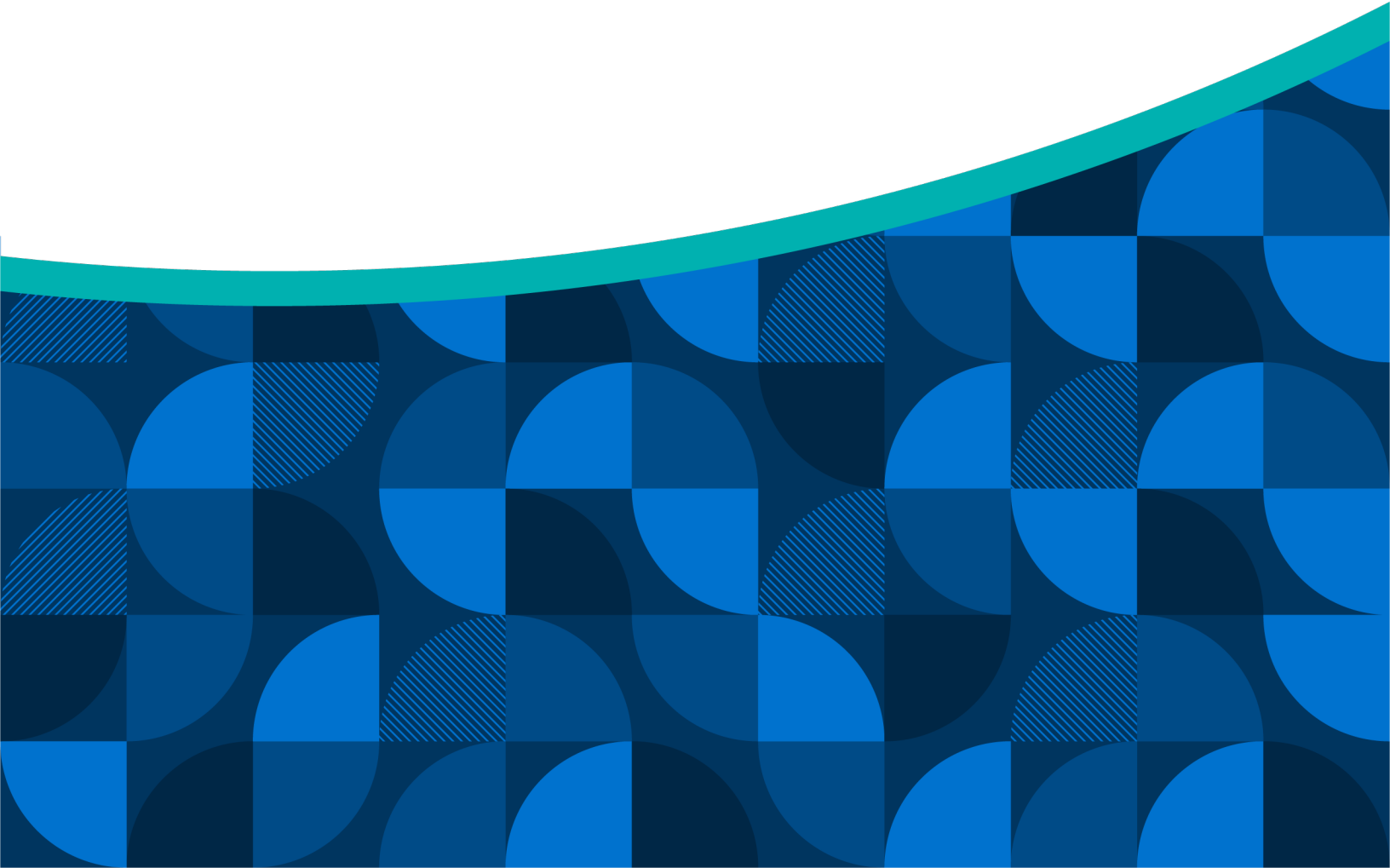




ENROLL360

Understanding the Mindset of Prospective HBCU Students

6 Insights for HBCU Enrollment Leaders from EAB's 2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey



Enroll360

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Executive Overview

Understanding the Priorities and Preferences of Students Considering HBCUs

The past few years have been a time of change for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Despite the turbulence of the pandemic, many HBCUs saw increases in enrollment associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Now, enrollment leaders face further uncertainty as the effects of the Supreme Court ban on race-based affirmative action—including a potential boost to HBCU enrollments—remain to be seen. Given these shifts, it's critical for HBCU enrollment leaders to have data that can help them better understand the distinct college search priorities and preferences of their prospective students.

About This Research

This report offers guidance for enrollment leaders on the college search and communication preferences of students considering HBCUs. The insights in this report are based on the findings from EAB's [2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey](#), which included **responses from 1,070 students who indicated they were considering HBCUs**. This student population is referred to as "HBCU-seeking students" in this report.

The primary goal of this research is to provide insight into the distinctive characteristics and preferences of HBCU-seeking students so that HBCU enrollment leaders can maximize recruitment among that population. To better understand trends among HBCU-seeking students, we compared their responses to those of the 19,254 participants who indicated they were not considering HBCUs and the 2,916 participants who self-identified as Black. For more on the demographic profile of students surveyed, refer to page 13. While this report focuses on trends among HBCU-seeking students, it's important to note that significant variation exists within this population of students and across the prospect pools of HBCUs.

This report explores six insights into how HBCU-seeking students search for and apply to colleges:



HBCU-seeking students start college research earlier.



HBCU-seeking students appreciate direct outreach.



HBCU-seeking students prioritize belonging.



Social media and virtual tours are key tools for HBCUs.



HBCU-seekers are more open to traveling for college.



Affordability remains a top student concern.

HBCU-Seeking Students Start College Research Earlier

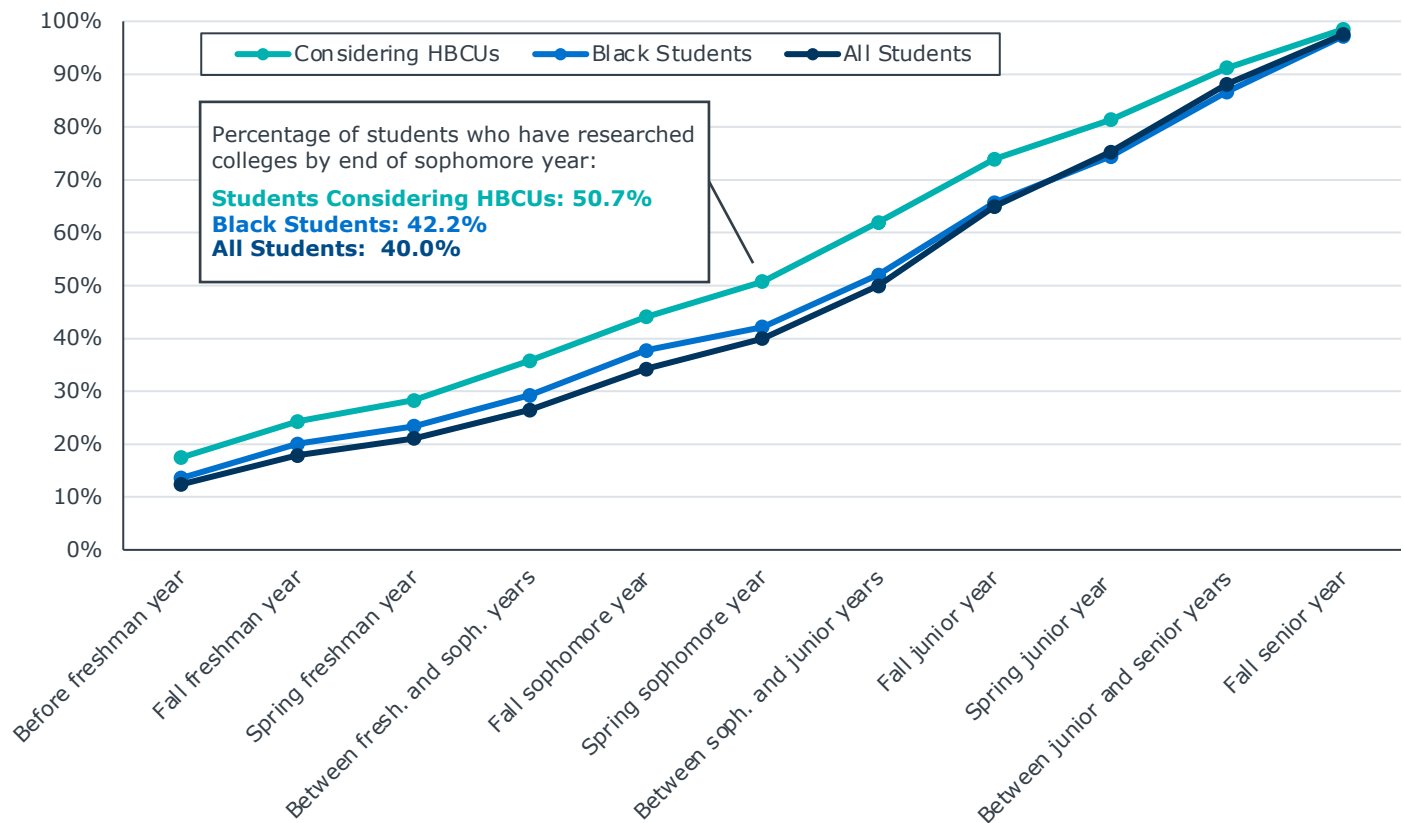
Students Considering HBCUs Begin Researching Colleges Earlier than Their Peers Do

We found that students considering HBCUs tended to start their college research earlier than the median for all students and for Black students. Nearly twenty percent (17.5%) of students considering HBCUs reported that they had started looking into colleges before their freshman year of high school, compared to the median of 12.4% among all students surveyed. This trend continues throughout early high school, with HBCU-seeking students being more likely to start researching in freshman and sophomore year as well. By the end of sophomore year, 50.7% of students considering HBCUs have started college research, compared to the median of 40% among their peers.

This finding is likely connected to the large role that family connections, word of mouth, and community and alumni events play in HBCU recruitment. HBCU leaders reported that they and their peer institutions are particularly likely to build strong alumni ties and to consider recruitment events as family affairs, with younger relatives welcome to attend. Because of this, students with existing ties to HBCUs may be more likely than their peers to start learning about college options in middle school or early high school. For HBCU enrollment leaders, this finding suggests that early outreach and brand-building play an especially important role in recruitment. In-person events and alumni outreach should be prioritized to further strengthen affinity among prospects with ties to HBCUs. As discussed later in this report, social media and virtual tours are also effective tools for conveying the student experience and reinforcing institutional brand.

“When did you first start researching colleges?”

Cumulative Percentage of Students Who Had Started Researching by Time Period, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



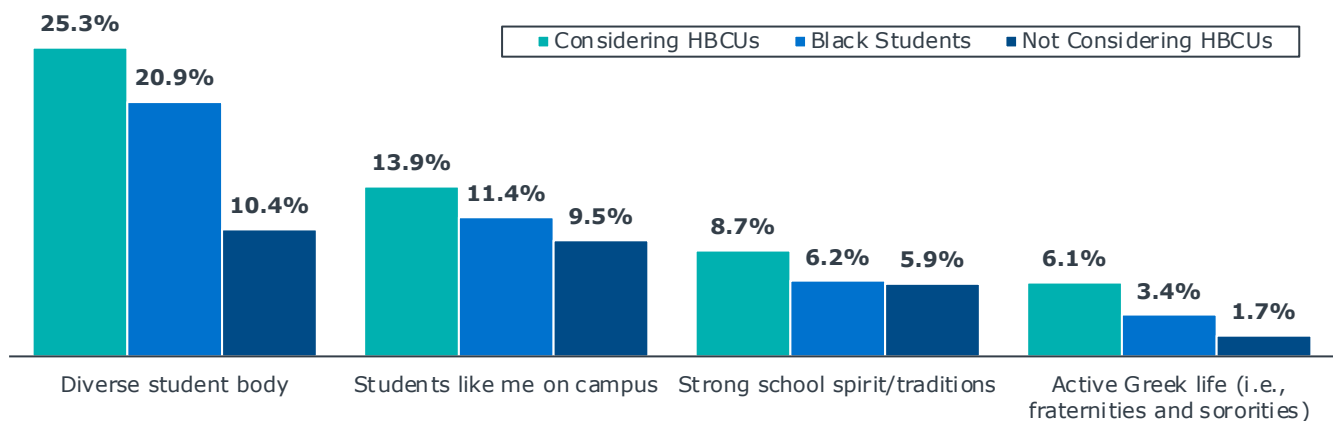
HBCU-Seeking Students Prioritize Belonging

Factors Related to Student Life and Experience Are Particular Draws for HBCUs

Students considering HBCUs are especially likely to prioritize belonging and community when looking for a school. When asked about the top three attributes they want in a college, HBCU prospects, as was true among the broader group of students surveyed, named affordable tuition as their top factor. However, there were significant differences among students considering HBCUs, Black students, and students not considering HBCUs in terms of various factors related to belonging and student experience. As shown in the chart below, students considering HBCUs were more likely to prioritize a diverse student body and “students like me on campus.” HBCU-seeking students were also more likely to prioritize strong school spirit or traditions and active Greek life, although those factors were among the top three attributes for a relatively small percentage of students. While it’s no surprise that finding a sense of belonging is a top factor that attracts students to HBCUs, this data reinforces the importance of effectively conveying that sense of the campus experience in marketing efforts.

Students Considering HBCUs Are Especially Likely to Prioritize Belonging and Student Experience

Attributes Students Want in a College, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



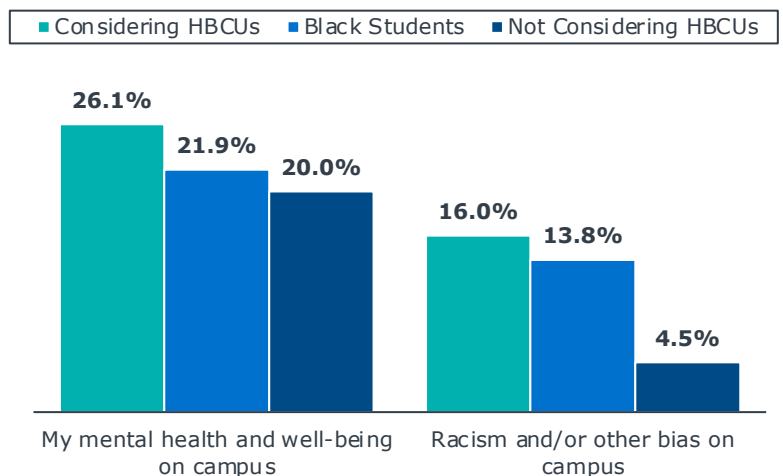
HBCU-Seekers Are More Likely to Say Mental Health and Racism Are Top College Concerns

When we asked students about their top concerns related to college, we found that students considering HBCUs were more likely to name mental health and racism compared to their peers. It’s worth noting that [additional analyses of this survey](#) determined that mental health concerns about college have increased among the general student population as a result of the pandemic.

At the same time, several HBCU enrollment leaders have emphasized the idea of “family” on their campus: professors, fellow students, and other campus members feel that they have a responsibility to look out for students and ensure that they feel supported and safe. Given that prospective students’ worries about mental health have increased and that concerns about mental health and safety are more pronounced among students considering HBCUs, it’s more important than ever for HBCU recruitment outreach to effectively convey the ways that students will feel supported and safe on campus.

“As you consider your future college experience, what makes you most concerned or nervous?”

Students Could Select Up to 3 Responses, EAB Communication Preferences Survey



Source: EAB research and analysis.

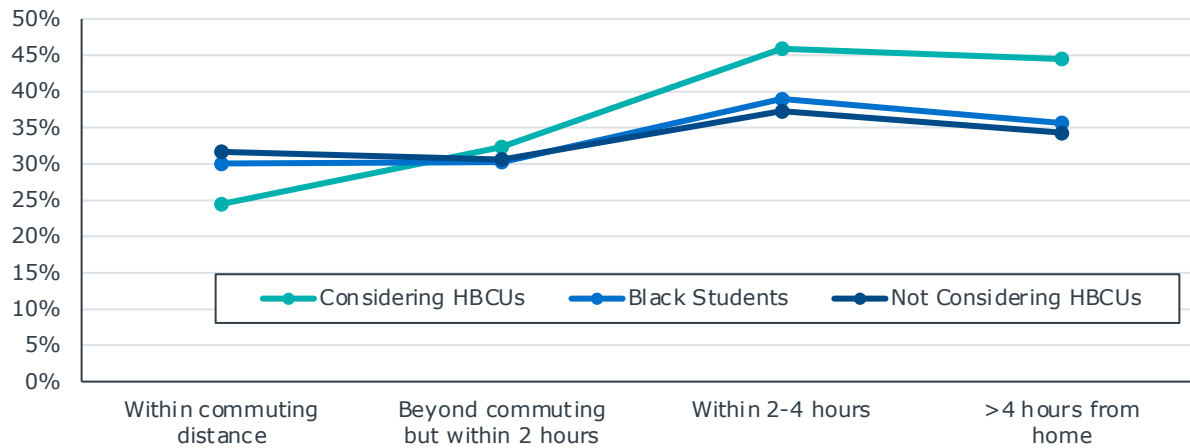
HBCU-Seekers Are More Open to Traveling for College

Students Considering HBCUs Are More Open to Attending College Far from Home

Students considering HBCUs were more likely than their peers to be exploring schools beyond commuting distance. While 45% of students considering HBCUs were open to options four or more hours from home, the same was true for only 35% of students not considering HBCUs. This finding is likely related to the locations of HBCUs, as shown in the map at the bottom of the page. While HBCUs are concentrated in the Southeast, our survey indicated that almost 60% of students considering HBCUs live outside of that region, meaning they would likely need to travel a significant distance to attend an HBCU. This indicates that the draw of an HBCU often overrides the deterring factor of attending a college far from home.

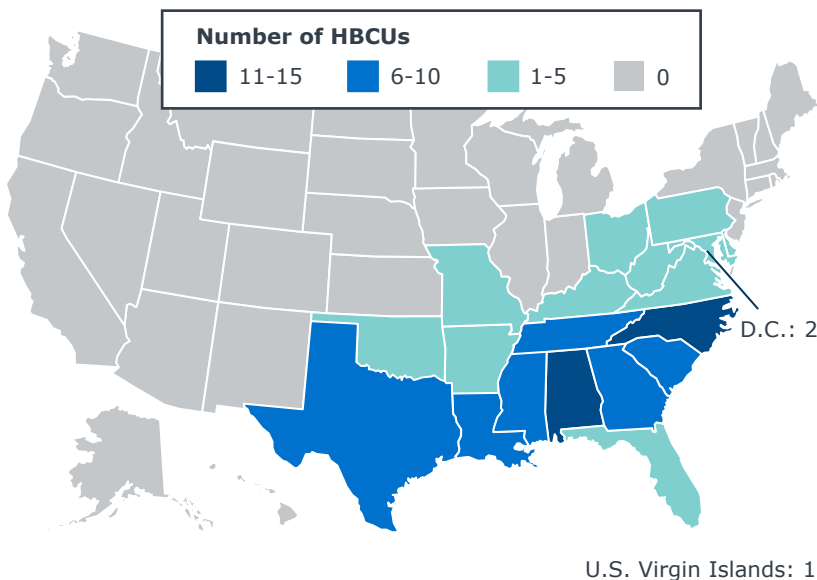
Distance from Home Students Are Considering Traveling for College

Students Could Select Multiple Options, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



HBCUs Are Concentrated in the Southeast

Locations of HBCUs by State or Territory



Locations of HBCU-Seeking Students

EAB Communication Preferences Survey

Southeast	41.3%
Northeast	22.0%
Midwest	15.0%
Southwest	13.8%
West	7.9%

58.7%

of students considering HBCUs live outside of the Southeast, meaning they would likely need to travel a significant distance to attend an HBCU.

HBCU-Seeking Students Appreciate Direct Outreach

The Power of “Traditional” Channels, Including Email and Personal Letters

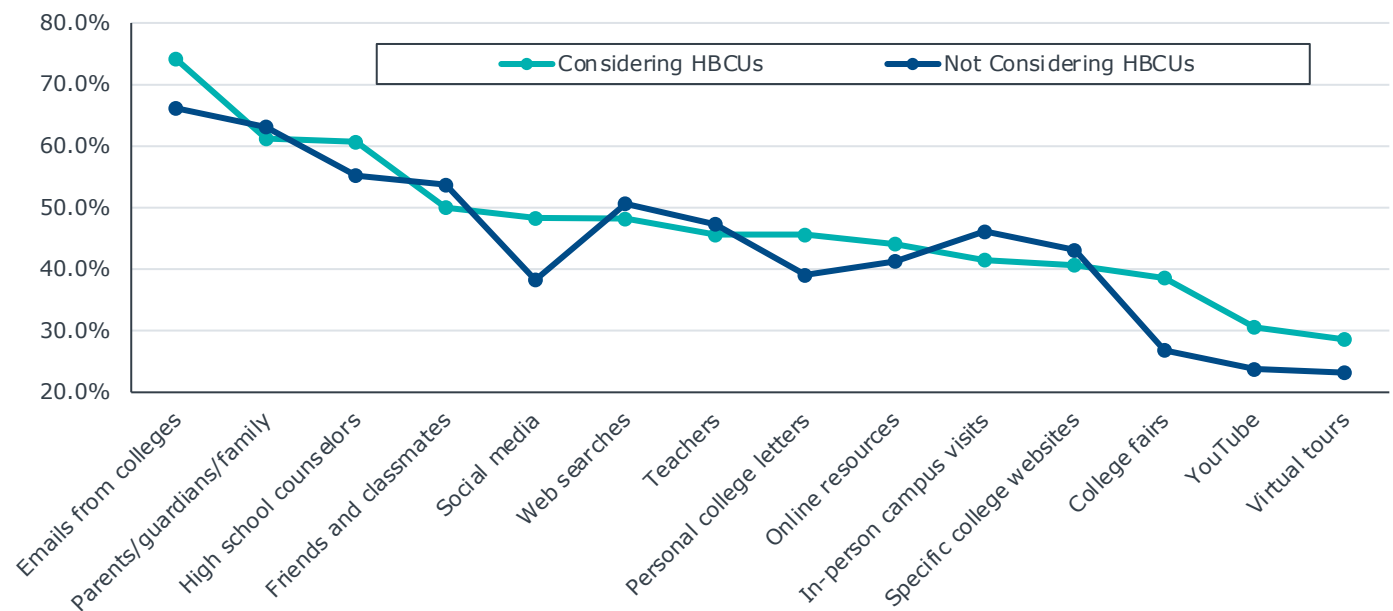
Despite discussions among enrollment professionals about the “death of email,” our survey indicates that email continues to be the preferred source of information about colleges. Among students considering HBCUs, the number saying they preferred college emails was 74%, which was significantly higher than among students who were not considering HBCUs (66%). Similar to emails, personal letters are another “traditional” direct recruitment channel that is especially influential for students considering HBCUs. About one in two students considering HBCUs said that personal letters were helpful in their college search, compared to about one in three students not considering HBCUs.

Parents and Counselors Are Highly Influential

Parents and other family members are a go-to source for all students, with about equal levels of influence across students considering HBCUs and those who are not. In addition, our survey indicates that high school counselors and college fairs are more influential for students considering HBCUs than for those who are not. These findings indicate the importance of having strong parent-first communications and high school counselor outreach strategies.

Sources Students Preferred for Their College Search

Sources Selected by >25% of Students, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



Which Sources Are Preferred More by HBCU-Seeking Students than by Other Students?

Preferred **More** by HBCU-Seekers

- Emails
- High school counselors
- Social media
- Personal letters
- College fairs
- YouTube
- Virtual Tours

Preferred **Less** by HBCU-Seekers

- Friends and classmates
- In-person campus visits

About the **Same**

- College search sites
- Parents/guardians/family
- Web searches
- Teachers
- Online resources
- College websites

Social Media and Virtual Tours Are Key Tools for HBCUs

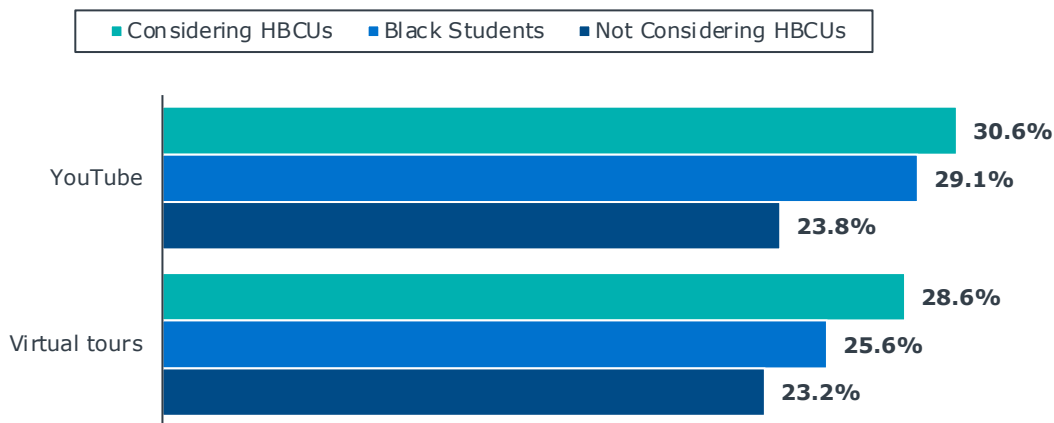
Social Media and Virtual Tours Can Help Convey Your Authentic Student Experience

As shown in the graph on the previous page, YouTube and virtual tours were both preferred by significant numbers of students considering HBCUs and are more likely to be used by students considering HBCUs than students who aren't. Our survey provides further evidence that YouTube and other social media channels can be especially influential in recruiting students to HBCUs: 80.9% of students considering HBCUs said that they had interacted with a college in some way on social media, compared to 73.1% of students not considering HBCUs. In addition, students considering HBCUs are significantly more open to paid social media from colleges, with 80.9% saying they're amenable to receiving social ads from colleges compared to 69.0% among students who aren't considering HBCUs.

Given that, as discussed in insight #2, students considering HBCUs are especially likely to prioritize student experience as a part of their college search criteria, it makes sense that they are more likely to turn to social media channels and virtual tours to help them gain insight into student life. These findings suggest that HBCUs should aim to build a robust social media presence and virtual tour to convey their student experience.

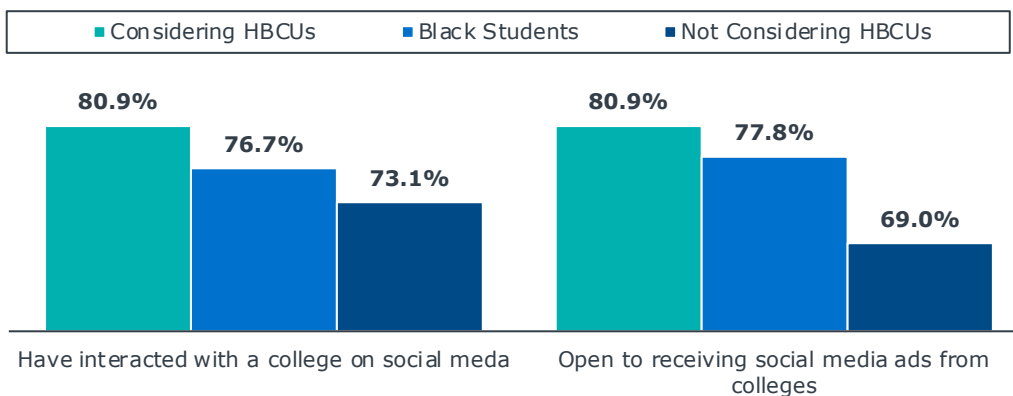
HBCU-Seekers Are More Likely than Their Peers to Use YouTube and Virtual Tours in College Search

Sources Students Preferred for Their College Search, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



HBCU-Seeking Students Are Open to Receiving Social Media Ads from Colleges

Share of Students Who Interacted with Colleges on Social Media, EAB 2023 Communication Preferences Survey



Affordability Remains a Top Student Concern

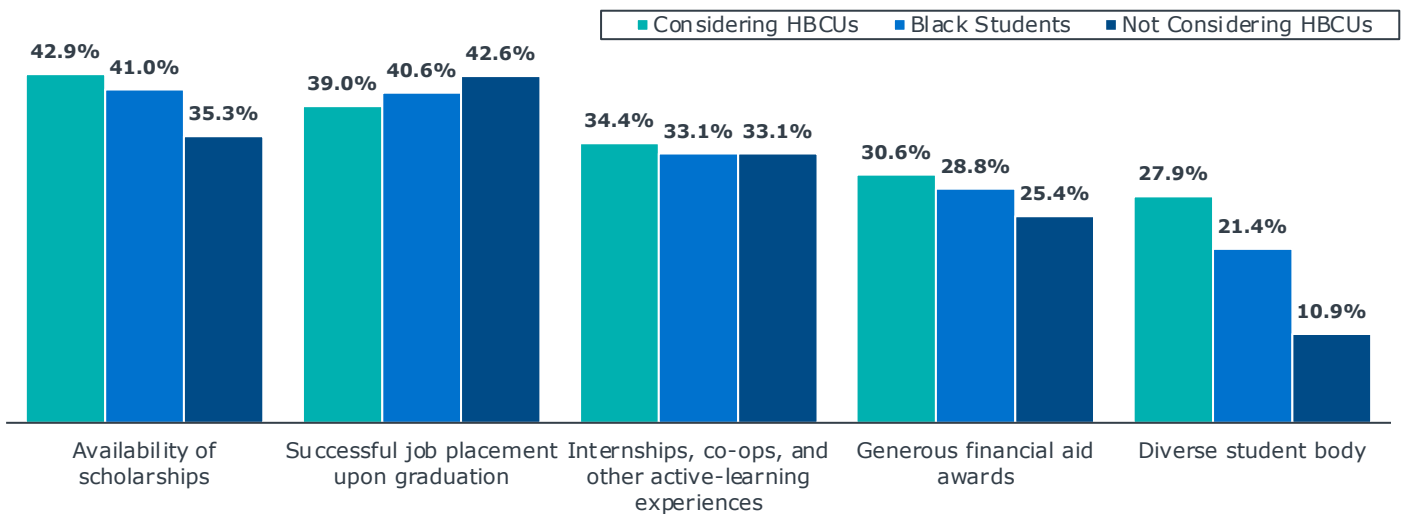
Diverse Student Body Is Seen as a Top Indicator of Value

As is true across the broader student population, students considering HBCUs are highly concerned about college affordability. However, HBCU-seeking students tend to perceive value in distinct ways. Students considering HBCUs are more likely than those not considering HBCUs to name scholarships and generous financial aid as top indicators of college value. HBCU prospects are also slightly less likely than their peers to prioritize moderate sticker price, meaning that they may be open to higher list price if net price is lower.

Students considering HBCUs are also about three times as likely as students not considering HBCUs to name diverse student body as a top indicator of value. These findings reinforce the need for HBCU enrollment teams to frame college affordability in terms of value—including the distinct value offered by HBCUs—when possible.

Perceptions of Value

“What characteristics best represent the value of a college or university?”, Top 5 Responses



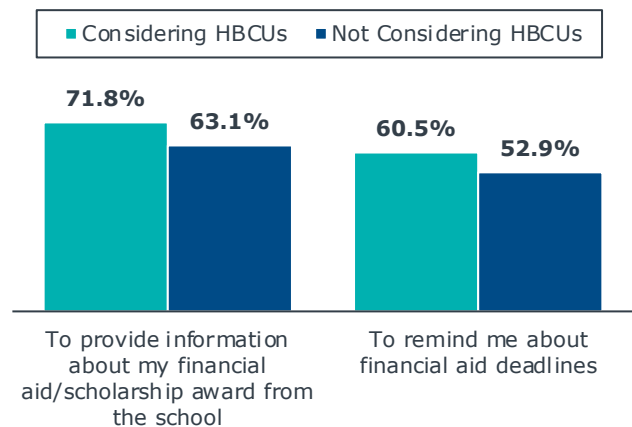
Students Appreciate Financial Aid Texts from College and High School Counselor Support

Our survey results shed light on how HBCU prospects prefer to receive information on financial aid. Nearly three-quarters (71.8%) of students considering HBCUs would like schools to text them to provide information about financial aid awards and scholarships, and 60.5% say they would like to be texted reminders about financial aid deadlines. We found that students considering HBCUs are even more interested in receiving financial aid texts than students who aren't considering HBCUs, as shown in the graph at right.

Our data also indicated that students considering HBCUs were significantly more likely to say they had relied on high school counselor support in completing the FAFSA than were their peers. This finding highlights the need for strong counselor communication.

HBCU Prospects Welcome Texts About Financial Aid

Reasons Students Would Like Colleges to Text Them



Key Takeaways for HBCU Enrollment Leaders

1 Early Outreach Is Especially Important for HBCUs.

- ✓ **Reach Students Early Through Events and Alumni Connections**
Early outreach and brand-building play a significant role in HBCU student recruitment. Leverage in-person events, community outreach, and digital media to share your student experience.
- ✓ **Encourage Family Involvement**
Inviting students to attend events with their families can help build affinity with parents and start to establish connections with younger family members who may one day be researching colleges.

2 Convey Your Authentic Student Experience.

- ✓ **Engage Students with Flexible, Responsive Marketing**
Craft a responsive, multichannel marketing strategy that articulates your student experience and helps connect students with the content that they care most about, at the right time, through the right channels.
- ✓ **Leverage Student Testimonials and Student-Created Content**
HBCU-seeking students are more likely to prioritize belonging and diversity in a college. Use student testimonials and student-created content to show the events and features that make your campus feel like a community, including campus traditions, Greek life, homecoming, and more.

3 Optimize Your Strategy in Reach Markets.

- ✓ **Strategically Target Students Without Nearby Access to HBCUs**
Ensure your lead targeting includes key reach markets, especially to areas without nearby HBCUs. A strong virtual tour can help build affinity with students who are unable to visit in person.
- ✓ **Foster Existing Connections to Reach Markets**
Evaluate your current student makeup to leverage and build on existing alumni connections from more distant areas.

Key Takeaways for HBCU Enrollment Leaders

Continued

4 Create Highly Effective Direct Outreach.

- ✓ **Don't Discount the Power of Email and Personal Letters**
Emails and personal letters are important contact points for students considering HBCUs and their families.
- ✓ **Involve Parents, Guardians, and Caregivers**
Parents and guardians are students' top influencers in recruitment. Ensure that you have robust parent and guardian email communication streams, beginning early in high school if possible.

5 Maximize the Impact of Your Digital Ads and Virtual Tour.

- ✓ **Share What Makes Your Campus Unique Through Social Media and Virtual Tour**
Pay special attention to your social media presence and virtual tour, including the use of student-created content.
- ✓ **Students Are Open to Digital Ads**
HBCU-seeking students tend to be very open to social media ads. Leverage social ads to amplify your message.

6 Address Concerns About Affordability.

- ✓ **Discuss Affordability Early and Persistently in Your Marketing**
Communicate early and often to parents and students about affordability and value, including discussions of scholarship opportunities and post-college outcomes.
- ✓ **Students Welcome Text Messages About Financial Aid**
Use texting to convey key details about financial aid details and deadlines.

Related Resource

For additional findings from EAB's 2023 Communication Preferences Survey, download our insight paper, "*Recruiting 'Gen P': 6 Insights into How the Pandemic Has Altered College Search Behavior*" at eab.com/GenP.

Research Overview

About This Research

EAB's University Research Partners conducts a biannual Student Communication Preferences Survey to learn about high school students' preferred communication sources, college search behaviors, and priorities when choosing a college. Responses were collected in March and April of 2023. Reported results include responses from 20,324 students, focusing on the 1,070 students who indicated they were considering an HBCU.

2023 Student Communication Preferences Survey Participant Profile of Students Considering HBCUs, n=1,070

High School Graduation Year	Percentage
2023 (Senior)	48.7%
2024 (Junior)	30.7%
2025 (Sophomore)	20.6%

First-Generation Status	Percentage
First-Generation	30.4%
Non-First-Generation	69.6%

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
African/African American/Black	89.6%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	2.1%
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	0.3%
Hispanic or Latinx/o/a ¹	6.6%
Middle Eastern or West Asian	0.3%
Native American or Alaskan Native	1.6%
White/Caucasian	8.0%
Other	0.6%

Region	Percentage
Northeast	22.0%
Southeast	41.3%
Midwest	15.0%
Southwest	13.8%
West	7.9%

Gender	Percentage
Female	70.5%
Male	24.8%
Nonbinary	2.2%
Other	2.5%

Household Income	Percentage
\$90,000 or less	70.7%
\$90,001-\$200,000	24.1%
More than \$200,000	5.2%

1) While Hispanic/Latinx/o/a students make up a significant portion of HBCU enrollment, relatively few of the surveyed students who indicated they were interested in HBCUs identified as Hispanic/Latinx/o/a. For that reason, we did not include Hispanic/Latinx/o/a students as a separate comparison group in our analyses, as we did with Black students.

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