized for the HBCU community to prioritize mental health.

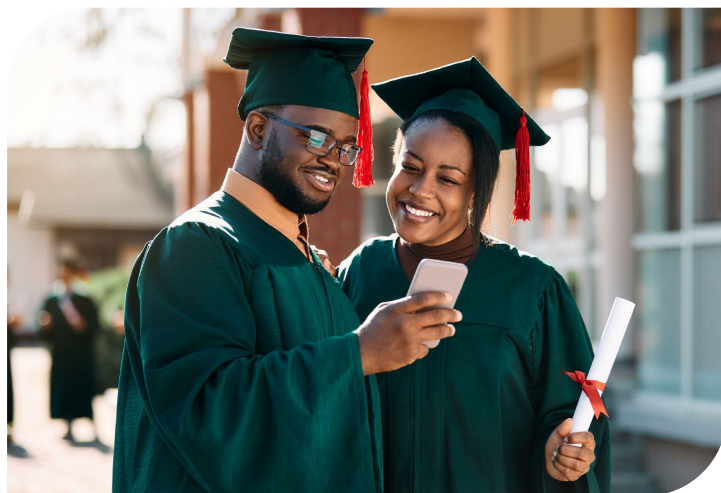
To better understand and address the mental health challenges faced by students it's important to look at the broader environment. HBCU students' experiences and well-being are significantly influenced by the broad range of societal issues and structural-level issues such as widespread social justice movements and subsequent pushback/reversals, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and geopolitical tensions.

Why is this important?

Mental health challenges among young people, especially, have been increasing for some time and were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic generated a multiplicity of adverse impacts and led to an emerging mental health crisis especially among young Black people in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Mental health concerns have continued at an elevated level since then.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in mental health concerns among Black college students. One large national study found that between 2013 and 2021 there was a 45% increase in depression and a 170% increase in anxiety among Black college students.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these already rising rates and in the 2020-21 academic year, over 50% of Black students met the criteria for one or more mental health concerns.¹ The collective trauma of a global pandemic during the transition from adolescence to adulthood may have persistent impacts on some Black students' mental well-being.

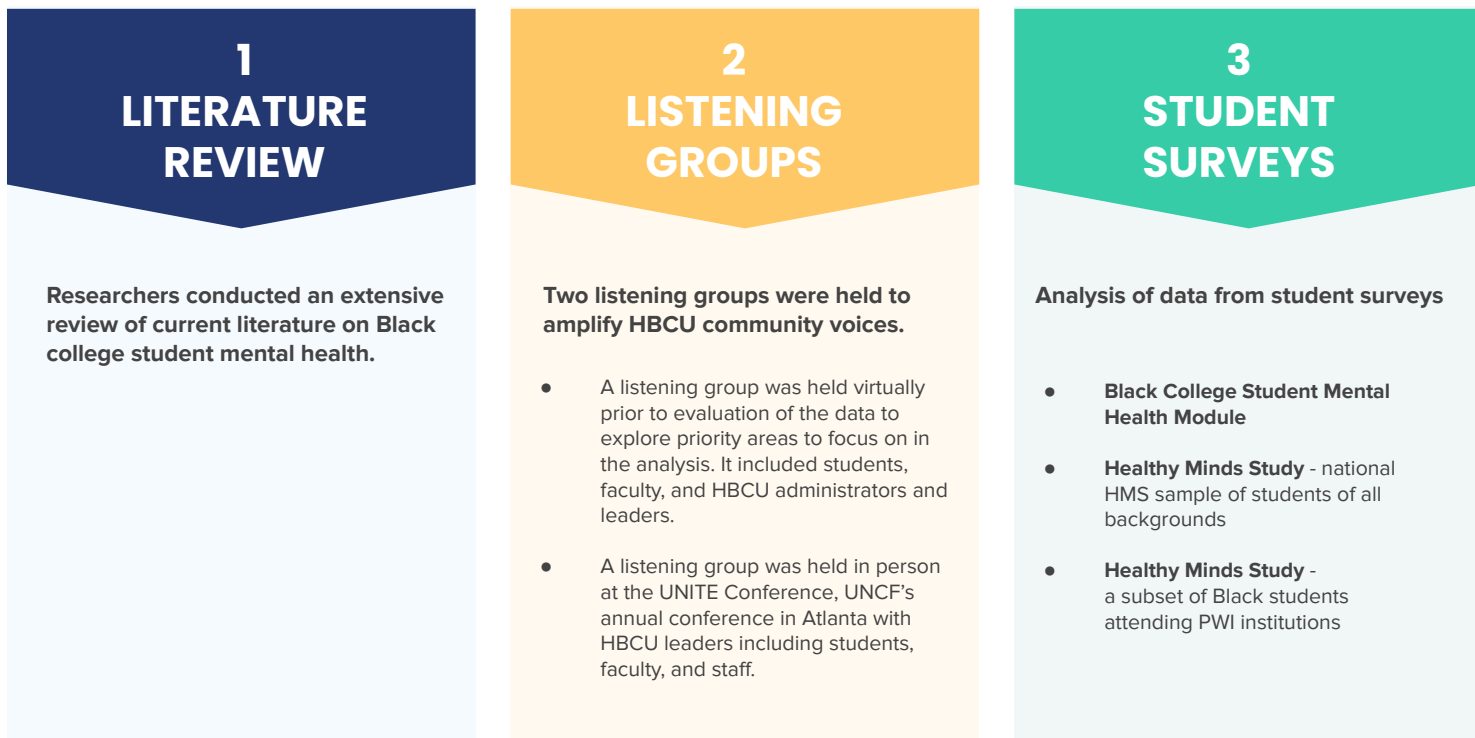


PARTNERS



The aim of the research effort was to contribute novel research to the field that furthers efforts on HBCU and PBI campuses to improve mental health outcomes for students.

The research effort included three components:



A collaboration with researchers from the Healthy Minds Network, The Steve Fund, and UNCF created a new survey module specific for HBCUs and PBIs to provide an accurate assessment of the current state of Black college student mental health (the Black College Mental Health module). First, researchers identified the key areas of mental health concerns at HBCUs and PBIs. They then identified themes, constructs, risk factors, and protective factors that are critical to capture. Existing validated survey measures that align with the priority areas were identified and modified to appropriately measure factors related to the HBCU and PBI college student experience. New survey items were also developed using previous research and advice from experts on the Black college student experience and how mental health is experienced by Black college students.

During the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years, the Healthy Minds Network collaborated with UNCF to administer a Black College Student Mental Health module at participating HBCUs and PBIs. In total, the research team analyzed 2,504 survey responses from Black students at 16 HBCUs and 2 PBIs. Participants were 75% women, 23% LGBTQ+ sexual orientation, and 3% transgender or gender expansive; 78% identified as African American and 9% as multi-ethnic.

Throughout this report, comparisons are made between the sample of Black students at HBCUs and PBIs (referred to in this report as HBCU students) and two additional samples of students. The national HMS sample refers to the full sample of 76,406 students who participated in the HMS in the 2022-2023 academic year. The second comparison group was 3,368 students who identify as Black and attend small to mid-size PWI institutions (less than 10,000 students).

Findings

Key Insights



Mental health is a critical issue affecting Black college students on HBCU campuses,
and it varies by age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and financial stress.

Personal stigma is low and most students believe therapy would be helpful for mental health concerns.



About one in four HBCU students spoke with a staff/faculty member about their mental health and the vast majority found the response helpful.

Just under half of HBCU students with mental health problems received care.



HBCUs have an important role and opportunity to address mental health challenges.



Collective multicomponent action is needed to improve mental health support for Black students.

Most HBCU and PBI students agree that mental well-being is a priority at their school

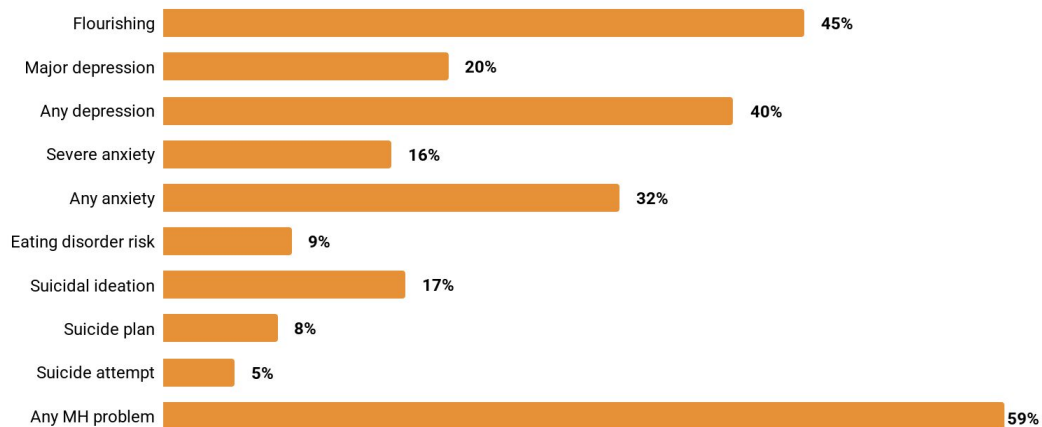
and believe their campus encourages free and open discussion about mental and emotional health.

Mental Health Among HBCU Students

- 1 in 3 (32%) HBCU students experienced general anxiety
- 2 out of 5 (40%) experienced depression
- Almost 1 in 10 (9%) were at risk for an eating disorder
- 17% reported suicidal ideation; 8% had made a suicide plan; 5% had attempted suicide

Younger students, transgender/gender expansive students and LGBTQ+ students experienced more mental health challenges than other students at HBCUs.

Mental Health: HBCU Students



Compared to the national HMS sample, students at HBCUs had:

- Similar rates of mental health conditions
- Slightly higher rate of suicidal ideation
- Higher rates of flourishing

The percent of students with flourishing scores indicating positive mental health:

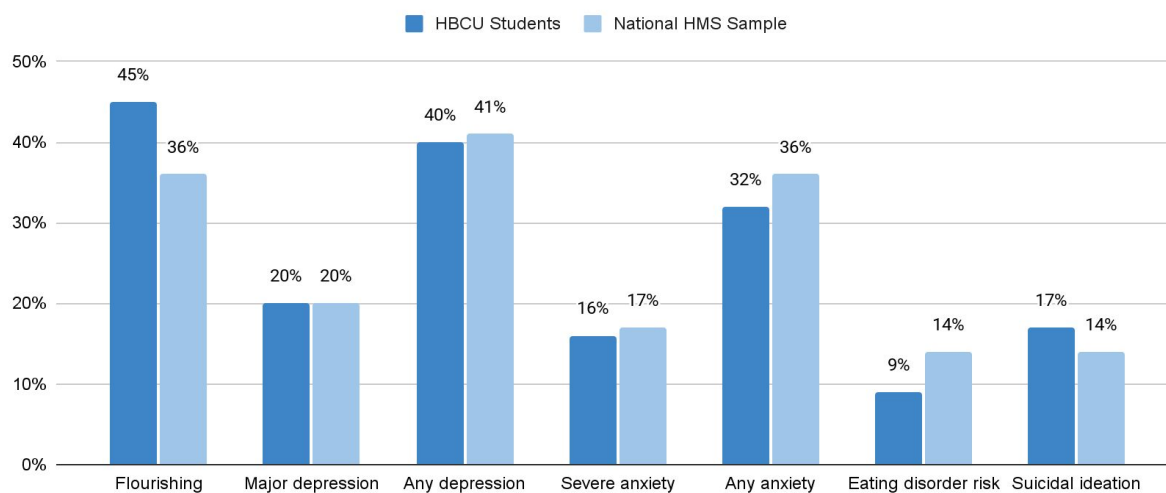
- 45% of HBCU students
- 36% of students in the national HMS sample
- 38% of Black students at small PWIs

The flourishing scale measures the presence of positive psychological resources such as self-perceived success in relationships, self-esteem and purpose.

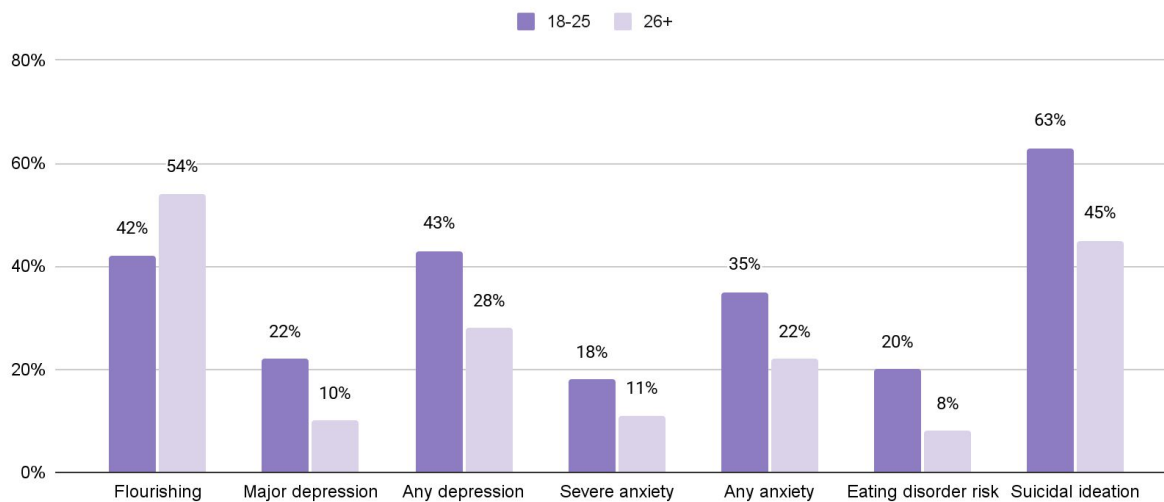
Findings

Mental Health Among HBCU Students, *continued*

Mental Health: HBCU Students and National Sample



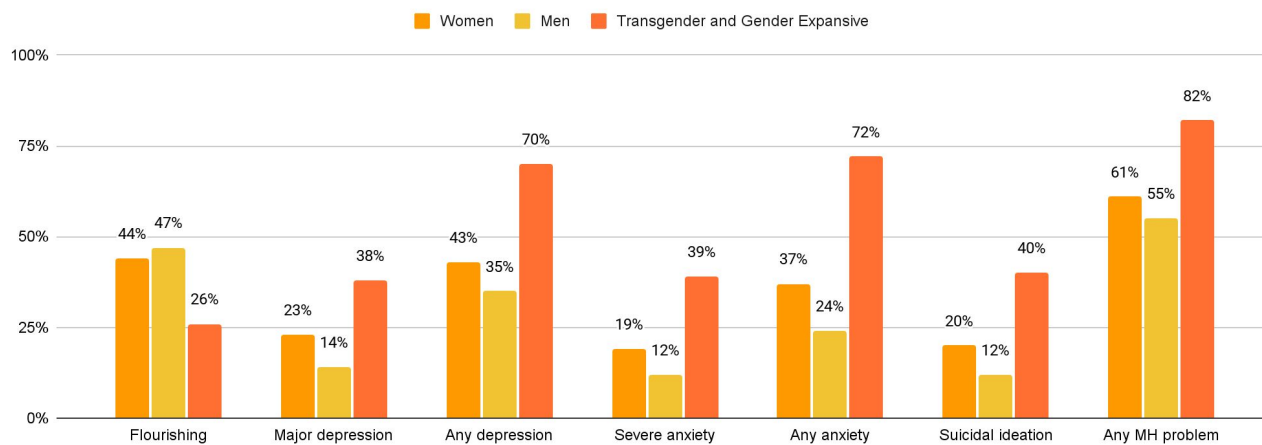
Mental Health: HBCU Students by Age Group



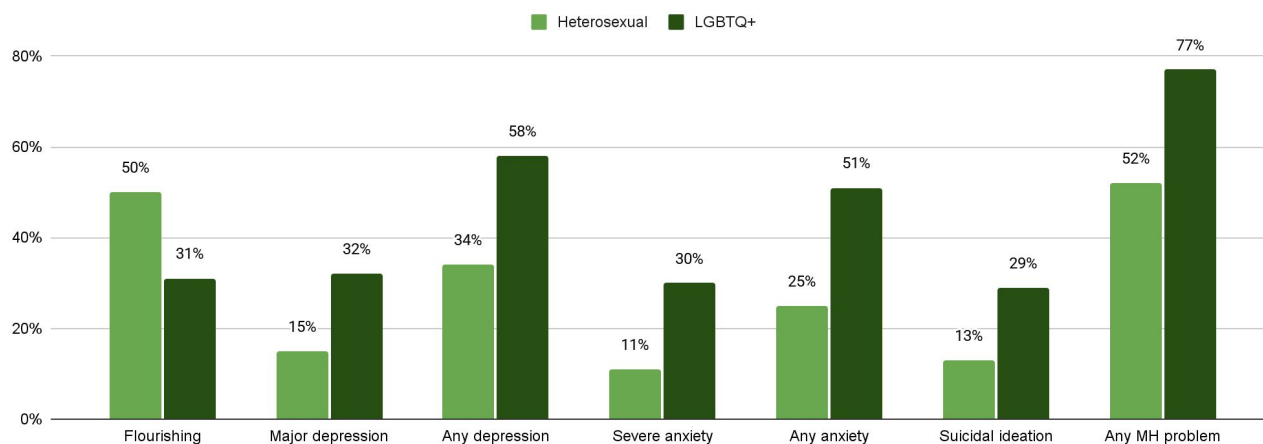
Findings

Mental Health Among HBCU Students, *continued*

Mental Health: HBCU Students by Gender Identity



Mental Health: HBCU Students by Sexual Orientation



Key Findings:

- HBCU students have slightly higher rates of suicidal ideation compared to the national HMS student sample.
- Younger Black students (18-25) at HBCU campuses report more mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders than older (26+) students. Older students account for 18% of the sample.
- Transgender and LGBTQ+ students report more mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders than other students.

Findings

Factors Impacting Mental Health

The survey identified several factors contributing to mental health challenges of students at HBCUs including academic stress, loneliness, financial concerns, relationships, grief, and others.

The top three factors students reported negatively impacting their mental health in the last 6 months:

- Academic stress, 51%
- Family and social relationships, 42%
- Grief, 26%

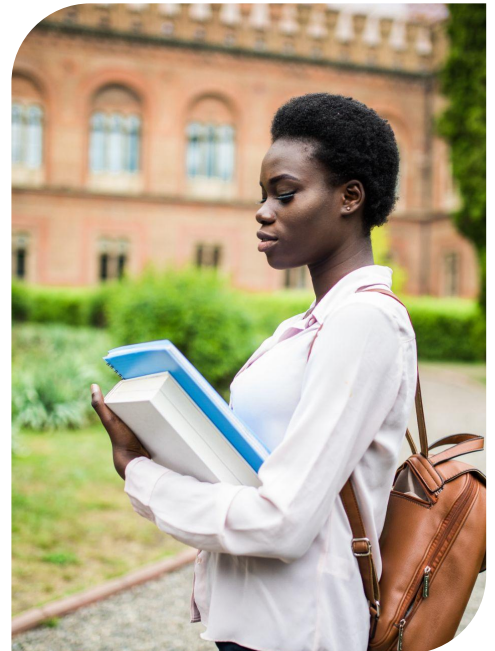
HBCU students reported high levels of academic stress, including feeling pressure, as one woman explained it, “to produce successful Black women.”

Loneliness

Loneliness can have a significant impact on mental and physical health. Loneliness levels were similarly elevated among students at HBCUs and across the broader student population. Just over half of HBCU students (56%, including 57% of women and 53% of men), Black students at PWIs (58%), and students in the full HMS study (55%) had high levels of loneliness. Transgender and gender expansive students were significantly more likely to experience high levels of loneliness (94%).

HBCU students and students in the full HMS sample were similar on several related measures.

- Often feeling they lack companionship - 21% of each student group
- Often feeling left out - 23% of HBCU students, 24% of the HMS sample
- Often feeling isolated - 28% of each student group



Financial Stress

Financial stress was higher among HBCU students and Black students at PWI institutions than among the national sample. More than half of Black students at HBCUs and PWI institutions reported that their financial situations are often or always stressful.

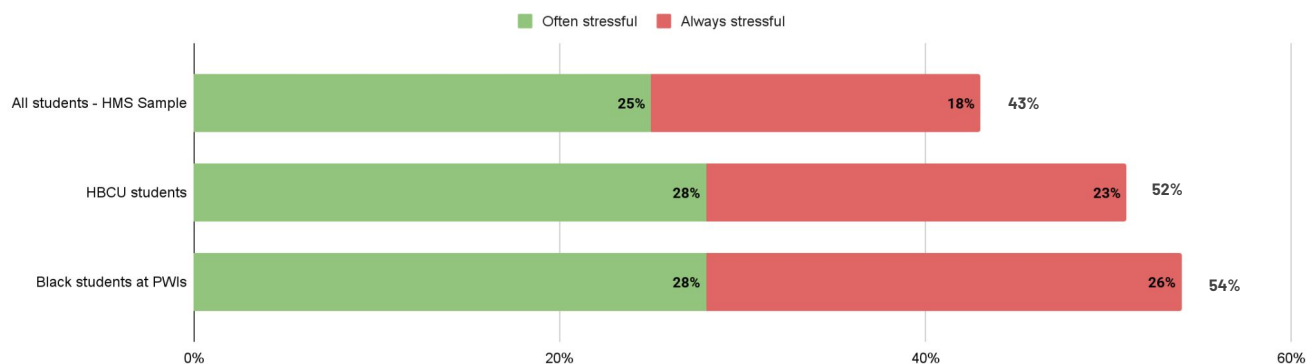
As might be expected, financial stress was negatively correlated with flourishing—among students with “always stressful” financial situations, 33% met the criteria for flourishing compared to 55% of students with “never stressful” financial situations. Financial stress was associated with higher rates of mental health challenges.

Factors Impacting Mental Health, *continued*

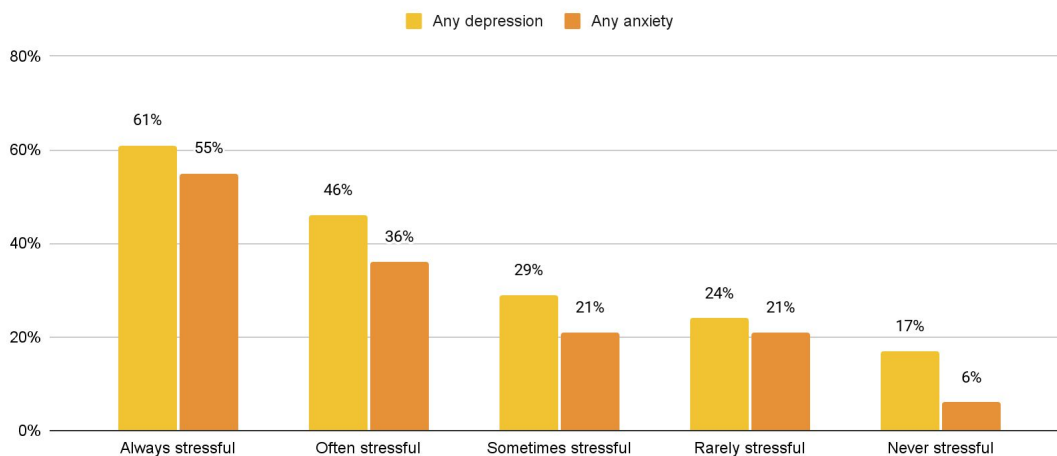
Among the HBCU students:

- 78% of 'always stressed' students experienced one or more mental health problems (and 28% reported suicidal ideation in the last year)
- 26% of 'never stressed' students experienced one or more mental health problems (and 12% reported suicidal ideation in the last year)

Extent of Financial Stress



Depression or Anxiety by Level of Financial Stress



Key Finding:

- The more financial stress the Black students on HBCU campuses experience, the more mental health problems, including suicidal behavior, they reported.

Factors Impacting Mental Health, *continued*



Substance Use

Substance use is associated with poorer mental well-being, increased stress, and other negative outcomes.^{2,3}

There was a similar prevalence of substance use among students in the HBCU sample and the national HMS sample and a lower prevalence of alcohol consumption among the HBCU students.

- 1 in 4 (25%) HBCU students reported substance use of any kind in the past 30 days, most commonly cannabis (24%).
- More than 2 in 5 (42%) HBCU students reported consuming any alcohol in the past 2 weeks (compared to 49% of the full HMS sample).
- Among HBCU students with any alcohol use, 30% reported 1 or more instances of binge drinking behavior in the past 2 weeks.

Intersectionality – Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Intersectionality, which involves multiple social identities, such as Black and transgender, gender expansive, or LGBTQ+, can have an impact on mental health. **Among HBCU students:**

- Transgender/gender expansive students had higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than their cisgender peers
- Transgender/gender expansive students also had higher rates of loneliness and isolation than cisgender students and lower rates of belonging and identity connectedness
- Similarly, LGBTQ+ students had higher rates of mental health concerns and were more likely to experience high loneliness (71%) than heterosexual students (52%)
- Flourishing was lower among LGBTQ+ students (31%) and transgender/gender expansive students (26%) than cisgender students (45%)

Transgender/gender expansive at HBCUs were more likely to feel a sense of campus belonging than Black Transgender/gender expansive students at small PWIs.

Factors Impacting Mental Health, *continued*

Intersectionality – Black Cisgender Men and Women

There were also differences in mental health between Black cisgender men and women. Women at HBCUs noted pressure to perform and succeed and men had higher levels of unmet need.

Among female cisgender students at HBCUs:

- 83% reported that they try to present an image of strength sometimes or all the time
- 76% reported that no matter how hard they work, they feel they should do more sometimes or all of the time
- 61% met criteria for one or more mental health problems
- 20% reported having had thoughts of suicide in the past year

Male cisgender students at HBCUs, compared to women, transgender and gender expansive students, had:

- Lower levels of mental health challenges
- Lower levels of treatment
- Higher levels of unmet need



Mental Health Services and Support

More than a third of HBCU students (35%) reported receiving therapy in the past year and more than half (59%) reported receiving non-clinical support for their mental health. However, a substantial portion reported not reaching out for support when they were feeling down. **HBCU students were slightly less likely than other students to agree with the statement: “When I feel sad or down, I tend to keep those feelings to myself”:**

- 74% of HBCU students
- 83% of the HMS sample
- 86% of Black students at PWIs

Awareness of Services

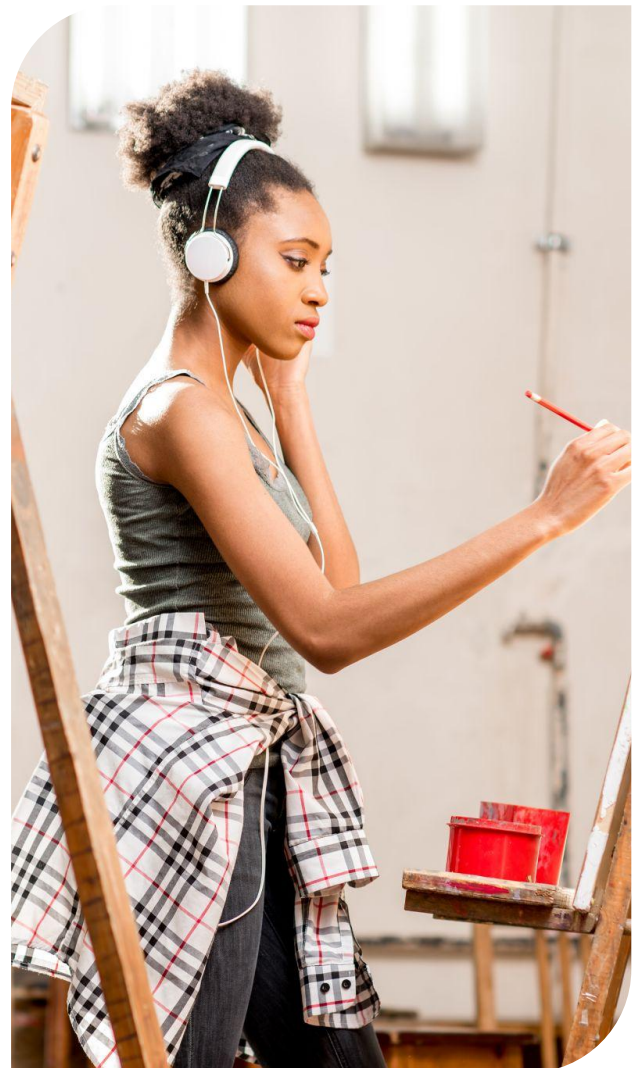
While most students in all survey samples indicated they know where to access mental health services, nearly a quarter did not. Cisgender men were most likely to be aware of mental health services.

Percentage of students who know where to go on campus for mental health services:

- 78% of HBCU students (including 83% of cisgender men, 76% of cisgender women, and 62% transgender/gender expansive students)
- 76% of national HMS sample
- 78% of Black students at PWIs

Attitudes Towards Treatment

More than half (57%) of HBCU students believe therapy would be helpful for them if they were having mental health concerns. With the elevated levels of unmet need among HBCU students, there may be additional reasons why students are not seeking mental health services and there is a large portion of students who don't believe therapy would be helpful for them if needed.



Mental Health Services and Support, *continued*

Use of Mental Health Services in the Past Year

Just under half of HBCU students with mental health problems received care and more students received therapy than medication. HBCU students were less likely than students in the national HMS sample or Black students at PWIs to have received care. Among those using mental health services in the past year, two out of three thought that therapy or counseling was helpful or very helpful for their mental health.

Among students with one or more mental health problems, percent receiving treatment:

- HBCU students - 47%
- All students (HMS sample) - 57%
- Black students at PWIs – 51%

Among HBCU students with one or more mental health problems:

- 36% reported using therapy
- 20% reported using medication

Among HBCU students receiving mental health services, sources/locations included:

- Provider in their hometown or elsewhere – 48%
- Campus counseling center – 38%
- Off campus provider/local community – 22%
- Other provider category – 18%
- ER, inpatient, or partial hospitalization – 9%

Non-Clinical Help-Seeking

Non-clinical help-seeking among HBCU students

- Transgender and gender expansive - 87%
- Cisgender women - 62%
- Cisgender men - 53%
- LGBTQ+ - 68%
- Heterosexual - 56%
- All HBCU students - 59%

HBCU students were most likely to turn to family and friends for mental health support

- Friends - 35%
- Family members - 35%
- Significant others - 27%
- Roommates - 9%
- Religious contacts - 7%
- Faculty members - 5%
- Staff - 3%

Transgender and gender expansive students were almost twice as likely as cisgender men and women to seek help from friends for mental health concerns.

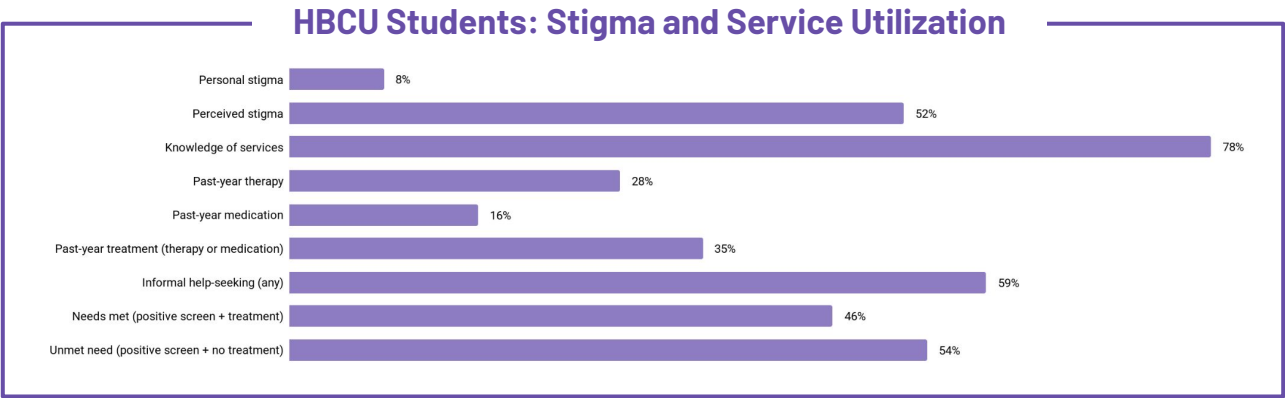
Students seeking help from friends for mental health concerns:

- Transgender and gender expansive - 60%
- Cisgender women - 35%
- Cisgender men - 31%

Mental Health Services and Support, *continued*

Talking with Faculty/Staff about Mental Health

Nearly one in four HBCU students (23%) spoke with a member of the school’s academic personnel (faculty, advisor, etc.) about a mental health problem affecting their academic work. Among those, more than 90% found the response to be supportive. When asked who they would be willing to talk to about a mental health concern, nearly half said a professor (45%) or academic advisor (47%).



Unmet Need for Mental Health Care

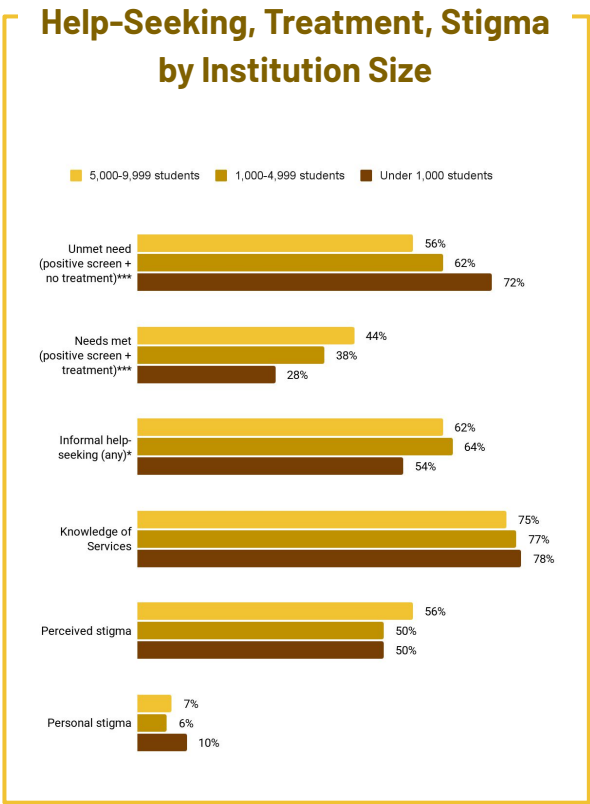
More than half of HBCU students needing care were not receiving treatment. Students at HBCUs who had screened positive for depression or anxiety were less likely to be receiving any treatment than similar students in the national HMS sample. A treatment gap refers to when students exhibit symptoms of depression or anxiety and report no mental health treatment within the past year.

The treatment gap/unmet need for treatment:

- National HMS sample - 41%
- Black students at PWIs - 47%
- HBCU students - 54%
 - Cisgender men - 61%
 - Cisgender women - 50%
 - Transgender/gender expansive - 38%
 - Heterosexual - 56%
 - LGBQ+ - 47%

Key Finding:

- The smaller the campus enrollment is, the more students report unmet needs.



Mental Health Services and Support, *continued*

Barriers to Treatment

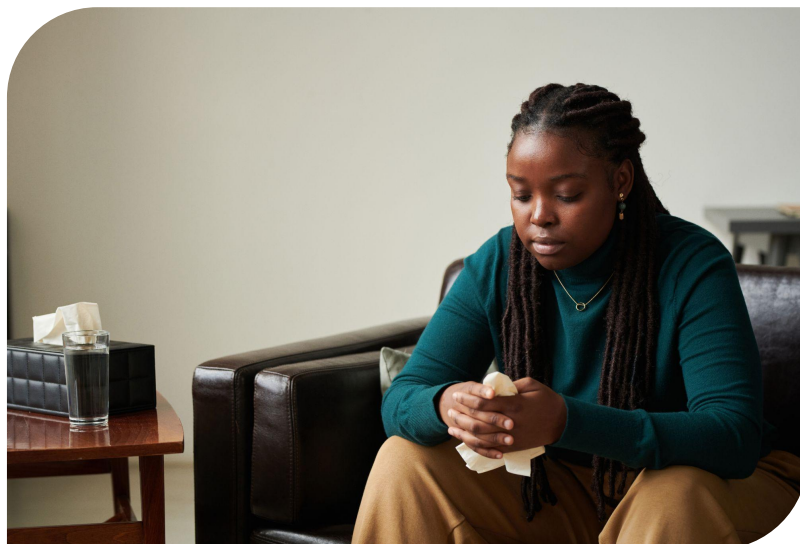
Because untreated mental health problems are associated with poor academic outcomes such as lower GPA and reduced retention, any barriers that prevent students from seeking mental health treatment are important concerns for colleges and universities.⁴

Stigma is commonly identified as a barrier limiting people’s willingness to seek mental health counseling or therapy. Mental health stigma is a concern among Black adults of all ages and HBCU students in particular. Stigma is associated with depression, anxiety and suicidality among Black college students.^{5, 6, 7, 8, 9}

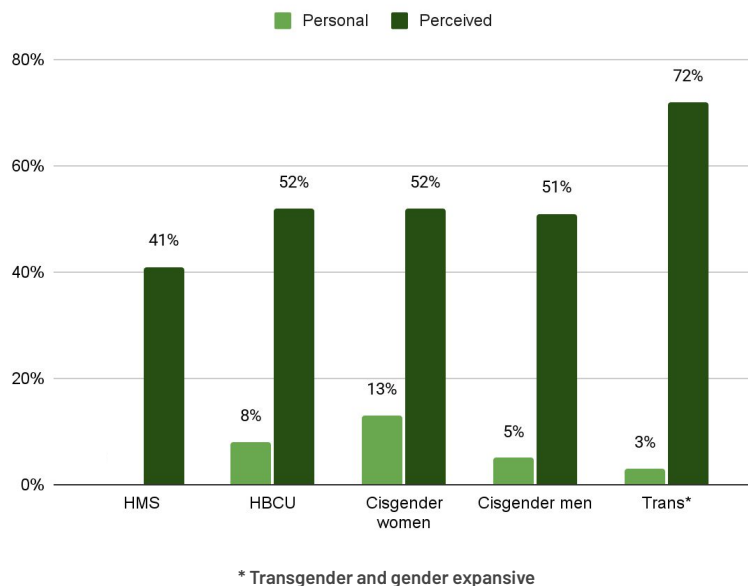
Stigma includes both **personal stigma** (meaning ‘I would think less of a person who received mental health care’) and **perceived stigma** (meaning ‘most people would think less of a person who has received mental health care’). For all the student samples, personal stigma was significantly lower than perceived stigma. Among HBCU students, 8% indicated personal stigma and 52% endorsed perceived stigma. Personal stigma was highest among cisgender men and perceived stigma was highest among transgender and gender expansive students.

Personal stigma is lowest among transgender and gender expansive students (3%) and cisgender women (5%) and highest among cisgender men (13%). Perceived stigma is higher among transgender & gender-expansive students (72%) compared to cisgender women (52%) and cisgender men (51%).

Students identified a range of reasons for not receiving treatment including not needing services, not having enough time, financial issues, and preferring to deal with concerns themselves.

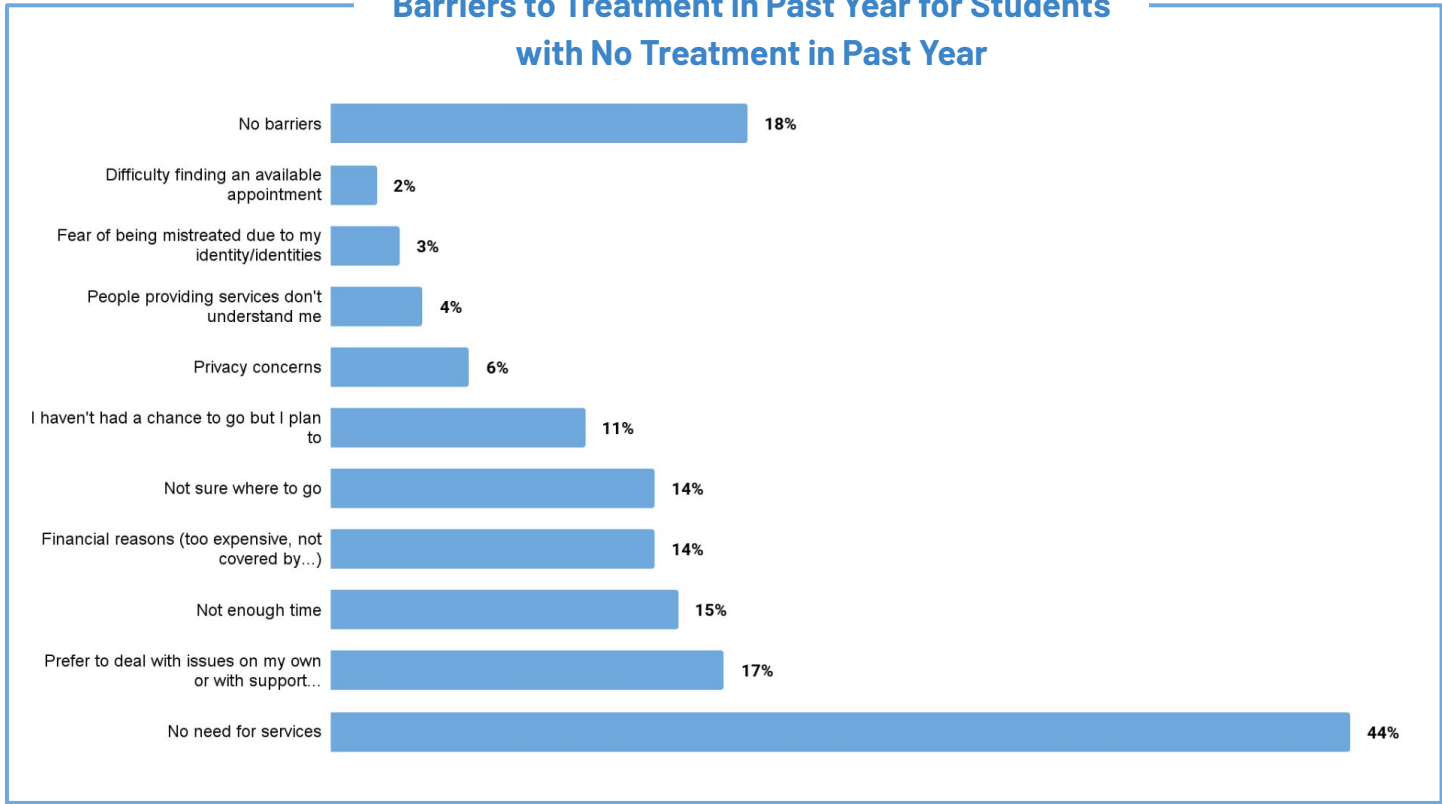


**Mental Health Stigma:
Personal and Perceived**



Mental Health Services and Support, *continued*

**Barriers to Treatment In Past Year for Students
with No Treatment in Past Year**



Key Finding:

- The top 3 barriers among HBCU students with no treatment in the prior year, were students who believing they did not need services (44%), preferring to deal with their issues on their own or with informal support from friends and family (17%), and not having enough time (15%).

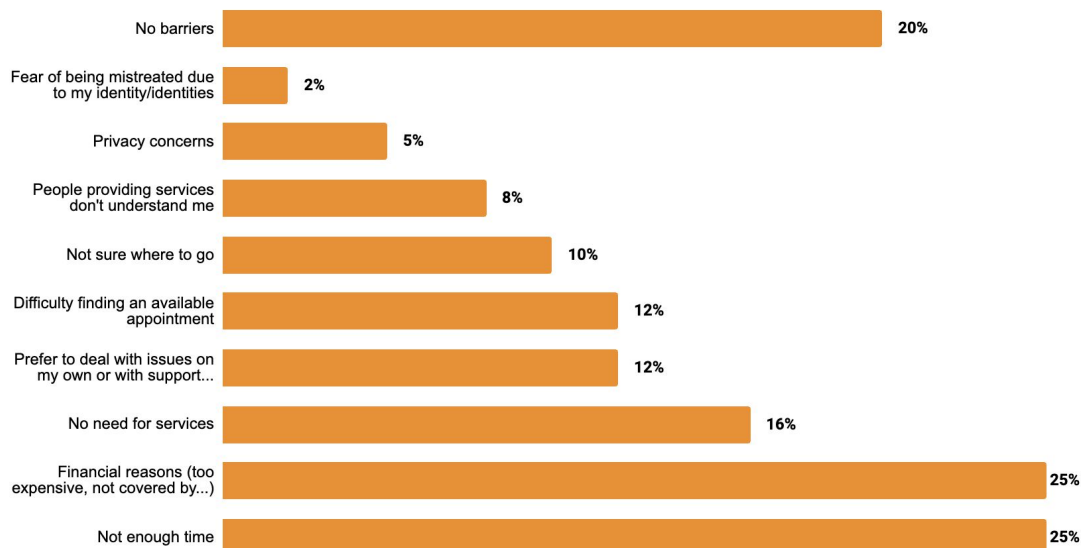
Among HBCU students with a positive screening for depression or anxiety who had not received services, the top reasons for not receiving services included

- 'No need for services,' 27%
- 'Prefer to deal with it myself or with family/friend support,' 22%

This underscores that while HBCU students are less likely than those in the national HMS sample or Black students at PWI's to use mental health services when experiencing symptoms of depression/anxiety, a notable proportion of these students may not have pursued mental health treatment due to personal preferences (no perceived need or preferring to deal with it on their own).

Mental Health Services and Support, *continued*

Barriers to Getting the Intended Level of Treatment Among Students Who Had Received Some Treatment in Past Year



Key Finding:

- When students who had received treatment in the past year were asked why they may have received fewer services than intended, they reported their top 3 barriers as not having enough time (25%), financial reasons (25%), and not needing services (16%).

Findings

Campus Climate

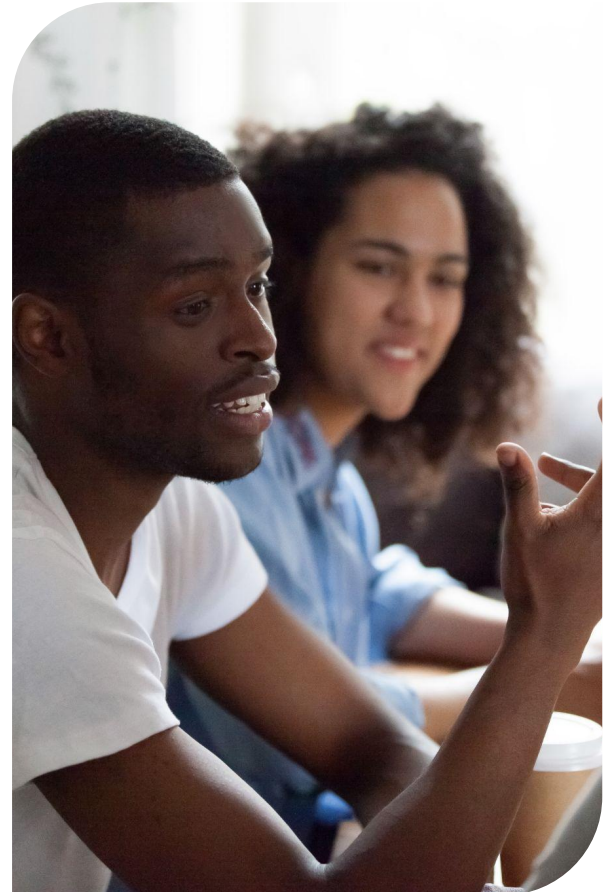
- More than 3 out of 4 (78%) students agreed that student mental well-being is a priority at their school
- Over half (55%) of students agreed that their campus encourages free and open discussion of mental and emotional health issues.

In contrast, in the pre-report listening session students described a sense of passivity in their school's approaches to mental health. Schools seemed to focus on mental health in response to major events or tragedy, only to have that culture fade away shortly after.

HBCU Culture

Listening session participants described HBCU culture as:

- Preparing Black students for life after college beyond academic and economic realms
- Fostering a culture that allows Black students to explore their identities, build community, and celebrate their resilience
- Supporting and developing the spirit of the young Black generation



Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging and identity connectedness support mental health throughout college.¹⁰ In the survey, HBCU students indicated that they were substantially more likely to have a strong sense of belonging than students in the national HMS sample and Black students at small PWIs. Transgender and gender expansive students, however, had lower levels of belonging.

Percentage of students indicating a sense of belonging on their campus:

- 83% of HBCU students
- 73% of students in the national HMS sample
- 72% of Black students at small PWIs

Other indicators supported the strong sense of community and social circles and connectedness among HBCU students. More than half (54%) of HBCU students agreed with the statement "I have a group, community, or social circle at [my school] where I feel I belong (feel at home, known, connected to, supported in my identity)." Additionally, 60% of HBCU students indicated they "have friends at school with whom I can share my thoughts and feelings." Yet despite this strong sense of community, many students say they don't share when they are struggling: nearly three-fourths of HBCU students (74%) agreed with the statement "When I feel sad or down, I tend to keep those feelings to myself."

Takeaways and Recommendations

Key Takeaways

1

Low levels of past year mental health treatment may be related to institutional factors which need to be addressed, such as underfunding of HBCUs, as well as population and individual level factors such as stigma, perceptions of need, personal preferences regarding mental health treatment and non-clinical help-seeking behaviors.

2

Academic stress and financial concerns both significantly impact the mental health of students at HBCUs.

3

The feeling of connectedness to their campus community and a strong sense of belonging are important strengths to be maintained and built upon to support for HBCU student mental health.

4

Elevated levels of unmet need, despite a majority of HBCU students believing that therapy would be helpful for them, suggest an opportunity to address identified barriers and the need to further explore the reasons students are not seeking mental health care.

5

Despite having high endorsement of knowing where to go for mental health services, Black men had the highest rate of unmet need suggesting that there are other reasons they are not seeking or receiving mental health services.

Takeaways and Recommendations

Recommendations – Implications for Action

1. Centering Student Voices & Peer Support in Mental Health & Prevention

Listening session participants emphasized the importance of centering student voices which could involve supporting student organizations focused on mental health-related initiatives and using peer educators as resources.

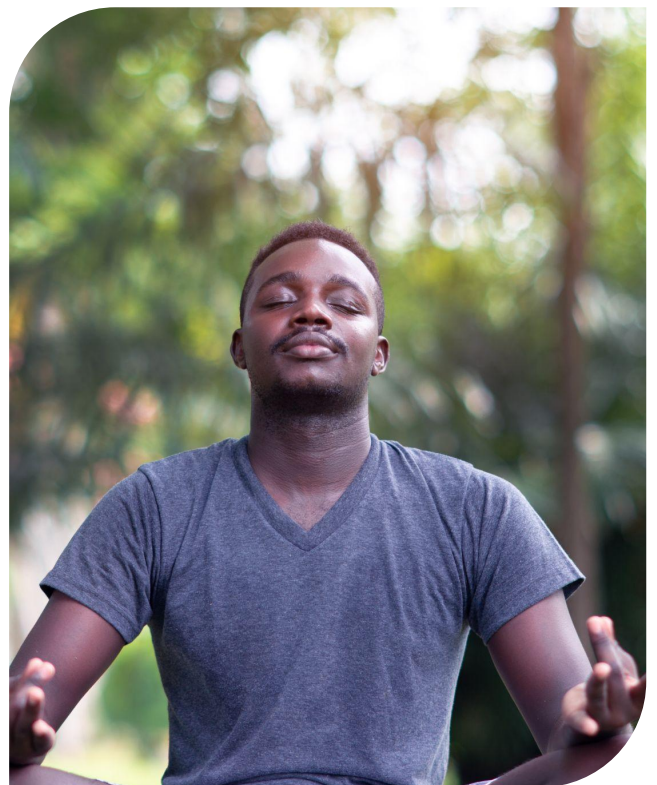
2. Prioritizing Mental Health Care

Most students in HBCUs feel mental health is a priority at their schools. HBCUs can build on this positive momentum by prioritizing efforts to enhance discussions around preventing mental health challenges, normalizing conversations about mental health, and sustaining a culture of care over time.

One common barrier to mental health care expressed by students was ‘not enough time.’ Students participating in the listening sessions shared that they want their schools’ administrations to emphasize the importance of taking care of mental health and establish policies that encourage rather than discourage taking time to prioritize mental health in an active and preventive manner. This could help students see mental health as something worth making time for and feel more comfortable taking the time they need for mental health care.

3. Fostering a Sense of Belonging, Identity, & Flourishing

HBCUs provide students with a unique, transformative experience that helps launch them into adulthood with a strong sense of self and community, as evidenced by the high numbers of studies that report essential psychological resources such as flourishing, belongingness, and support. HBCUs should identify, target, build upon, and strengthen the systems that promote these emotional resources in Black college students.



Takeaways and Recommendations

Recommendations – Implications for Action, *continued*

Support from faculty/staff. Many students are willing to confide in faculty, staff, and administrators at their school about mental health concerns. Campuses can continue fostering a culture that prioritizes the mental health of students so that these conversations become more and more commonplace.

Addressing loneliness. This report highlights that despite high levels of connectedness and belonging, many students feel lonely and isolated. Many HBCUs are making efforts to combat loneliness and create community and sense of belonging by creating spaces and opportunities for connection, providing peer mentorship programs and hosting events designed to establish relationships between students. Social connectedness programming should be considered an essential component of any HBCU strategy to support student mental health.



4. Improving Access to Mental Health Care

Understanding the treatment gap. Assessing the extent of unmet need is one way for campuses to begin addressing barriers that may be preventing students from seeking or receiving services.

Alternatives to one-on-one therapy. Maximizing resources and meeting students where they are could involve offering alternatives to one-on-one sessions, such as group therapy and peer support groups as an effective allocation strategy in cases of limited staff capacity as it allows more students to connect with counseling services. The low personal stigma among the sample supports the idea that enlisting/centering student voices is feasible.

Advancing University-community partnerships. The study found that off-campus mental health care providers are a vital source of care for Black college students who seek therapy. This suggests an opportunity to build stronger university-community partnerships that could enhance access to care, particularly in low resourced, fiscally constrained campuses, and an opportunity to educate students on the range of resources available, how to effectively access them, and how to transition between service providers.

Takeaways and Recommendations

Recommendations – Implications for Action, *continued*

5. Tailoring Strategies to Improve Black College Students' Mental Health

The report findings show how mental health challenges and psychological resources, as well as mental health service attitudes, knowledge, and behavior, vary by age, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

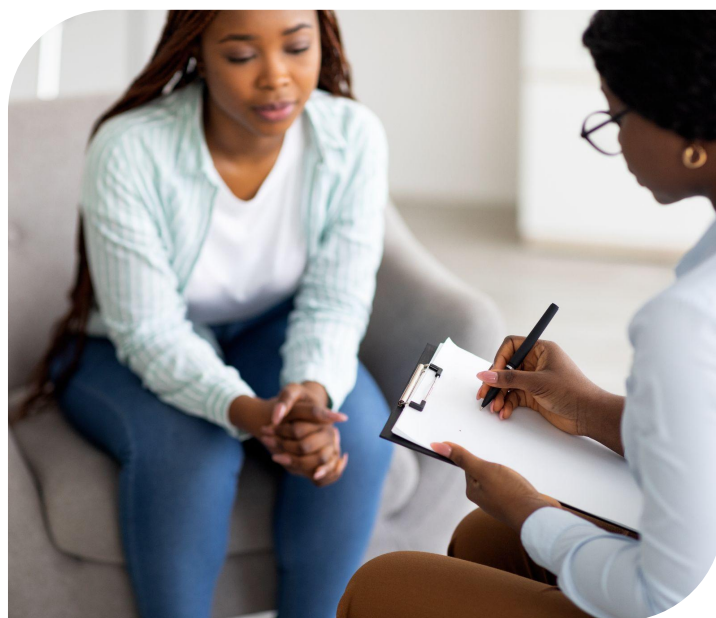
Intersectionality. Approaches aimed at cultivating belonging, inclusivity, and mental health service utilization among students need to take into account students with intersecting identities such as transgender and gender expansive students.

Participants in the listening sessions offered some possible strategies, including being intentional about hiring LGBTQ+ faculty and staff, offering LGBTQ+ competency trainings for faculty and staff, establishing an LGBTQ+ advisory council or alliance group, ensuring the availability of gender-inclusive housing and restrooms, and hosting events that engage both on- and off-campus LGBTQ+ organizations.

Black Women at HBCUs. Many Black women at HBCUs experience immense pressure to succeed and excel above and beyond. It is important for HBCUs to validate Black women's experiences and address their mental health needs as they navigate high pressure environments through the use of effective programming and interventions. Consideration of utilizing sister circles, support groups of Black women¹¹, may be an important way to promote mental health and offer effective support and connection for Black women students.

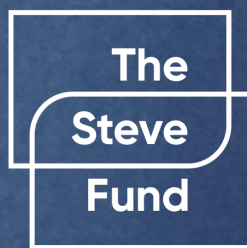
Black Men at HBCUs. To help address the high prevalence of unmet mental health need among men, HBCUs could draw from recent approaches and interventions focused on providing social support through peer support groups for Black men such as YB Men.¹² Social support on HBCU campuses could serve as a vital and effective strategy in increasing mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviors among Black men.

HBCU Community of Care. HBCUs provide a culturally affirming environment that centers Black students' unique experiences and challenges. Given the urgency of mental health concerns, HBCUs are well-positioned to assist students in navigating these challenges, but must receive increased support and resources to address the alarming trends indicating declines in mental health.



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