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## HBCU Presidents' Perceptions About the Unique Financial Challenges Influencing Enrollment

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Tiffany Hardy Terrell

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

HBCU Presidents' Perceptions About the Unique Financial Challenges

Influencing Enrollment

by

Tiffany Hardy Terrell

MA, New York University, 1999

BS, Tougaloo College, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2026

## Abstract

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are important to the educational landscape. The problem that was addressed through this study was the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at HBCUs. Guided by the conceptual framework of transformational leadership, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions. Semistructured interviews were conducted with five former and three current HBCU presidents who had been in their role for a minimum of 1 year. Using in vivo coding, the following five themes emerged: (1) address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to impact growth and operations, (2) resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management, (3) develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will increase enrollment and student access, (4) invest in organizational capacity by improving human resources as well as optimizing internal and external operating environment, and (5) increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students. The findings have potential implications for positive social change by providing HBCUs with a strategic framework to initiate conversations about how to stabilize institutional finances. If an immersive environment could indeed be created, Black students might thrive. These students graduate with the academic credentials to contribute to the global society, fuel the growth of the Black middle class, and create generational wealth for their families.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to God that has given the desire to start, the motivation to continue, and the strength to finish. Without his grace, nothing is possible. I cannot thank Him enough for guiding me through this journey.

And to my son, Gregory, I hope this project serves as an inspiration to you. No matter where you are in life, you can do all things through Christ that strengthens you. Take the drive and motivation that is within you and make a positive difference in the world.

To my parents, my sisters (two plus one), my Walden classmates (you know who you are), special co-workers from Tennessee State University, that special line sister, mentors, friends, and those that encouraged me along the way, thank you. You helped to make my dream possible.

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To the faculty at Walden University, thank you for a wonderful educational experience that has been instrumental in my development as a student and practitioner.

Finally, I wish to thank Tougaloo College, my alma mater, which gave me a wonderful and powerful introduction to Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Just as the world has evolved, so has higher education (Martin, 2021). While higher education's product is unique—education—some of the challenges for these organizations are no different than those of other businesses such as cost, quality control, competitiveness, consumer expectations, and growth (Martin, 2021). Moreover, American higher education is experiencing an impending leadership crisis (Howell et al., 2022). There are not enough qualified people to take on the responsibility of a presidency or have the required leadership skills to move institutions of higher education forward (Howell et al., 2022) while meeting changing and impending uncertainties. For several decades, the business community has turned to transformational leadership, where leaders essentially serve as a “change agent” to lead followers in the direction of desired changes (Yaslioglu & SelenayErden, 2018). Developed by Bernard Bass, transformational leadership is one of the most popular theories business leaders use to transform organizations (Yaslioglu & SelenayErden, 2018). Transformational leadership is no longer confined to the business community as scholars are beginning to see that there is a correlation between the existence of transformational leadership and in higher education (Abu-Rumman, 2021).

As leaders of institutions of higher learning navigate complicated issues, finding ways to address challenges are needed to ensure the institution's survival (Brown, 2021). These challenges may include declining enrollments, low student completion rates, changing government funding models, growing accountability issues, and the need to undergo major curriculum reform to increase student success and completion rates

(Tarker, 2019). The most concerning of these for college and university presidents are the financial challenges that influence enrollment, the topic of this study. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), a subset of colleges and universities with predominantly African American student populations, also struggle with these issues.

To be more exact, HBCUs face a myriad of challenges such as shifting student demographics, accreditation, legal mandates, soaring costs, declining revenues, modernizing curriculum/pedagogy (Allen et al., 2020), and dated infrastructure (Wynn, 2025). Fueled by mixed reviews from the press (Commodore & Njoku, 2020), scholars themselves sometimes rarely fully grasp the significance that these institutions continue to have on the African American community today and well into the future (Allen et al., 2020) despite numerous hardships. However, a recent Gallup poll contradicts this statement (K. L. Williams et al., 2019). The poll reported that students at HBCUs felt better prepared for life postgraduation, are more engaged at work, and possess a greater feeling of overall well-being particularly in terms of their finances as compared to Black students at other types of institutions (K. L. Williams et al., 2019).

This topic was studied because HBCUs continue to play an important role in access and degree attainment for Black students (Commodore & Njoku, 2020). Yet these institutions are often left out of conversations highlighting their contributions to state higher education goals (Commodore & Njoku, 2020) despite declines in enrollment. Enrollment encompasses more than just students applying to college. It is a complex system that is often affected by external factors such as the level of state and federal funding and changes in lending laws. To meet enrollment goals, leaders at institutions of

higher education have the arduous task of translating the institution's strategic plan into success (Martin, 2020).

The potential positive social change implications of this study are worth highlighting as it relates to HBCUs. Not only do these organizations contribute to their local communities, but their reach also has regional and national implications. Positive social change as defined by Stephan et al. (2016) are the transformational processes that apply knowledge to solve key societal challenges. HBCUs continue to serve as a major resource for minority students in their pursuits for higher education. Leadership at these institutions must be strategic planners who can address unique financial challenges that influence enrollment by employing transformational leadership skills. Individuals who are matriculating through HBCUs can drive positive social change after graduation by filling the talent pipeline that is an essential component of the 21st century workforce (Muldrow & Heitner, 2021).

In this chapter, I provide a background on the problem statement and purpose of the study, research questions, and conceptual framework. The nature of the study follows definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance. Completing the chapter is the summary.

### **Background**

HBCUs have a track record of providing their graduates with upward social and economic mobility by serving a vital role inside Black communities and in the United States as a whole (Koch & Swinton, 2022). Founded post-Civil War, HBCUs provided a pathway for recently freed slaves to receive an education (Redd, 2020). In their 160-year

history, African Americans have made up the majority of students enrolled at HBCUs despite migrations in this population due to events such as the Industrial Revolution, passage of Jim Crow Laws, and expansion of the western portion of the USA (Britton et al., 2022). Today, these institutions are still a major contributor to Black student enrollment and graduation conferring 48,300 degrees in 2017-2018 (Allen et al., 2020). Yet many of these students face challenges accessing higher education (Burnett, 2020). With the majority of these institutions located in the southern United States, the 102 federally-designated HBCUs provide a means for addressing equity gaps and social mobility by providing an affordable education (Daugherty et al., 2023). Of Black professionals, HBCUs graduate 70% of Black doctors, 35% of Black lawyers, and 50% of Black engineers and teachers, further making the case for their relevance (G. S. Johnson et al., 2017).

While founded with a shared purpose, HBCUs have evolved to be a myriad of diverse institutions of higher education. The Higher Education Act of 1965 contributed to the expansion of HBCUs and defined them with the shared mission of educating Black Americans (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). HBCUs are both public and private, 4-year and 2-year, multigender and single gender, research-intensive and regional public institutions (Commodore & Njoku, 2020) with a quarter of their student population identifying as non-Black (K. L. Williams et al., 2019). Most HBCUs are located in 11 southern states accredited by the regional accrediting agency Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (Burnett, 2020).

The resilience of HBCUs can be traced through their history as facing more structural and demographic challenges than pre-dominantly White institutions (Britton et al., 2022). Funding for higher education comes in a variety of forms, but there are noted disparities in funding when examining HBCUs. Even as one looks at the history of philanthropy for institutions starting with the first financial gift to Harvard University in 1638, Lawrence and Woods (2021) contended that HBCUs are at a disadvantage because they do not have longevity being founded 200 years later. Studies consistently show severely limited federal funding to HBCUs as compared to White institutions (Allen et al., 2020).

Underresourced since their inception, HBCUs experienced an increase in financial strain after the Great Recession (Britton et al., 2022). This trend has continued to negatively impact HBCUs over the years with increased expectations of students to finance their own education, decreased state funding, federal policy changes, and the number of college-age students shrinking (Britton et al., 2022). Most recently, HBCUs along with other institutions of higher education experienced financial interruptions and declining enrollment with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating this decline (Koch & Swinton, 2022). Leaders at these institutions continue to struggle to meet these challenges as financial aid and affordability are major factors in college choice, particularly for students of color and low income (Britton et al., 2022).

For HBCU presidents, attracting the best qualified and talented students is needed for these institutions to remain relevant (G. S. Johnson et al., 2017) and financially solvent. This study was conducted to address the gap in practice that college and

university presidents should be able to understand trends in enrollment as well as communicate data-driven strategies and recommendations to meet these challenges (Howell et al., 2022). HBCU presidents, facing an increased pressure to plan for the future while often facing insufficient revenues (Clement & Lidsky, 2011), need leadership skills necessary to make smart decisions (Gasman, 2009). Desirable qualities for a president include leadership skills that include proficiency in the language of business, nonprofit, philanthropy, government, and the academy (Martin, 2020). Academic leaders are seeing an increased focus on leadership practices—often turning to transformational leadership—to face the impact of globalization and internationalization (Basham, 2012a). Transformational leaders set high standards and purposes for followers bringing out the best in people so that strategic changes can be made to address both major threats and opportunities (Basham, 2012b).

### **Problem Statement**

HBCUs were founded with the mission to educate formerly enslaved Black people. The official HBCU designation came as a result of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Gordon et al., 2021). Since their inception, HBCUs continue to play a pivotal role in successfully educating a large proportion of Black graduates (Miller et al., 2021). HBCUs graduate more than 20% of all African American students in the country (Shuler et al., 2022) by providing these students with psychosocial development, racial pride, and self-efficacy (Palmer & Freeman, 2020).

Despite their successes, HBCUs are facing unique financial challenges, many of which stem from enrollment. This is particularly troubling for HBCUs as they are seeing

declines in enrollment (Escobar et al., 2023; Koch & Swinton, 2023), especially given the decline in Black high-school graduates in southern states with the largest number of HBCUs (Johnstone & Schexnider, 2023). Only a few HBCUs have seen increasing enrollments which some administrators anecdotally attribute to social justice movements like Black Lives Matter (Gray, 2022). Student enrollment affects the financial resources of colleges and universities making it a critical component of the institution's financial stability (Humphrey, 2006). The number and type of students that colleges and universities, including HBCUs, enroll becomes even more important as overall funding for higher education decreases each year (Humphrey, 2006). For instance, the profile for African American students at HBCUs in 2004 consisted of over a third being considered low income (Gordon et al., 2021).

Through the emergence of enrollment management, the importance of financial issues in the enrollment process (Humphrey, 2006) is at the forefront of many institutional leaders, including leaders at HBCUs. The problem that was addressed through this study was the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at HBCUs. There are three pieces of evidence for these unique challenges. The first piece of evidence provided information about disparities in state funding. Since founding, these institutions have been disproportionately funded by states as compared to their peers (Boland, 2020). Not only has declining state funding contributed to financial challenges (Boland, 2020), the federal government has decreased funding to HBCUs most notably since 2006 (Redd, 2020). This was the second piece of evidence. Lynch et al. (2021) stated that HBCUs have experienced a 6% decrease in federal funding with subject area

support often experiencing even more significant declines. Performance-based funding (PBF) poses a third unique financial challenge for HBCUs. PBF is a policy in which states appropriate funding to institutions of higher education for meeting specific performance targets. Recent research found that lower resourced institutions, including HBCUs, often experience a negative impact on enrollment when implementing PBF (Boland, 2020).

Organizations experience increased structural effectiveness, change, and innovation when led by transformational leaders (Tarker, 2019). Without transformational leaders serving as HBCUs presidents, these institutions may ultimately succumb to their doors closing because their leaders will not be able to bring their vision to life, shift the institution's direction, or build a culture of innovation (Buller, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions. Enrollment at HBCUs is steadily decreasing (Escobar et al., 2023) and leaders of these institutions are not without scrutiny (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). The problem addressed was the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at HBCUs. Studying this problem will help leaders by providing strategies, within the context of HBCU enrollment management, to barriers students encounter when attempting to finance their education. Specifically, are transformational leadership skills the driving force in institutional leaders that have been able to meet the financial challenges related to enrollment? Using

a basic qualitative approach, participants in this study were asked to participate in semistructured interviews to learn their perspectives. Findings from this study may inform aspirants who wish to seek HBCU leadership roles or provide current HBCU presidents who are struggling to meet their enrollment goals best practices for enrollment management.

### **Research Question(s)**

Below are the research questions that guided this qualitative study:

RQ1: How do HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

RQ2: What recommendations would HBCU presidents have for overcoming financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used for this study was transformational leadership. First introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, it was further defined by Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio in the late 1980s and 1990s, evolving into the development of four major components (Stewart, 2006). Transformational leadership is characterized by idealized influence, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Tarker, 2019). This framework, which is detailed in Chapter 2, was chosen because studies continue to show a strong correlation between transformational leadership and innovation at institutions of higher education (Tarker, 2019). Peterson (2018), Wilson (2015), Nicdao (2019), and Lerra (2015) used the lens of transformational leaders to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional leaders in various contexts.

HBCUs are institutions of higher education that have a history of unique systemic challenges that has led to complicated present day pain points. One that is most pressing is enrollment. Since the 1970s, overall enrollment at HBCUs has steadily decreased (Hardy et al., 2019). Exacerbated by financial challenges that includes reduced state funding (Gasman et al., 2022), a rise in PBF models (Chan et al., 2023), and policies changes to federal education program (Chen & Bahr, 2021), maintaining and increasing enrollment is a major concern for HBCU presidents. Given the complexities of running a college or university, leaders of these institutions should be transformational – capable of motivating faculty and staff to meet a shared vision that can propel these institutions to be innovative to exceed enrollment goals. Data collected from semistructured interviews with HBCU presidents were analyzed with the goal of learning ways to eliminate or reduce financial challenges affecting students’ ability to fund for their education (G. S. Johnson et al., 2017). Using the lens of transformational leadership, which can produce positive results within educational settings (Tarker, 2019), this study uncovered the perceived leadership skills needed by HBCU presidents to overcome financial challenges that influence enrollment.

### **Nature of the Study**

To understand financial challenges that influence enrollment from the perspective of presidents of HBCUs, qualitative research provided a systematic approach to collecting their thoughts based on lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A basic qualitative study using interviews was ideal for this research study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that a one-on-one interview provides in-depth information on each

individual that is a participant of a study. As a researcher, conducting interviews with HBCU presidents based on the study's research questions helped identify the transformational leadership skills these leaders suggested are needed when facing financial challenges that influence enrollment. Therefore, a qualitative study looks past the surface to gain a deeper understanding of transformational leadership skills and higher education enrollment.

The interpretation of transformational leadership skills is needed by HBCU presidents so that they can determine if they are exhibiting these skills when facing unique financial challenges that influence enrollment. One way to explore and understand the meaning of this phenomenon and learn what recommendations they would offer to overcome these challenges was to engage in a form of inquiry, in this case, qualitative research. Creswell (2009) posited that qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. In this case, the data collection method to gather this information was to interview eight HBCU presidents.

For this study, I conducted a semistructured interview in which questions were prepared in advance about the topic (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012) being studied. Using this format, I asked open-ended questions which allowed participants to speak freely (Butin, 2010). Simultaneously, as the researcher asking the questions, I guided the conversation if participants lost focus as well as asked follow-up questions when needed (Butin, 2010). Published studies on transformational leadership and existing leadership questionnaires served as the foundation for developing interview questions. The

responses gathered from participants captured these individuals' behaviors as well to determine if their perceived thoughts are transformational.

This study's primary source of information or data to code was semistructured interviews with eight current or former HBCU presidents. Coding is a broad term that is often used in qualitative research to describe the process of analyzing raw data to obtain clear answers for research questions (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012). The data collection instruments I used to record interviews for later transcription were audio/visual recording equipment (cell phone) and virtual computer software (Zoom). Additionally, I utilized an interview protocol/guide to record handwritten notes. From the data, I extracted broad ideas or themes. In qualitative research, themes are directly observable or underlying aspects of the phenomenon being studied that show the relationship between two or more concepts or they offer an explanation of why something happened or what something means (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012).

### **Definitions**

The following terms and definitions were used in this study:

*Enrollment management*: A coordinated effort of systematic activities that educational institutions implement to exert more influence over their student enrollments, in the case of this study, undergraduate students (Balayan et al., 2022).

*Historically Black College and University*: The Higher Education Act (1965) defines HBCUs as

any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and

that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary of Education. (Hotchkins, 2021)

*Institutions of Higher Education:* As defined by the Higher Education Act of 2008, an institutions of higher education is

an educational institution in any State that— (1) admits as regular students only persons having a certificate of graduation from a school providing secondary education, or the recognized equivalent of such a certificate; (2) is legally authorized within such State to provide a program of education beyond secondary education; (3) provides an educational program for which the institution awards a bachelor's degree or provides not less than a 2-year program that is acceptable for full credit toward such a degree; (4) is a public or other nonprofit institution; and (5) is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association, or if not so accredited, is an institution that has been granted preaccreditation status by such an agency or association that has been recognized by the Secretary for the granting of preaccreditation status, and the Secretary has determined that there is satisfactory assurance that the institution will meet the accreditation standards of such an agency or association within a reasonable time. (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008)

For the purpose of this study, generally speaking, institutions of higher education were referring to colleges and universities (Leidner et al., 2021).

*Performance-based funding:* Policies that tie state support for public higher education institutions to performance on student outcomes such as degree completion (Chan et al., 2023).

*Strategic enrollment management:* Building on the organized and intentional process of enrollment management, strategic enrollment management marries the university's mission and long-range strategic plan and is integrated with university policies, practices, curriculum, and external environmental research (Hornberger, 2021).

*Transformational leadership:* Transformational leaders motivate their employees to high performance by inspiring and intellectually stimulating followers to overcome their own interests for a greater purpose (Martinez & Leija, 2023).

### **Assumptions**

Research studies are based on assumptions defined by three critical attributes (Burkholder et al., 2016). The three critical attributes are (1) the assumption must relate to a critical condition of the study, (2) there is basis for the researcher making the assumption, and (3) the assumption relates to a procedure of the study that the researcher may not fully control (Burkholder et al., 2016). This research study was designed to learn about the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at HBCUs from the perception of current or former presidents.

In this study, the first assumption was that all participants at one point served in the role of president at an HBCU. The institution may or may not have a separate department or division that manages enrollment. It is worth to note that while not all colleges and universities participate in strategic enrollment management, basic

enrollment functions must take place for students to attend and matriculate through post-secondary programs.

Second, this study assumed that all participants had a baseline knowledge of how enrollment functions and some knowledge of higher education finances. Enrollment is a driver for the financial standings of an institution and vice versa. A basic understanding is needed by those in leadership positions because of their interconnectedness and the influence enrollment and an institutions' finances have on each other.

Third, this study assumed that all participants were authentic in their responses to interview questions. Many factors contribute to the success of or lack of growth in enrollment year over year at an institution. Participants should feel comfortable sharing their true responses about their influence on, knowledge of, and management pertaining to enrollment at their respective institutions. Finally, it was assumed that participants in the study were concerned with the well-being of the students and decisions were made with their best interest.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope, or broad group (Burkholder et al., 2016), for this qualitative study was to focus on current and former HBCU presidents. This study aimed to address the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges that influences enrollment from the perception of the president. Delimitations for this study included limiting participation to eight current and former HBCU presidents. Purposeful sampling began with obtaining a list of current federally designated public and private HBCUs. To understand the unique financial challenges influencing

enrollment at HBCUs, a basic qualitative study using a semistructured interview design for participants was used. While the focus of this study was enrollment challenges, the knowledge gained from this study can be transferred to equip HBCU presidents with transformational leadership skills to meet other challenges that may include, but are not limited to, fundraising efforts to combat dwindling endowments, persistence of students to increase graduation rates, and crumbling infrastructure.

### **Limitations**

When conducting a research study, acknowledging that the study or data collected has limitations assists with clarifying and bringing focus to the research (Butin, 2010). With this study, several limitations were identified. One potential limitation when collecting primary data for this study was the difficulty of meeting with participants in person. HBCUs are mainly located throughout the southeast United States (Hardy et al., 2019). For selected HBCUs that are outside a reasonable driving window, virtual interviews using the Zoom platform offered a viable alternative. Zoom brings geographically separated people or groups together using common items such as a desktop or laptop computer, iPad, or cellular device.

The second limitation identified with this study was the difficulty in scheduling participants to meet the recommended number of eight participants. Additionally, for those who would like to participate, it was difficult to schedule the appropriate amount of time needed to conduct semistructured interviews. Specifically, participants who are currently serving as the leaders of complex, multi-level hierarchical HBCUs may not see the value in completing a task such as this that does not contribute to the success of or are

not related to functions associated with their current institution. This limitation could have hindered me from meeting projected, or recommended sample size to achieve saturation. Most commonly, saturation is achieved with smaller sample sizes as more data does not mean more information. Another strategy to ensure saturation is for the researcher to be skilled in interviewing so that the data quality is not compromised (Mason, 2010). To increase participation, I utilized interview tools available through Walden University's IRB site.

The pool of participants for this study included current and former presidents of HBCUs. In some cases, the former and current president shared the same institution. While the institutions are the same, this was not a concerning limitation as their responses would be different because the time period, circumstances, and experiences in which they served was not the same.

Additionally, as a graduate and former employer of two different HBCUs, my biases did not influence the outcome of the study. While I do know a handful of individuals who work at HBCUs, their positions did not put them in direct access to those institution's presidents or were able to influence the president. By utilizing the interview guide that included a script, I remained focused in such a way that my views did not sway answers or follow-up questions.

### **Significance**

This study was significant in that it fills a gap in practice that leaders at HBCUs will have a better understanding of the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment at their respective institutions and recommendations on how to overcome those

challenges. When HBCUs decrease their enrollment goals because of financial issues, the number of underserved and underresourced students who can enroll and matriculate through these institutions is limited as well. The potential contributions from this study can be used to develop financial strategies to address issues with enrollment with resilience and positive resolution, as well as bring stability and innovation to the institution. All of which are beneficial to all the institution's constituents, most importantly current and future students.

The implications from this study for positive social change can affect minority populations locally, regionally, and nationally. HBCUs are known for admitting students who are underprepared for college and graduating these same students with the skills to enter professional and graduate schools (Palmer & Freeman, 2020) and the workforce. When financial challenges affecting enrollment are addressed, these institutions can experience an increase in enrollment thus becoming a major factor in educating a diverse population of students that ultimately go on to bolster the economic competitiveness of the United States for the future knowledge-based economy (Boland, 2020). Strong enrollment at HBCUs contributes to the academic growth and social development of Black students by allowing them a safe haven to reach their fullest potential (K. L. Williams et al., 2019).

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to this basic qualitative study designed to address the problem that is the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment at HBCUs from the perspective of the president. HBCUs are unique colleges and

universities, and Chapter 1 began with a brief background on these institutions of higher education. In conducting the study, transformational leadership served as the conceptual framework. Eight current or former HBCU presidents were interviewed to learn how they perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment and what recommendations they would suggest for overcoming these challenges. The chapter concluded with the following items further defining the study: definitions of key terms, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Building on the foundation established in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 reviews the literature for the study. The chapter begins with a description of the literature review search strategy. Following, more information is provided on the conceptual framework, transformational leadership. The chapter concludes with key concepts defined or expounded on, how the study meets a gap in the literature, and a summary.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The benefits of having a college degree are substantial impacting lifetime earnings (Emery, 2020) particularly for students from low- and middle-income families (Rosinger et al., 2019). The earnings for those with a college degree have doubled in the past 30 years as compared to those without (Rosinger et al., 2019). Yet, the gap in those enrolled and the completion of low-income students have widened (Rosinger et al., 2019). Enrollment at colleges and universities is supported by federal and state governments, private and non-profit agencies, and institutional grant aid (Rosinger et al., 2019) through the efforts of the Office of Enrollment Management.

Institutions of higher education are not immune from multifaceted and complicated challenges that other organizations across the world face. Modern institutions of higher education operate in a highly complicated environment stemming from extensive cultural, racial, social-economic, political, and religious differences among campus constituents (Martin, 2020) as well as the upheaval cause by the introduction of new technologies (Martin, 2021). Effective leaders are needed to generate and sustain social progress in the 21st century while functioning at a high level to attain and uphold high levels of achievement. Balancing new reforms with maintaining institutional values and policies can be challenging and demanding for college and university presidents (Martin, 2020) particularly those leading HBCUs.

HBCUs, in particular because of their role in educating a confident, knowledgeable, and competitive African American workforce (Lynch et al., 2021), should be concerned with enrollment as higher education is one of the main catalysts for

personal, social, and economic growth in today's globalized economy (Nidao, 2019). With the declining birthrate, migration patterns, college readiness, and continuing budget constraints (Emery, 2020), leaders of HBCUs facing these challenges are worried about the legitimacy of these institutions (Miller et al., 2021). Enrollment has dropped significantly for HBCUs (Miller et al., 2021) with only 9% of African Americans enrolled in an HBCU in 2015 (Miller et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the cost of higher education has dramatically increased (Juban et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further exasperated the drop in enrollment with students of underrepresented minorities being affected the most (Prescott, 2021).

College enrollment is supported by federal and state governments, private and nonprofit organization, and institutions themselves which includes institutional grant aid (Rosinger et al., 2019). Many factors—mostly financially-related— impact enrollment including debt, cost of enrollment and the potential return on investment (Baker, 2019). Rightfully so, leaders of HBCUs should be concerned as enrollment management is one of the most time consuming areas for college presidents (Martin, 2021) and fastest growing areas for staff in higher education (Wendt et al., 2022).

Based on the literature, this chapter provides the support needed to study the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment as well as recommendations to overcome these challenges at HBCUs from the perceptions of HBCU presidents. In this chapter I discuss the search strategy used, provide a rationale for the selection of specific search terms, and a lay out a discussion on the conceptual framework. This chapter concludes with a discussion on key terms based on the literature found.

### Literature Search Strategy

When conducting a literature review, search terms were key to drilling down to find the research that supports the study. Search terms that I used included *higher education, HBCU, leadership, president, chancellor, transformational leadership, funding, enrollment, challenges, and enrollment management*. I used phrases to represent a specific search term so that I would not eliminate the term because it was abbreviated or if an acronym were used. For example, “HBCUs or Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Historically Black Colleges” and “strategic enrollment management and SEM” ensured that all articles with any version or combination is included in the search results returned.

Development of the topic was an iterative process beginning with broad terms and continuing through iterations of combining various search terms. This process of narrowing down phrases created a solid list of search terms to conduct the literature review. Throughout the search process, the Walden library was an excellent resource that provided information on how best to utilize databases and search engines. The Walden Library staff was available for one-on-one appointments which I took advantage of with the goal to learn how to set up a Google Scholar alert. As with most researchers, Google Scholar is one of most popular search tools used when conducting scholarly research. Google Scholar indexes most academic papers, dissertations, and books that are available online (Kalhor et al., 2022).

Filters were used to ensure that articles were relevant and peer reviewed. For current research, I selected the year range of 2020 through 2025. Additionally, I checked

the “Peer Review” and “Full Text” boxes when I conducted searches. An additional filter was “publication type” to narrow the search down to journal articles to eliminate reports.

The majority of databases used were DOAJ, ERIC, Sage Journals, ProQuest, and JSTOR. Additionally, statistical information about colleges and universities were found using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This database is a large-scale survey that collects institution-level data from postsecondary institutions in the United States and other U.S. jurisdictions which includes graduation rates, tuition and fees, enrollment, campus safety, and number of employees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The results of searches concluded with 114 sources of information and one database containing federally reported data for all colleges and universities.

### **Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation**

The college presidency is a complex position requiring leadership skills to manage institutions (Al-Asfour et al., 2021; George & Rose, 2025). With new challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice and equity affecting enrollment at institutions of higher education, the preparedness of the college president has come into question (Al-Asfour et al., 2021) now more than ever. This is particularly troubling for presidents of HBCUs as nationally Black people are dying 2.5 times the rate of their White counterparts from COVID-19 and the ongoing victimization of Black people because of increasing racial and social injustice (Murty & Payne, 2021). Al-Asfour et al. (2021) found that unpreparedness is a major factor in job terminations and contract non-renewals for leaders at institutions of higher education.

With an increasingly uphill battle to remain relevant, higher education leadership is often viewed through business leadership models (George & Rose, 2025) to find solutions. Educational leadership has evolved with transactional, transformational, and transformative leadership theories (Emery, 2020) being the most commonly used. When leaders shape and inspire followers to move beyond individual goals and unite to affect change that supports a common purpose of improvement within the organization, transformational leadership (Emery, 2020) is exhibited. The theory that supports the conceptual framework for this study was Bass's (1985) theory of transformational leadership. His theory defined the factors – charismatic, considerate, and intellectually stimulating – that leaders possess who have led their organizations to great success over challenges facing the organization. Bass's theoretical work has been used extensively in the business sector and has now made its way to academia. Institutions of higher learning once were not required to exercise business models but must do so today in order to survive in today's competitive market (Lawrence & Woods, 2021). The connection between transformational leadership skills and presidents of institutions of higher education who have been successful in overcoming challenges informs my research problem through the use of Bass's theory of transformational leadership.

Bass's theory informed my purpose because it provided a lens through which perceptions of HBCU presidents can be viewed to determine if they possess certain leadership skills as well as make recommendations known to overcome financial challenges affecting enrollment. Academic institutions are facing unprecedented challenges (Abu-Rumman, 2021; Martin, 2021) with the changes in the demographics of

college-going population experiencing significant changes (Emery, 2020) leading to a decline in enrollment but also an increased dependency on tuition revenue (Prescott, 2021). The extent to which HBCU presidents can respond to these challenges, particularly financial challenges that influence enrollment, is a predictor to the long-term success of the institution. Bass contends that transformational leadership is more likely to emerge in times of distress and rapid change (Bass, 1985) and used to stimulate positive changes among universities (Nicdao, 2019) and other institutions of higher education. Bass's theory informed my methodological decisions because the tenets of transformational leadership would be the basis for interview questions. While HBCU presidents may possess expertise in a particular discipline, it is the transformational leadership skills they possess that allows for the creation of shared goals that ultimately support the institution's capacity to make positive changes to practices of teaching, learning (Howell et al., 2022) and the management of the university. The purpose of this study was to learn the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges that influence enrollment at HBCUs from the perception of the president.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

As one of the most used and researched approaches to understanding leadership, Bernard Bass's transformational leadership theory builds on James McGregor Burns's earlier notion of transforming leadership as compared to transactional leadership (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022). First coined in 1978 by Burns, the definition of transformational leadership has evolved by expanding the relationship between leaders and followers

(Howell et al., 2022). At its simplest form, transformational leaders motivate employees to do more than originally expected to do as compared to transactional leaders who (Bass, 1985) motivate followers by exchanging rewards for services rendered (Peretomode, 2021).

Bass builds on Burns's ideas and developed the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) with his colleague Bruce Avolio. The MLQ has become a widely used and well researched instrument that measures transformational leadership. The questionnaire consists of 45 items which rate individuals on a scale ranging from "more transformation than the norm" to "less transactional than the norm" and is arranged around the key factors – idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022).

While it is one of the most widely used and researched theories to understanding leadership, transformational leadership theory is not without controversy (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022). A controversy that transformational leaders exhibit the trait of self-confidence which can negatively entice the leader to succumb to temptations of pride, authority, and power (Martinez & Leija, 2023). In Bass's fourth edition of *Handbook of Leadership*, he notes that there is a low number of African Americans in senior leadership positions and they scored lower on cognitive ability test (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022). This has implications for HBCU presidents because Bass's findings assert that African Americans have lower IQs than Whites (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022).

## **Factors of Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leadership is organized into four factors: charismatic leadership, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985) and inspirational motivation (Howell et al., 2022). Inspiration motivation helps leaders influence followers (Howell et al., 2022) to accept tough goals with enthusiasm and motivation to complete (Almaududi Ausat et al., 2022). Individualized consideration is when a leader respectfully (Almaududi Ausat et al., 2022) listens and understands a follower's needs (Howell et al., 2022). Intellectual stimulation allows for creativity, innovation, and strategic thinking (Howell et al., 2022) that promotes the rethinking of formal habits (Almaududi Ausat et al., 2022). Charismatic leadership, or idealized influence, builds self-esteem and confidence in their followers (Almaududi Ausat et al., 2022) often through mentorship (Howell et al., 2022).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable**

#### **Higher Education Enrollment Management**

The concept of enrollment management has been around since the 1970s (Wendt et al., 2022; Emery, 2020) when college admissions officers realized that the number of high school graduates was decreasing (Hassanein, 2020; Slim et al., 2021). Enrollment management is described as maintaining the number of new students an institution enrolls while the demand decreases (Hassanein, 2020) through a systemic set of activities (Gilstrap, 2020). The areas of new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development, and other academic areas are key components of enrollment management because they affect not only enrollment, but student persistence

which is the continued enrollment of a student from the time they enter an institution of higher learning to their graduation (Gilstrap, 2020). By streamlining how student information and records are shared, the concept of enrollment management has been institutionalized in the structure of higher education (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). New leadership positions and divisions for enrollment management have been created (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020) across all four-year non-profit institutions (Wendt et al., 2022).

As a mainstay in current higher education with more than 90% of 4-year institutions engaging in institutionalized enrollment activities (Wendt et al., 2022), enrollment management has evolved to strategic enrollment management in which the institution's strategic plan guides enrollment management (Hassanein, 2020). Strategic enrollment management includes data-informed and information-driven decisions as a core operating principal

with the goal of attracting, enrolling, and graduating a well-defined student population (Hassanein, 2020). Student experiences and outcomes are at the core of strategic enrollment management, an institution-wide coordinated effort to not only growing enrollment, but building the institution's desired enrollment profile (Weber, 2025). Designed to influence the size of characteristics of an institution's student body (Wendt et al., 2022), strategic enrollment management encompasses six assessment phases—enrollment projections, recruitment, admissions, students' journey, retention and financial support and funding opportunities (Hassanein, 2022). Metrics for enrollment management may include test-optional policies (Bennett, 2022). Integrating research and

strategy into enrollment management is needed to move the institution from being reactive to proactive (Hutton, 2021).

Data pulled from information systems and technologies, or student data systems, are pivotal to enrollment management and drives the creation of enrollment procedures by clarifying enrollment trends and providing an early alert mechanism for administrators and faculty (Hassanein, 2020). Valid reliable data in combination with increased research capacity allows institutions to proactively utilize results (Braxton et al., 2021; Ra et al., 2023). The COVID -19 pandemic forced many colleges and universities that had been slow to embrace technology, including in the area of enrollment management, to begin using data and advanced technology to advance students' educational outcomes and optimizing their experiences (Hassanein, 2022). Data accessibility and transparency across all areas of enrollment management – financial aid, admissions, registrar – is needed to breakdown silos for data-driven decision-making in strategic enrollment management (Hutton, 2021). As noted by Hassanein (2022) and Slim et al. (2021), data informs strategies and provides tools to improve an institution's overall enrollment goals such as determining the probability of enrollment of students who receive scholarships. In this case, enrollment management can shift scholarship money from those with low odds to enroll to individuals with a high probability of enrolling (Slim et al., 2021). According to Hassanein (2022), knowledgeable staff are able to analyze data to prepare budget and anticipate student needs, create fellowship/scholarships to cover upcoming semesters and years, and finally, adjust and create funds whenever possible.

However, strategic enrollment management activities and systems are not without critics or challenges. Are enrollment management practices putting students first (Wendt et al., 2022)? DeMonbrun and Warshaw (2020) noted that strategic enrollment management may increase selectivity of high academically prepared students (White students from higher-income families) due to social inequality in K-12 and decrease diversity representation. Other critiques of strategic enrollment management include it takes too much time due to the amount of time spent in meetings and the processes are too complicated and do not align to institutional values (C. Smith et al., 2020). Other criticisms stemming within the organization include the wrong academic programs, poor marketing, poor or insufficient data (C. Smith et al., 2020), and resistance from faculty and staff to embrace changes associated with new practices (Weber, 2025). Additionally, data systems and human capital are expensive costs associated with strategic enrollment management (C. Smith et al., 2020). Oftentimes, new technology is purchased without taking into account the additional cost of training or continued maintenance (Weber, 2025). While internal issues can be addressed, there are external factors affecting strategic enrollment management in which the institution has little control over (C. Smith et al., 2020). They include changing demographics, a decrease in the number of high school graduates, an increased competition among institutions, a decrease in government funding, fluctuation in the demand of certain academic majors, an increased accountability and institutional effectiveness requirement from the public, an increased demand for comprehensive career services, and the market effects of the rising cost of tuition and fees (C. Smith et al., 2020).

Hassanein (2022) stated that as the availability of funds increases so do admissions rates. Institutions serving low-income and underrepresented students do not have sufficient resources and supports to increase college completion rates (Ra et al., 2023). Current trends in enrollment management predict that the next fifteen to twenty years will be characterized by instability often caused by financial and social pressures on students, competing priorities between work and school, and students whose technological capabilities outpace those used in the classroom (Gilstrap, 2020). Strategic enrollment management's most pressing institutional policy areas include student success, student persistence, and student retention (Braxton et al., 2021). External competition from online universities also serves as a major challenge (Juban et al., 2021). Even prior to the pandemic, the University of Phoenix in its heyday around 2010 having more students than any other university receiving Pell Grants and the introduction of massively open online courses (Juban et al., 2021) present as competing factors for traditional institutions of higher education to overcome. The complexity of post-secondary institutions makes the pressure from the implementation of strategic enrollment management feel unbearable (C. Smith et al., 2020) to institutions of higher education staff. Structured processes for collaboration are the key to organizational change; strategic enrollment management implementation can only be successful through adopting a collaborative approach throughout all levels of the organization (C. Smith et al., 2020). Leadership must be involved in such that team members are encouraged to develop ideas individually and share to the larger group, communicate openly among peers, and manage tasks by aligning team members' interests (C. Smith et al., 2020).

FTE or full-time equivalence is a straightforward way to predict headcount enrollment figures for undergraduate students because it does not account for parttime students, as compared to some graduate programs (Hassanein, 2020). Strategic enrollment management uses FTE to determine the “enrollment health” of the institution (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). Enrollment yield, the percentage of admitted students who enroll, depends on how well strategic enrollment management works to entice students to attend the institution (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020).

### **HBCU Enrollment**

Post-secondary enrollment in the United States has fallen 10 years in a row (Koch & Swinton, 2022). A core source of enrollment and tuition revenue is from traditionally aged students; this group is a shrinking though (Prescott, 2021). This declining enrollment is a major threat to the role of HBCUs in higher education (Miller et al., 2021) as many HBCUs rely on tuition-driven budgets (Johnstone & Schexnider, 2023). The HBCU designation was created with the passage of Title III of the Higher Education Act in 1965 (Baker, 2019). While founded to education formerly enslaved Black people, these institutions have evolved to organization diversity—public, private, religious, and land-grant (Miller et al., 2021)—and student diversity enrolling students from all backgrounds and interests—highly ranked, middle-class and low-income students including those from underserved communities (Redd, 2020). Of approximately 100 HBCUs (Lynch et al., 2021), they are approximately divided evenly between public and private with 89% being 4-year institutions (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). Additionally, these institutions, whether

public or private, tend to have lower tuition rates than other institutions (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019).

HBCUs contribute significantly to African American students in enrollment figures overall (Daugherty et al., 2023) with 7.6% of all Black undergrads being enrolled in an HBCU (Burnett, 2020). Considering that HBCUs make up 2.1% of all degree-granting US institutions (Burnett, 2020), their value is undeniable despite funding challenges. Underfunding of HBCUs contributes to students lack of desire to enroll in these institutions compared to PWIs (Redd, 2020) which contributes to undesirable cycles of fluctuations in enrollment affecting financial stability and vice versa.

### **Higher Education Funding**

The college enrollment landscape is ever evolving, but what remains constant is the resource-constrained environment that these institutions function in (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). Funding for education can take place in a variety of methods varying by funding source and calculations to determine the amount of funding. Even though the United States has emphasized the completion of postsecondary degrees and certificates (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020), the amount spent per credential completed declined over 20% between 2003 and 2013 (Kelchen, 2019). Yet tuition levels continue to increase (Rosinger et al., 2019) making it increasingly difficult for people of color to obtain a post-secondary degree.

Trends in higher education funding particularly pertaining to Black college enrollment continue to reveal entrenched barriers to Black educational equity (Allen et al., 2020). Prior to admission into a college or university, African American families are

already at a disadvantage by lacking family resources and attendance at high schools that do not have a college bound focused curriculum (D. A. Smith & Platt, 2021) leading to academic disparities on standardized testing (Bennett, 2022). Equity focused higher education observers are concerned because funding policies may deemphasize access for historically underserved groups and produce unfavorable incentives that counter the college-access agenda (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020). Strategic enrollment management policies, while not perfect, takes into account a variety of funding sources to shape enrollment yield and retention (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). Depending on the source and level of funding per student at an institution, limited financial resources affect the scale to which enrollment management functions can be implemented (Wendt et al., 2022)

### ***Performance-Based Funding***

Performance-based or outcome-based funding is the idea that states should allocate funding based on institutions meeting educational metrics including, but not limited to, graduation rates, credit attainment, and course completion (Redd, 2020). Approximately half of U.S. states have transitioned to some type of PBF system (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020; Ortagus et al., 2023; Ra et al., 2023; Redd, 2020). In some cases, PBF is as high as 90% of state appropriation (Ra et al., 2023), yet each state's adoption looks different (Ortagus et al., 2023). Since its inception, recent policy implementations for PBF beginning in the late 2000s have moved metrics from enrollment to outcome metrics such as retention, degree completion, graduation rates, and transfer rates (Ison, 2022; Ra et al., 2023). Some PBF results have shown to have a

positive association on enrollment (Ra et al., 2023). On the other hand, no relationships between PBF policies and student outcomes exist (Ra et al., 2023). Results of PBF due vary according to institutional type, particularly when focusing on institutions with high/low tuition levels, institutions with high/low endowments, and institutions with high/low state revenue shares (Ra et al., 2023).

HBCUs' enrollment tends to be comprised of low-income and first-generation students who are less likely to graduate making it difficult for these institutions to meet these educational targets (Redd, 2020). In a study looking at institutional-level data from 2001 to 2014 of 4-year, public institution, Gándara and Rutherford (2020) found that these institutions using PBF enrolled fewer first-generation students. The correlation of education metrics and money negatively impacts HBCUs (Redd, 2020). A study by Redd (2020) cited several Louisiana HBCUs that experienced significant funding cuts due to the state's transition to the new PBF system—Southern Agricultural and Mechanical University (including the law school associated with the institution) 45% decrease; Grambling State University 36%; and Southern University at New Orleans 35%. Another example of the inequity of PBF for underresourced institutions is highlighted in the study by Ortagus et al. (2023). When comparing PBF for several Florida institutions for Fiscal Year 2019, Florida A&M, an HBCU, received no funding while Florida State University and the University of Florida received \$51.5M and \$57.6M, respectively (Ortagus et al., 2023). Beside decreases in state funding, PBF negatively impacts Pell grant revenue at 2- and 4-year institutions due to increased focus on recruitment of students from higher-income families (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020).

Although representing a small population of HBCU students, the nation's 14 federally designated HBCU (Bray et al., 2019) community colleges also face the same challenges associated with PBF. Kelchen (2019) noted that community colleges in approximately 29 states had some type of PBF system in play during 2015-2016. Unlike 4-year institutions, community colleges have a different set of levers that affect enrollment—they are able to encourage lower income, underrepresented minorities, or adult learners to enroll from limited geographic areas (Kelchen, 2019). Kelchen (2019) also found that when serving underrepresented students, community colleges—even those with equity provisions in their PBF models—exert the same amount of effort to recruit students from historically underrepresented groups as compared to community colleges who do not have performance-based models in place. Yet, with PBF, Ison (2022) found that the number of associate degrees from community colleges has declined giving rise to the number of short-term credentials completed.

In order to combat the exclusion of students who have been historically left post-secondary spaces, higher education officials should carefully examine PBF policies for improvement in equity measures (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020; Ra et al., 2023). Equity metrics and incentives for serving first-generation students should be included in PBF models (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020). Consistent monitoring of PBF (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020) and policy design that prioritize access and student success (Ortagus et al., 2023) will also help to combat exclusion of underrepresented students (Ra et al., 2023) many of whom are first-generation.

### ***State Funding***

The United States higher education landscape is decentralized with oversight and governance over many institutions determined by the state in which they are located (P. G. Rubin et al., 2022). This funding often follows the ebbs and flows of economic growth and recessions and is subject to volatility in state higher education appropriations (P. G. Rubin et al., 2022). The decline in state financial support for public higher education has been taking place for decades (Daugherty et al., 2023; Juban et al., 2021) with the Great Recession of the late 2000s having the most impact (D. A. Smith & Platt, 2021). State appropriations have declined by 19% from 2001 to 2020 with current state appropriations being \$9,598 per full-time equivalent student (P. G. Rubin et al., 2022). On top of the decline in state appropriations, students were faced with an 11% tuition increase from 2008 to 2012 (Portis, 2020). One way to make of the shortfall has been an increased focus on increasing enrollment (Juban et al., 2021). This disinvesting has been particularly challenging for HBCUs, consequently leading to the shift in costs from the states to students and families (Daugherty et al., 2023). With HBCUs receiving less funding from states over the years (Redd, 2020), these institution often increase tuition to make up the shortfall thus exacerbating difficulties for students' ability to pay (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019).

Financial inequity on the state level can be seen in funding per student at HBCUs as compared to predominately White institutions (PWIs; Redd, 2020). Redd (2020) noted that funding per student allocated at North Carolina-Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University (both PWIs) was approximately \$15,700 as compared to \$7,800 at HBCUs

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and Fayetteville State University (Redd, 2020). Without adequate funding, students select PWIs over HBCUs because their inability to compete with updated/modernized dorms and facilities, a driver in prospective freshman and transfer students' decision to select an institution to attend (Redd, 2020).

Many states have turned to Promise programs, or tuition-free college policies, which have contributed to significant shifts in enrollment across institutions that are eligible and ineligible to receive Promise funds (Bell, 2021). Students that meet certain income and academic requirements receive subsidized tuition and fees through state funded promise programs (A. Williams, 2019). Even with its growing popularity among states that include New York, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi (A. Williams, 2019) at community and 4-year institutions, promise programs are not without critique. Their positive impact on the enrollment at community colleges is not without consequences as it often diverts students from enrolling in four-year programs (Bell, 2021).

### ***Federal Funding***

In the same vein, federal funding for higher education has been at the center of politics with ebbs and flows in program support (Juban et al., 2021). In 2015, President Obama proposed America's College Promise to provide tuition free community college (Juban et al., 2021). Democratic presidential candidates in 2020 supported free four-year institutions or students should graduate debt free (Juban et al., 2021). On the other hand, in that year, President Trump proposed a \$7 billion cut in education in 2020 (Juban et al.,

2021). Most recently though, institutions received a large influx of cash to offset budgetary challenges from the Covid-19 pandemic (P. G. Rubin et al., 2022).

HBCUs receive federal funding under a variety of sources including Title IV of the Higher Education Act; Higher Education Act via Title III, Part B; (Redd, 2020), Trio programs, the Pell Grant, and support for minority-serving institutions (Portis, 2020). Designed to level the playing field and correct the past failures and discriminatory acts of governmental policies, these federal funding sources are not enough to position HBCUs on similar footing as PWIs (Redd, 2020). While HBCUs depend heavily on federal funding, over the years, this funding has decreased significantly (Redd, 2020) forcing students to take on loans to fully fund their education. Lynch et al. (2021) reported that HBCUs experienced decreases in federal funding obligations and in the area of Science and Engineering support by 6% and 17% respectively. This is particularly troubling as Daugherty et al. (2023) noted. Higher loan debt pushes talented rural students away from post-secondary institutions upon graduation, many of which are from high poverty rural areas where many public HBCUs are located (Daugherty et al., 2023). Students attending HBCUs account for a larger percentage of those borrowing at least one federal loan (subsidized or unsubsidized) as compared to non-HBCU students, 80% and 55% respectively (Baker, 2019). In a similar study on institutions in 19 southern states, Daugherty et al. (2023) found that 67% of students at 38 public HBCUC received federal student loans as compared to 48% at 182 public regional non-HBCUs. Even more telling is that the federal loan amount for HBCUs and the non-HBCUs was \$7,383 and \$6,736 respectively, a \$646 difference (Daugherty et al., 2023). Additional studies contributing to

the literature indicate that Black students accumulate greater amounts of federal undergraduate debt (Baker, 2019). Students of color are the most impacted with policy and economic changes (Portis, 2020).

One government policy related to funding that may have harmed HBCU enrollment is the increased rigorous standards applied to Parent Plus Loan program (Koch & Swinton, 2022). Designed as a way for parents to financially assist their children, the Parent Plus Loan provides a loan for qualifying parents to pay for college (Redd, 2020) expenses that other sources of financial aid do not cover (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). For HBCUs, this is troubling because there are some disadvantages associated with the Parent PLUS Loan and being that the number of Black families with these loans are increasing (Redd, 2020). The Parent PLUS Loan is a riskier type of loan which carries abnormally higher interest rates and scarcer protections for borrowers (Redd, 2020). Unlike White families who use Parent PLUS Loan less and more as a strategic move, Black families are more dependent on the Parent PLUS Loan as it is a necessity to meet the financial burden to college enrollment (Redd, 2020).

The rigorous standards of the Parent PLUS Loan negatively effects enrollment because it is hindering families from helping with the financial burden of college thus making it more difficult for students to attend college (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). In October 2011, the U.S. Department of Education brought the Parent PLUS Loan in line with those of banks by increasing the credit history standards needed to obtain the loan (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). Meaning applications with bankruptcies, foreclosures, student loan defaults, tax liens, or wage garnishments during the preceding five years and

not more than 90 days delinquent on any debt could block the approval of a Parent PLUS Loan (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). Subsequently, approvals for parents fell 11% in the first academic year following the change having an especially large impact on HBCUS because they have large enrollments of student from low-income and minority families (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). Specifically, as an example, the Parent PLUS Loan approval rate fell from 48% in 2011-2012 to 27% in 2012-2013 for United Negro College Fund institutions which are all HBCUs (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). A disproportionate decrease in enrollment at HBCUs in 2012-2013 has been statistically linked to the decline in Parent PLUS Loan recipients (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). Changes were implemented after the sharp drop by streamlining the appeals process for denials and relaxing credit standards leading HBCUs to experience the largest increase in Parent PLUS Loan recipients in 2013-2014 (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019).

### **Unique Financial Challenges at HBCUs**

HBCUs have a track record for doing more with less proven by consistently educating students, including those most often marginalized – low-income, underprepared, and underserved students (Daugherty et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exasperated their financial crisis in some cases to budgets falling to below pre-Covid 19 levels (Murty & Payne, 2021). Moreover, land-grant HBCUs founded through the 1890 Morrill Act continue to be underfunded compared to White land-grant institutions founded under the 1862 Morrill Act (Murty & Payne, 2021). From 2003 through 2015, HBCUs experienced severe step declines in federal funding which makes meeting the need for increased student services, technological infrastructure, enrollment,

scholarships, faculty and staff trainings, etc. difficult to meet (Murty & Payne, 2021). To continue to meet the mission of these organizations amidst disinvesting from states, higher loan and fundraising strategies must be central to any leader's strategic plan.

### **HBCU Leadership**

The successes of HBCUs in educating Black students is not arguable, but the recent instability in HBCU leadership is arguably a major concern jeopardizing their sustainability (Palmer & Freeman, 2020). The average tenure of an HBCU president is 4 years or less (Palmer & Freeman, 2020; Preston et al., 2021) as compared to six years for all presidents (Artis & Bartel, 2021; Martin, 2020, 2021). Given the uniqueness of the mission, context, history, and financial disadvantages of HBCUs, a noted trend of presidents from these institutions is that they are coming from student affairs background as opposed to academia (Palmer & Freeman, 2020).

In looking at individual enrollment of 50 HBCUs located in the south and southeast United States, Koch and Swinton (2022) found that individual campus decision-making and leadership are vitally important to the enrollment prosperity of the typical HBCU. Changes in senior leadership as recommended by boards should not take place until after a year in the role (Preston et al., 2021). This would include the leader of enrollment management as any changes in senior teams should be in alignment with the institutions strategic plan (Preston et al., 2021).

Presidents should no longer need to be convinced of the role of strategic enrollment management to achieve enrollment goals (Wendt et al., 2022). Leaders who are innovative understand that new ideas and policies implemented through strategic

enrollment management attracts potential students (Palmer & Freeman, 2020). Strong leadership is required for the full implementation of strategic enrollment management (Hutton, 2021). Stakeholders look at leaders in terms of accountability for how institutional funds are spent (Hutton, 2021). By evaluating the return on investment from strategic enrollment management efforts, leaders can ascertain which policies, vendors, programs, and investments are moving enrollment figures in a positive direction (Hutton, 2021). Leaders have to be cognizant of the repercussion of accessibility and affordability policies, particularly how they may affect diverse student populations (Ison, 2022). The nimbleness of leaders to react to enrollment trends is critical to the future fiscal well-being of the institutions that they manage (Prescott, 2021).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

HBCUs are experiencing a shift. Leaders at these institutions are retiring or moving within all institutions of higher education. The knowledge and skills needed for a seamless transition to the college presidency is vital as challenges continue to plague the institutions particularly around enrollment. With fewer births in 2008 because of the Great Recession of 2008, the number of college aged adults from underrepresented groups will be negatively impacted beginning in 2026 (Campion, 2020). Following the same trend, reductions in staff are expected by 2030 (Campion, 2020). During COVID, undergraduate enrollment particularly from international and historically underrepresented group declined tremendously leaving higher education with \$115 billion in losses that government aid and staff reductions are unlike to cover (Kelchen, 2022). Not only do leaders at HBCUs need to understand the uniqueness of these

organizations (Commodore et al., 2016), they should have cultivated transformational leadership skills during their careers to weather such oppositions to maintaining or increasing enrollment.

Chapter 2 provided the groundwork for this study related to how presidents of HBCUs perceive the effects of financial challenges on enrollment as well what recommendations they have on how to overcome these challenges at these institutions. The chapter began with a brief introduction to the topic studied and restated the purpose of the study. Following was the literature review strategy used to collect research that informed the conceptual background, transformational leadership theory, and key concepts. A brief history of the development of this theory accompanied its definition and descriptions of the four factors that constitute transformational leadership. The literature revealed five key concepts related to HBCUs, leadership at institutions of higher education, and enrollment.

Establishing a solid foundation of information ensures success in completing the steps of the research method covered in Chapter 3. The design of and rationale for the study are described before detailing the methodology used. Concluding Chapter 3 are statements on the study's trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

HBCUs have a storied history, yet their continued existences is necessary for the continued education of people of color. In terms of degree attainment, as of 2001, HBCUs awarded more than one-fifth of all undergraduate degrees conferred to Black American (Simms & Bock, 2014). HBUC graduates have become doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers (G. S. Johnson et al., 2017) and the like, and are a major contributor to today's workforce. HBCUs continue to struggle financially, which has been exacerbated over time, particularly with declines in student enrollment (Escobar et al., 2023). presidents at HBCUs need leadership skills so that they can develop strategies to meet the challenge of declining enrollments which ultimately affects the financial stability of the institution. The purpose of this study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges influencing enrollment at these institutions.

Chapter 3 of this basic qualitative study details the research method. First, the research design and rationale are provided which includes the research questions, the basis of this study. Following is information on the researcher's role which precedes the methodology section. Four areas – participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and data analysis – are covered in the methodology section. Trustworthiness follows which is composed of sections on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with information about ethical procedures and a summary.

## **Research Design and Rationale**

Completing a research project is an iterative and ever-evolving process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) with research questions often thought of as the foundation for the study (Thomas et al., 2009). As researchers design a study, the approach or methodology selected for data collection and analysis should align with the research questions of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The methods of qualitative research must have verifiable procedures, analyses, and conclusions so that other informed researchers would arrive at the same conclusions (Burkholder et al., 2016) when working with the same data. A basic qualitative research study using semistructured interviews was selected for this study as it was the best approach to learn from the perspectives of HBCU presidents the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges. The rationale for selecting this tradition, qualitative research, was to answer the following two research questions.

RQ1: How do HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

RQ2: What recommendations would HBCU presidents have for overcoming financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

In basic terms, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) defined qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world.” In other words, researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Qualitative research uses a variety of interconnected, generic activities such as theory, analysis, ontology,

epistemology, and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world. Each of these activities intersects and informs the other steps (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) with the researcher serving as a pivotal element.

Qualitative research is gathering data about a particular research problem from the perspective of the people who are being studied. A range of methods such as questionnaires, interviews, document analysis, and testing can be used to collect data (Lambert, 2012). The best option for this qualitative study was to conduct interviews (Lambert, 2012). Interviews allow researchers to explore in-depth an individuals' attitudes, opinions and feelings (Lambert, 2012). It is the process of using interpretive research methods to understand phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their experiences and the social work (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) they perform. When interviewing, researchers can select from several options for carrying them out – structured, unstructured, semistructured, group, or focus groups (Lambert, 2012).

Focus groups were an option for consideration early in the methodology design process for this research study. Typically with a focus group, six to eight pre-determined people debate amongst themselves issues raised by the researcher (Lambert, 2012). With this approach, novice researchers can hire moderators to conduct the focus group as this minimizes the researcher's bias influencing the direction of the focus group or reduces the views of the participants taking over (Babbie, 2017). However, the feasibility of

scheduling one or two focus groups with individuals with huge leadership responsibilities, i.e., presidents of HBCUs, was incredibly low. Asking each HBCU president to agree upon a mutually convenient day and time would have been painstakingly difficult. For this reason, I eliminated focus groups and the option of a group interview where the researcher asks questions of two or more people at the same time (Lambert, 2012).

As its name suggests, semistructured interviews fall between structured interviews and unstructured interviews (Lambert, 2012). Structured interviews occur when the researcher prepares all the questions in advance and the interviewee answers them one by one (Lambert, 2012). Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, occur when the researcher and interviewee explore broad areas related to the research topic without prior planning (Lambert, 2012). Questions are prepared in advance for semistructured interviews by the researcher, but additional questions can be asked or additional topics discussed in semistructured interviews (Lambert, 2012). This type of format allowed participants in this study to speak freely while the researcher sets the focus of the conversation and asks follow-up questions as needed (Butin, 2010). The responses gathered from participants captured their words and behaviors as data to answer the study's research questions. In the case of this basic qualitative study, how HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment was key to determining what recommendations they have for increasing enrollment. Engaging in qualitative research as discussed allowed me the opportunity to explore and understand the meaning of this phenomenon and answer RQ1 and RQ2 (Creswell, 2009).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is critical to the success of any research study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) discussed qualitative researchers constantly engaging critically in qualitative research to understand human complexities and how they interact and intersect. As the main instrument collecting data, I had the responsibility of engaging with and understanding the setting, participants, and study of the phenomena in context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) and acknowledging any biases or conflicts of interest. Previously, I was employed by an urban, state funded HBCU in Tennessee. In that role, I did not have the opportunity to interact with the president while completing day to day duties. Additionally, the president that I served under has since retired prior to completion of this study. As I completed this study, I was employed at a small, private HBCU in Mississippi. Unlike my first HBCU employment, the president that I serve under was fulfilling the role on an interim while I completed the study. To be discussed later in the *Participant Selection* section, these factors disqualified these individuals from inclusion in the study. While I do know several people in high level leadership positions in the HBCU world, these personal and/or professional relations did not yield any power over participants.

My plan that combatted any ethical issues or unbeknown biases was to use proper interview protocols. I strictly followed an interview script so that any biases I had would not lead me to stray from predetermined questions, thus influencing answers. All interviews were recorded so that an exact record of what the participant shared were used for data analysis. Another bias check was performed by having participants review and

verify that the information collected was synthesized and stated as intended. Additionally, I kept a reflective journal with an abundance of analytic notes to reduce biases and ensure trustworthiness (Saldaña, 2021).

### **Methodology**

Often thought of as the way a topic is investigated and how answers to research questions are reached, the methodology used must be appropriate and rigorous in design (Burkholder et al., 2016). Questionnaires, interviews, document analysis, and testing are several methods used to collect data (Lambert, 2012). The methodology selected for this basic qualitative study using interviews for data collection is discussed in this section.

How participants were selected, what collection instruments were used, what procedures for collecting data were utilized, as well as, how the data was analyzed is addressed.

Additionally, sections on the trustworthiness of this study include a discussion on the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study and is followed by ethical procedures.

### **Participant Selection**

The sampling strategy provided guidance on how to select participants for this basic qualitative study (Burkholder et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling was used as the sampling strategy because it allowed for in-depth focus on a phenomenon with the goal to find individuals that provide insights into the specific situation that is being studied (Burkholder et al., 2016). These guidelines helped me delineate the criteria required to find appropriate participants for the study to achieve saturation (Burkholder et al., 2016). Saturation happens when continued data collection does not add new themes, there is no

unexplained phenomena, and is most commonly achieved with smaller sample sizes (Mason, 2010). Due to the small number of federally funded HBCUs (approximately 100) as compared to the more than 3,400 non-HBCU colleges and universities (*Characteristics of Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions*, n.d.), the pool of participants was smaller (eight individuals) and saturation was achieved.

The population for this study was current and former presidents of HBCUs who had been in their roles for at least a year. To obtain the pool of participants for recruitment to participate in the study, firstly, I had to acquire a list of current federally designated HBCUs. Because there are only 102 HBCUs as reported by the federal government (Daugherty et al., 2023), public and private institutions were included in the study to ensure the desired number of participants who met the length of service requirement was achieved. When compiling the list of presidents for each institution, I reviewed their official bio to determine how long they have been in this position. If a bio did not contain the start date or no bio was located on the website, then an internet search was conducted to locate articles or position announcements detailing when the president would assume office. Additionally, I completed an online search to determine if the potential participant would be vacating the office soon by looking for announcements related to retirement or movement to another institution.

To ensure that the desired sample size of eight to 10 individuals was met, the pool of participants included former HBCU presidents. Their inclusion as participants was dependent, as described above, on the institution being a federally recognized HBCU and having served in that capacity, gaining one full year of experience in the role. Typically,

institutions of higher education have their history posted on the website which includes a list of past presidents. Internet searches, including social networking platforms like LinkedIn, provided current employment location and a means to make contact. Another consideration for the participant pool were individuals serving in interim capacities. These people would not be considered for the study as their investment or scope of responsibilities may not be the same as a full-time, permanent employee.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University is responsible for ensuring the research is compliant with the university's ethical standards as well as U.S. federal regulations. The two basic steps for IRB approval were to complete the application and submit it to IRB for approval. As per their policy and depending on committee feedback, a revised application would need to be resubmitted. Once approval was granted and the *Notification of Approval to Conduct Research Study* had been received, I began contacting participants to collect data for analysis.

### **Instrumentation**

There are many types of instrumentation that can be used for data collection and researchers should select the best method based on their type of study. For this basic qualitative study using semistructured interviews, the interview protocol was the main data collection instrument and source to meet the study's purpose of exploring HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment at these institutions as well as recommendations to overcome these challenges. One characteristic of a good qualitative interview is a solid interview guide or protocol (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using the study's conceptual framework, Transformational

Leadership Theory, interview questions were developed based on the research questions. Additionally, the literature review which served as a basis for the study's research questions also guided the development of interview questions.

Babbie (2017) defined content validity as the degree to which a measure covers the range of meanings included within a concept. To ensure content validity for this study, the interview protocol was developed, formatted, and tested prior to beginning any interviews. To craft the semistructured interview questions, I based them on themes evolved from the literature review and the conceptual framework, Transformational Leadership Theory, by reviewing questions contained in the MLQ. The MLQ, developed by Bruce J. Avolio and Bernard M. Bass, is the most frequently used leadership measure in scholarship and organizational practice (Bajcar & Babiak, 2022). The questions developed from this combination explored participants thoughts, opinions, and feelings on the challenges that negatively impact enrollment and what recommendations they have for overcoming financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions. Each interview question was matched with one of the two research questions to ensure alignment with the purpose of the study.

The interview questions developed for this study were open-ended for the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. Another component on the interview protocol was a place to notate behavioral observations (Butin, 2010). To test the interview protocol, I discussed its format and content with colleagues and peers in Walden's EdD program. While ideal, I was not able to test the interview protocol with individuals who were currently serving as HBCU interim presidents. Changes were made to address any

feedback which included the addition or deletion of questions or rewording questions for clearer understanding. During this entire process, I kept notes and practiced reflective thinking as additional steps to establish content validity.

Additional instruments that helped with the collection of data were video and audio recordings. These could be obtained whether the interviews were conducted in person or virtually. For transcribing data, I outsourced this task to a reputable company. Nvivo, and Microsoft Word and Excel were used to manage the coding of data and additional information or notes collected during the interview. As researchers work through the data collection process, it is to be understood that no data collection is perfect (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012) and best practices should be used as to not compromise the data or hurt the participants.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Finding appropriate participants is a priority for researchers completing a research study. For this basic qualitative study, interviews were the mechanism by which participants would share examples, experiences, narratives, and stories related to the topic of the study. In semistructured interviews, questions are prepared in advance so that extended conversation happens between the researcher and interviewee (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012). The goal was to achieve saturation (Burkholder et al., 2016) by collecting rich, detailed information through in-depth qualitative interviewing. Saturation is when no new or relevant data needs to be collected as recurring patterns and concepts continue to emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative studies, the number of participants does not determine saturation as does the breadth and depth of the data collected. There is no

set number for saturation, but an estimate can be based on similar studies (Burkholder et al., 2016). For this basic qualitative study, the number of participants from recruitment efforts to participate in semistructured interviews was eight current or former HBCU presidents.

### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment for this basic qualitative study followed the prescribed steps below after Walden University's IRB approved the study. Using the list of federally designated HBCUs, I created a spreadsheet in Excel of current HBCU presidents to track their recruitment and participation in the study. The tracker also contained a list of criteria for participation in the study to eliminate individuals who are not eligible to participate. Each institution typically would have publicly available information for each president which consists of full name, email address, and telephone number. Additionally, when available, I located the email address of the president's chief of staff, administrative assistant, or second highest-ranking staff member. These individuals were copied on the survey solicitation email to garner additional support from the president to complete the survey as well as to encourage open rates.

The recruitment email explained the study, provided details on informed consent, and made the ask to be interviewed in-person or virtually. The standard "Consent Form" provided by Walden University was attached to the email to ensure participants were voluntarily participating in the study. While Walden University provides email templates for participant recruitment, a specific letter was needed for an audience of this stature. I consulted with IRB about the best practices in communicating with executives and

proceeded after they granted approval to changes to the standard template. To assist with recruitment efforts, I sent subsequent emails when responses – positive or negative – were not received in a timely manner. When prospective individuals had questions about the study, my contact information – Walden University email address and cell phone number – was included in the recruitment email. Additionally, I had a network of peers that assisted in my recruitment efforts because I did not know any HBCU presidents personally. My personal connections sent emails or made phone calls on my behalf to encourage prospective individuals to participate.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection is an iterative process that is integral to any qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this basic qualitative study using semistructured interviews, I, as the researcher, was the primary data collection instrument. In order to obtain rich, detailed information, I built trust by being friendly (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012) and asking open-ended questions. The goal was to make the interviewee feel comfortable enough to answer not only easy questions, but those that may be uncomfortable or controversial in nature (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Often controversial questions are needed to collect data to answer research questions, and trust helps build credibility and confidentiality of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The time period allotted for each interview was 45 minutes as these individuals have busy schedules.

The location of data collection events was virtually. When conducting virtual interviews, I used the Zoom platform and the program's feature to record the meeting. Because technology is not fool-proof, I logged onto the platform 15-20 minutes early to

troubleshoot any issues. Prior to the virtual interview, I continuously checked my email so that I could provide the interviewee simple instructions for logging on and my contact information should they have any issues. If for some reason, the participant was not able to connect virtually, the interview would be conducted via phone. I did not have to go this route as all interviews were conducted using Zoom. However, I did use the voice recorder on my phone as an alternative method to record the audio of the interview. For each method of recording the interview (Zoom platform and I-phone), I downloaded the video and audio components for transcription. Data was stored on a desktop that was password protected. Additionally, a reflective journal was used to collect notes and observations. It stored securely in a locked file cabinet when not in use. The frequency of the interviews was based on the availability of the participants. While the desired period for collecting data would be two months from the date of the first recruitment email with the goal of completing one to two interviews per week, this was not the case. Interviews were conducted over a period of five months.

### *Participation*

Interviewing is not without risks (Burkholder et al., 2016), and the researcher should take every precaution to avoid practices that would not obtain the most credible data. For interviewing in this research study, I followed an interview protocol or guide designed to make sure the researcher collects information to answer the study's research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Based on best practices and IRB approval, the interview guide provided a pathway from start to finish for data collection that included an introductory script, instructions for the interviewee, standard questions with the

opportunity for more open-ended follow-up questions, a place for notes to jot about behavioral observations (Butin, 2010), and closing comments and next steps. Within 48 hours of the completion of each interview, I submitted the file to the pre-selected external vendor for transcribing. While working through this process, I kept all IRB guidelines in mind to ensure that the data is not compromised, the participant is not harmed, or confidentiality was not broken. After completing the data analysis, I employed member checks to reduce biases in the study and promote confidence in that the findings have been counterbalanced with limitations identified (Chenail, 2010). Additionally, the transcriptions were provided to each interviewee for review and feedback prior to starting data analysis and coding. Following, participants were thanked and informed of next steps in the process which included information on how the data would be stored and then destroyed after five years.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Researchers completing qualitative studies work directly, and intimately, with the data they collect. They play a pivotal role in facilitating the collection of data which is the connection between the research questions, purpose, and results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In order to answer a study's research questions, the data must be selected and sequenced in a plan that optimizes its analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative research, coding is a broad term that is used to describe the process of analyzing raw data to obtain clear answers for research questions (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012). However, it is one step in the process which includes coding, categorizing, and creating themes from collected data.

In its simplest form, coding is when a portion of text or visual data is assigned an attribute, idea, or quality (Saldaña, 2021). For this research study, I engaged in inductive analysis as the type and procedures for coding the data (Saldaña, 2021). Codes can emerge from interviews, observations, or text-based data that is collected during fieldwork (Nichols et al., 2015). After collecting the data for this study through semistructured interviews, I employed the services of a transcription company, Rev, to transcribe the recording.

Upon receipt of transcripts, I was prepared for multiple reviews of the data for best analysis because coding is an iterative process. Using the process of first cycle and second cycle coding, large segments of information were interpreted that allowed the participants' perceptions of their experiences to emerge (Blake, 2018). In vivo coding, or codes created from direct quotes, was used during first cycle coding (Mitchell, 2018). I selected in vivo coding because it is often a first choice for novice researchers because it gets as close to the data as possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In vivo coding represents the participants voice by using their own words to identify codes and themes in the data (Mitchell, 2018). This frames the study in the participants' everyday lives, thus keeping researchers from using their own words which may devalue the codes and themes in the data (Mitchell, 2018).

In the second cycle of coding, codes can be reconfigured into a smaller number, or larger segments of text can replace several smaller ones (Saldaña, 2021). Building on codes from first cycle coding, are categories – a collection of codes with shared attributes, meanings, or intents (Saldaña, 2021). Categories are labeled with a word or

short phrase (Saldaña, 2021). Themes can be thought of as the overarching umbrella for data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). Developed from one or more categories, themes represent a directly observable or underlying aspect of the phenomenon being studied (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2012). Themes not only show the relationship between two or more concepts, but they also offer an explanation of why something happened or what something means (H. Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Continuous review and reflection help to alleviate discrepant cases in the data analysis process.

Thematic analysis is appropriate when research is conducted on people's perspectives on the concept of the topic under investigation (Saldaña, 2021). Saldaña (2021) recommended that researchers complete thematic analysis by looking for qualities such as repetition of ideas, participant terms and categories, metaphors and analogies, naturally occurring transitions or shifts in topic, missing data, and theory-related material such as sociological concepts. Upon concluding the thematic analysis of the information collected during the interviews, Microsoft Word and Excel were used for data management of codes, categories and themes. Microsoft Word allowed for the text to be highlighted, bolded, and rearranged for easy coding. Excel was used to sort and group information in an efficient manner using pivot tables and the filter option. The data is presented in tables and diagrams so that the readers can make sense of the findings that are presented (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). All data was securely stored to avoid any compromise in confidentiality or data corruption.

## **Trustworthiness**

By examining the ways in which participants experience, perceive, and make sense of their lives, qualitative researchers can develop an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Yet, qualitative research continues to be questioned about the quality of findings (Kornbluh, 2015). Even though some individuals feel that trustworthiness cannot be achieved in qualitative research, there are several measures that can be used to meet validity and reliability standards. Four criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – as described below were used to determine the level of trustworthiness in this basic qualitative study (Shenton, 2004).

### **Credibility**

Qualitative research should consider and deal with all the complexities and patterns that are not easily explained. Credibility, a criteria for trustworthiness, is vital to the design of the research project (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) and the researcher's instruments and data. Researchers can employ several strategies to achieve credibility. For this basic qualitative study to address the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment as well as recommendations to over these challenges from the perception of the president, I utilized members checks. Member checks is the process by which the researcher takes preliminary analysis back to participants to verify that the researcher's interpretation of the data is true (Burkholder et al., 2016). Without member checks, the researcher may design a study that is biased (Burkholder et al., 2016) and ethical violations may occur. Member checks allow researchers to feel confident in the findings they present because it has been counterbalanced with limitations identified (Chenail, 2010). An additional

strategy, reflexivity which requires the researcher to be aware of their influence on the development and enactment of the research process and findings was utilized (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Transferability**

Qualitative research is designed to develop descriptive, context-relevant statements. This is achieved through transferability, or the way qualitative studies can be transferable to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness. One such strategy to establish transferability is to include detailed, or thick descriptions of the data so that readers of the research can make comparisons to other contexts based on as much information as possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this basic qualitative study, I collected and provided information on each current or former president because background data establishes the context of the study and phenomenon in question (Shenton, 2004). The findings from this research study can be used to help HBCUs not included in the study develop solutions to positively influence enrollment.

### **Dependability**

Dependability, or the stability of the data, can be obtained (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) when overlapping methods are used in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). The strategy that was used to establish dependability in this basic qualitative study was triangulation. Triangulation strategies help the researcher consider whether there is enough data and if the data obtained is the right kind to provide quality and depth of information to answer the study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To achieve dependability, researchers triangulate and sequence data collection methods in a systematic way to allow

for authentic and stable interpretations to emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this basic qualitative study, I kept detailed notes of all actions related to interviewing participants and collecting supporting documentation, and in similar vein, an audit trail which is defined below.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the study's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of participants without the influence of the researcher (Shenton, 2004).

Researchers should disclose any biases within the research study along with detailed methodologies so that the reader can determine how far the data and constructs emerging from the study may be accepted (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation strategies, researcher reflexivity processes, member checks, and external audits are several ways to achieve confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this basic qualitative study, an audit trail and reflexivity was used to meet confirmability.

An audit trail is a detailed account of how the data was collected, how categories were derived, and how decision are made throughout the study (Burkholder et al., 2016). Field notes, memos, reflection journals, and other types of reflective documents are provided to external analysts to assess the confirmability of this basic qualitative study (Burkholder et al., 2016). Reflexivity takes place when researchers recognize, or become aware of their identity, positionality, biases, assumptions, values, and subjectivities that may influence the research process and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using self-reflective practices, researchers must be vigilant in reassessing their relationship with research participants, data generated, and analytical interpretations so that the research

designs and processes are not compromised (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative researchers who engage systematically and critically in reflexivity produce more complex and ethical research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The treatment of human participants in a research study should be guided by ethical procedures to ensure subjects are not harmed. All contact with subjects were respectful, professional, and appreciative in manner. This basic qualitative study was conducted using semistructured interviews after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB. IRB provided directions for obtaining ethical approval that complies with the University's ethical standard as well as U.S. federal regulations. As I mapped out how data were collected, best practices were included to check for biases and account for ethical considerations. I was employed with a small, private HBCU during the data collection process. Because of this, all communication that is tied to this study was sent from my Walden University email address as an additional tactic to limit biases from participants who may have opinions about my place of employment or colleagues through previous professional interactions. Additionally, it was communicated in all recruitment materials that the identity of participants would remain anonymous by assigning pseudonyms. The primary predicable adverse event for this study was that a participant is relieved of their duty as president prior to their completion of the interview. While this was not the case for this study, if it were to happen, that participant would not be included in the study and additional recruitment would be necessary for a replacement

to meet saturation. No other unexpected ethical considerations arose, or else they would have been addressed with best practices to ensure no ethical compromises occurred.

Once subjects agreed to participate in the study through signed informed consent, the treatment of data collected was guided by safeguards to protect from breaches or the corruption of data. Passwords were applied to programs when applicable and documents were housed in secure folders. The computer was password protected, and external flash drives were secured in a safe with only the researcher having access to the key. While an external company was used to transcribe the data, they are committed to safeguarding their customer's data by maintaining compliance with several internationally recognized and industry-specific security and privacy standards. Additionally, a plan to properly dispose of data five years after the study has been published was developed.

### **Summary**

With this basic qualitative study, Chapter 3 detailed the method used to design this study explored the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment at HBCUs as well as recommendations to overcome these challenges from the perception of the president. Beginning with a restatement of the study's purpose followed by the research questions and role of the researcher, Chapter 3 set the foundation for the methodology to be discussed. The methodology detailed each component needed to complete a research study using semistructured interviews. Components included how participants were selected, the instruments used to collect data, the process by which participants were recruited and engaged in interviews, and how the data were analyzed. To achieve trustworthiness, or rigor of the study, issues of credibility, transferability, dependability,

and confirmability were addressed. Ethical concerns were addressed at the end of the chapter. Upon approval from Walden University's IRB, the study was conducted as outlined, and the results are presented in Chapter 4. Detailed information is provided about the setting and how data was collected and analyzed. The data collected as the results of the perceptions of participants are explained using text and tables. Additional evidence to attest to the trustworthiness of the study are shared in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges influencing enrollment at these institutions. Designed to address the problem of financial challenges affecting enrollment, eight current and former HBCU presidents participated in interviews for this study. Findings from this study may inform aspirants who wish to seek HBCU leadership roles or current HBCU presidents who are struggling with enrollment issues. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

RQ2: What recommendations would HBCU presidents have for overcoming financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions?

This chapter is organized with the research setting presented first followed by information about participant demographics. The next section describes the process for data collection, which began with approval from Walden's IRB. It also describes the process of face-to-face interviews conducted virtually, and the method which was employed to complete data analysis. Following are results from the study and evidence of trustworthiness. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary.

### **Research Setting**

Organizational conditions or external influences present at the time this study was conducted did not affect the interpretation of the study. All interviews took place before

the inauguration of the current President of the United States of America. For each interview, virtual conferencing software was the tool used to collect data for this study. The virtual software platform Zoom recorded the interviews with a second back-up method being voice recorder on my personal, password-protected cell phone. The location for participants was not preset by the researcher; participants could choose any location that was most comfortable for them. I could not ascertain their location as it is customary to upload “backgrounds, setting, or branding images” to Zoom profiles. Additionally, there was no evidence that other individuals were in the room at the time the interviews were conducted. While having the camera on was not a requirement, participants did leave it on, which helped the researcher to pick up nonverbal cues. A semistructured interview format was used to gather responses to 11 questions that supported the study’s two research questions. An interview protocol was used to structure each interview yet provided flexibility when needed to allow for extended participant responses. Each participant in this study was a current or former HBCU president hailing from a public or private college or university. Currently, the turnover rate among HBCU presidents is experiencing higher than normal numbers and it affected my ability to recruit participants. Tracking participants who were no longer presidents or those whose tenure reached the 1-year permanent mark at times posed a slight challenge. Participants spoke freely, clarified what they were willing to answer, and validated their transcripts and summary notes provided by the researcher.

## Demographics

HBCUs can be categorized as public or private and four-year or 2-year institutions. While there are 2-year HBCU community colleges, no current or former presidents participated from this category of HBCUs. In this study, five institutions were public with the remaining three classified as private. All participants met the study's guidelines of a minimum of one year as a permanent employee in the position with the average time in leadership being 6.4 years. The number of participants who were currently serving as president was three. Table 1 shows participant information.

**Table 1**

*Participant Information*

Participant	Employment status	Years of experience
Participant 1	Former	6
Participant 2	Current	5
Participant 3	Current	6
Participant 4	Former	3
Participant 5	Former	17
Participant 6	Current	4
Participant 7	Former	8
Participant 8	Former	2

While I worked at an HBCU, no personal or organizational conditions influenced the participants when the interviews took place, which would affect the interpretation of the data. Additionally, members checks were performed.

## Data Collection

Upon approval from Walden University's IRB, data collection for this qualitative study began. An excel spreadsheet listing HBCUs was created with fields that included but was not limited to first name, last name, current or former, email address,

administrative assistant name, administrative assistant email address, years employed, and will/will not participate. In addition to institutional data, LinkedIn and referrals from higher education colleagues were used to collect email addresses especially for individuals falling into the “former” category. Using the email invitation approved by IRB, 107 emails were sent from my Walden email requesting participation in the study. To increase the number of individuals participating, a second email request was sent to 63 individuals who did not respond to the first email invitation. A total of eight individuals responded to the request, agreeing to participate in a semistructured interview as outlined in the Consent Form, which included a statement explaining how their participation would be kept confidential.

Interviews for this study occurred virtually using Zoom software. HBCUs are located throughout the United States, thus, virtual meetings were the most cost-effective method to complete each interview. The location of the interview participants was unknown because the video-conferencing software used allows individuals to upload virtual backgrounds to mask their location at the time of the meeting. I conducted each interview in private at my home or work office with the door closed. Another feature of the Zoom platform is the ability to record (audio and video) the meeting. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant with all occurring during normal business hours. Due to Christmas/Winter holiday closures for most institutions of higher education and difficulty in scheduling individuals in executive leadership positions, the interviews occurred over five months beginning on September 16, 2024, and concluding on January 8, 2025. The average time for each interview conducted was 40 minutes.

An interview protocol was used to introduce the study, obtain verbal consent, share information about confidentiality, and provide follow up steps. Conducted as a semistructured interview, predetermined questions were asked of each participant. Follow-up clarifying questions were asked as needed. At the end of each interview, individuals were thanked for participating and informed that they would be receiving a written copy of their transcript and summary notes – member checking process. A professional service was used to transcribe the recording. The company meet privacy and security requirements as stated by Walden’s IRB to meet confidentiality policies. One participant sent corrections to the summary notes I provided, and one participant made a corrections to their transcript. As participants were added to the data collection process, they were assigned numbers that were used going forward to ensure confidentiality.

The data for this study was recorded using the Zoom platform and I-phone voice recorder as a back-up method. Throughout the process, recordings were kept secure in several ways. Both methods were protected with secure passwords only accessible by the researcher. Additionally, videos and transcripts were downloaded to a password protected computer that only the researcher could access. Notes taken during the interview were kept in the researcher’s private file drawer.

### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative study used an inductive approach to analyze the data by means of a coding process called in vivo (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used in vivo coding because this method, as stated by Saldaña, “uses the direct language of participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases” (2021). Using the software program

NVivo, designed for analyzing qualitative data, I was able to import transcripts, code and categorize data, and export data reports. A simple outline of the process used to move inductively from coded units to categories and themes was: (1) create in vivo codes, (2) review coded data for any discrepancies, (3) group codes into categories and (4) develop themes from categories.

Generating in vivo codes was an easy process to complete in NVivo. The first cycle of coding began once transcripts were uploaded. Grounded in the perspective of each participant (Saldaña, 2021), in vivo codes were created and grouped based on likeness as I read through each transcripts. This software has the ability for researchers to highlight text, create a code, add a description to the code if needed, and group codes based on similarities. Additionally, NVivo has an edit feature. While completing my first pass of coding data, I was able to correct transcripts for any remaining typographical errors and remove identifying information that was overlooked.

In this qualitative study, having transcripts allowed me to engage in rigorous, iterative data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) by reviewing them several times for new or edits to current in vivo codes. In doing so, I was able to regroup codes as needed to ensure better alignment in how they were related to one another. By reorganizing the data in the program, I was able to complete a deeper analysis around particular themes and ideas (Lambert, 2012) when moving to the second cycle of coding. NVivo made this task easy because you can “drag and drop” selected text from one group to another. Once I completed the second review of data, I exported an Excel report listing all the in vivo codes and began categorization and thematic analysis.

To begin the thematic analysis, or second cycle of coding, I started with the exported Excel report from NVivo. While NVivo allows you to complete categorization and thematic analysis within the program, I found this option was cumbersome and not very user friendly. The most convenient method for me to organize codes to create categories and ultimately themes was to copy text from the Excel file into a Microsoft Word document. In Word, I created clusters by grouping words and phrases that were similar in meaning together (Saldaña, 2021) in a chart. In doing so, keywords begin to emerge for examination. Once I had my clusters, I reviewed the data in each group for alignment and produced a category label for each one. As needed, I referred to the transcripts as well as the interview notes that were approved by each participant for clarity. This was an iterative process—I reviewed each cluster to ensure that the best category title emerged. This step concluded second cycle coding and prepared me for thematic analysis. Throughout the process of first and second cycle coding, no discrepant cases were identified that required further data analysis and an in-depth review.

Notating important concepts in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), longer phrases or themes were developed to summarize the data (Saldaña, 2021). Five overarching themes emerged from the research: (1) address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to impact growth and operations; (2) resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management; (3) develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will impact enrollment and increase student access; (4) invest in organizational capacity by improving human

resources and optimizing internal and external operating environment; and (5) increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students. They are displayed in Table 2 along with associated categories. Following in the Results section, the alignment of the categories and themes are expanded upon along with specific examples from the research to support their interconnectedness.

**Table 2***Second Cycle Coding: Categories and Themes*

Categories	Themes
Deteriorating Facilities and Deferred Maintenance Limited Resources	Address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to impact growth and operations
Time Constraints Internal Institutional Factors and External Influences Challenges with Leadership	Resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management
Fundraising Strategies Recruitment Strategies	Develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will impact enrollment and increase student access
Human Capital Policy-related and Advocacy	Invest in organizational capacity by improving human resources and optimizing internal and external operating environment
Infrastructure, Academics, and Social Activities	Increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students

**Results**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations to overcome these challenges that influence enrollment at these institutions. In addressing this topic, two research questions that guided this study were (1) how do HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions and (2) what recommendations would HBCU presidents have for overcoming

financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions. I captured participants' perspective through a semistructured interview format. Eleven interview questions that corresponded to the two research questions were asked of each participant. This section contains the results that emerged from the data and is organized by research questions, themes, and supporting quotes.

### **Research Question 1**

#### ***Theme 1: Address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to impact growth and operations***

Two areas that emerged were related to limited resources and deteriorating facilities and deferred maintenance. All participants referenced limited resources affected an institution's ability to attract students and operate fiscally. Participant 1 noted, "Whenever you lack resources to budget towards scholarships and other aid, it impacts the students' ability. And unfortunately, at our HBCUs too often see students whose families have made no financial preparations whatsoever for college."

Participant 3 stated,

We've certainly had to look at improved operating efficiencies because we are in a tenuous situation. What is it? The best way is we are living semester to semester, and a lot of that has to do with inflation. The cost of everything is going up a lot faster than tuition and support for that. So, the institution is able to maintain, but it is looking at strategies to diversify its revenue streams to position itself to be able to make investments to continue to attract students to the institution.

Participant 6 stated,

Everything is contingent upon the resources to be able to get things done. And if we don't have the resources, it's harder to get things done in the sense of quality. So for example, many students who have high GPAs or high SAT scores and the like, they want a scholarship. They want resources. They want the best dorms, they want the sports teams, the fraternities, the sororities, the campus life. They want all of the things. And if you don't have the resources, you don't have the finances to have those things. So it's always a challenge. It's been a challenge for us, but we again have been able to move the needle forward.

Of note, four participants commented specifically on how the financial challenges associated with deteriorating facilities and deferred maintenance impacted growth.

Participant 1 noted, “The other, I guess, piece of it is just in terms of deferred maintenance, upkeep, .... So, whenever the resources are challenged, it challenges the entire enterprise.”

Participant 4 stated,

And when you kept the enrollment down, what happened was you were making enough money to get by. But what happens is the first thing when people were having trouble on their campus and they're having financial problems and they're barely robbing Peter to pay Paul, then the problem you have is that you forego deferred maintenance and you can't just constantly let your HVCA, your piping, your water, all those types of things, they'll just collapse. It also makes expansion extremely difficult because you've got old systems in there.

Participant 8 stated,

So, between financial aid or lack thereof, between deferred maintenance and between our varied dependence on students who were all PELL eligible or 95% of 'em were PELL eligible, that's just not a recipe for long-term success and vitality and had a dramatic effect on our ability to recruit and enroll other students.

Attracting students by offering meaningful collegiate experiences equates to institutions having the financial means to provide resources for scholarships and high-quality academic offerings as well as maintenance for current and funding for new infrastructure projects. Revenue from increased enrollments help institutions stabilize and improve cash flow projections for long-term financial success.

***Theme 2: Resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management***

Time constraints, internal institutional factors and external Influences, and challenges with leadership are determinants affecting an institution's operations and ability to function effectively and increase enrollment. Three participants commented on how the lack of time to implement strategies hinders operational growth. Participant 7 shared “I don't know whether I probably was not quick enough in eradicating things that I knew were potentially going to be harmful either to me or even to the institution.” Participant 1 explained,

Probably the biggest challenge was just time. It just took some time to work through a lot of the issues that we inherited. There weren't necessarily any

regulatory challenges. It was really just a matter of taking the time to be able to work through it and get through it.

Participant 3 stated,

The biggest challenge is they all take time. The need is immediate, but all of these strategies take time. They just don't happen overnight. So, the biggest one is being able to balance the current challenges while you implement and see the benefits of these strategies.

The interconnectedness of internal institutional factors and external influences is often a complex relationship that affects an institution's ability to achieve strategic operations, including functions that can impact enrollment management. Participant 4 commented, "So there's a lot of things that if you're going to implement good ideas, make sure you got your operational ducks in order." More than half of the participants commented on challenging external influences.

Participant 2 stated,

Quite frankly, what I can tell you now is given the advent of George Floyd, the Supreme Court's affirmative action decision, and I'd say the increased profile of HBCUs, the I'd say more medium to larger size publics are seeing solid sustained enrollment increases. But the smaller privates are, in many respects, are still struggling on that score.

Participant 3 stated,

And it is one that we have to better understand the, so-called Demographic Cliff, the So-called impact of the affirmative action Decision. The impact of college is

not for everybody. Narrative on what the enrollment landscape looks like in the future. I think it's going to be very, very important for us to be clear about that. Otherwise, we are going down this path that we all are going to have robust enrollment numbers and we are setting ourselves up for perhaps what might be a disappointment. So I think we need to do a little bit more research and due diligence like you are currently doing to understand what things impact enrollment, what things outside of the institution itself has an impact on enrollment ...”

Five of eight participants mentioned challenges with leadership at varying levels in the organization. This incompatibility affects an institution’s ability to operate smoothly and strategically. Participant 1 commented, “And so it becomes very difficult to raise money and to really develop sound financial when you have this revolving door in the President's Office. And people are hesitant to give when there is instability in leadership.” Participant 7 shared, “So I did not stay at that institution no longer than three years. .... I list that as a determinant of a souring of relationship with the board...”

Participant 8 stated,

Well, fortunately, we'd hired a new enrollment management vice president, vice president of student services enrollment management, who was amazing and just knew how to connect with students and to create an energy and a goodwill and an esprit. And we had some really good success, but he couldn't last a year because the environment was just that difficult.

Being able to meet the demands of internal and external factors affecting enrollment is a challenge that leaders face when operations, particularly enrollment management, are not functioning at a high level. Participants acknowledged the importance of managing expectations of how much time is needed to solve problems. Furthermore, ineffective operations and challenging internal conflicts is linked to limited enrollment growth.

### **Research Question 2**

#### ***Theme 3: Develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will impact enrollment and increase student access***

Innovative fundraising strategies and recruitment strategies were the basis for Theme 3, of which seven participants commented. Several offered entrepreneurial solutions or non-traditional fundraising strategies to raise funds. Participant 4 shared, “So there's a lot of opportunities out there in the private sector that you can get for additional resources.” And Participant 6 commented, “I'm working with major corporations to get them to provide gap scholarships to my students.”

Participant 1 stated,

Now, I know there are those who say it's a school, it's an institution, it's not a business. Well, if you have payroll, you have utilities, you have insurance, you have all those traditional expenses that any business would face. It's a business. And so I think that is the first thing you have to approach the business enterprise with a business mindset. ... So I think initially the biggest challenge is getting people to buy into running the institution as a business.

Participant 3 stated,

Only to say that the institution, like many institutions, is engaged in identifying other revenue streams that will help to mitigate the challenges that we just described for recruiting new students. And I think you're seeing across the spectrum of HBCUs, it cannot be business as usual in order for us to continue to attract and retain, especially, first generation economically disadvantaged students. And so we are looking at things like unused real estate assets and other opportunities we have that will bring additional revenue into the institution that we can use for recruiting and retaining and supporting students while they're on our campus.

In addition to innovative fundraising strategies, all eight participants discussed generating diverse recruitment strategies that impact admissions and affordability.

Participant 2 stated,

One, you don't want to price yourself out of the market that you serve, so you want to be core to your mission, but two, you want to make sure you're getting value for what you are providing. So I think that is something certainly I think about, but all of our sister institutions should be thinking about moving forward. Are we priced appropriately for the communities that we serve?

Participant 4 stated,

We started a program called... and what it is, we went and got kids that actually started in the eighth grade. We brought 'em on campus in the summer...And the idea is to get these kids used to a college because most of 'em are coming from

families that have no background in college or anything like that. So, we wanted to let them get comfortable to see that when they come out, hopefully they would come to the institution.

Participant 8 stated,

So I can tell you, we would go to these meetings where we'd meet with alumni and donors ..., and then we'd have students and their families that would come to these regional meetings and spend time with us, the admissions team, the faculty members, myself, there's no question that those kinds of events and the conversations that we had with students and the ability to talk to the president and understand what we're trying to do, there's no doubt that that had an impact on us, like group of students, and they ended up coming for that reason.

Participant 5 stated,

And I believe that our, given the declining student enrollment in some institutions, that our HBCUs must cast a larger net. Our institutions must and begin to create an environment that's attractive not only to Black students but other people of color as well as White students. I think that's the world we're moving today, and we have to look at that. What does diversity look like at our own campuses as we talk about diversity in other places. And then if we get diversity, what does inclusion and equity look like? How are these students going to see themselves when they come to our campuses?

Innovation is key to HBCUs developing fundraising and recruitment strategies to meet enrollment needs. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 provided examples that have a

positive impact on the number of students enrolling in an institution in addition to ways to improve student access and ultimately success.

***Theme 4: Invest in organizational capacity by improving human resources and optimizing internal and external operating environment***

The human element is critical to institutional operations. Five participants commented on the need to strengthen human capital for effective organizational management and leadership.

Participant 2 stated,

I think we put too much, particularly in the HBCU community, on the presidents and not enough with respect to responsibility and accountability to the senior executives and the mid-level managers that are actually doing a lot of the work every day and leading a lot of the people.

Participant 1 stated,

And so, I think for those institutions that run well, you have a president who empowers the team and the people around him or her that helps to move the enterprise forward. And not only empowerment of the executive leadership team, but the students, I considered myself to be very involved with and accessible to the students.

Participant 4 stated,

But you've got to make sure that when you, like I said, the colleges and universities and HBCUs included are full of good ideas, but the first thing they really need to do is to look at the way they're conducting the administrative or the

business part of their institution is the most effective and most efficient that it can be. .... And so, there's a whole series of strategies that you can look at to go in and the first thing you want to do is save money on what you're spending now. And by the way, saving money doesn't mean I'm just going to fire someone. Let's look and see if we're doing it effectively or efficiently as we are.

Eight participants noted the review of and advocacy for internal and external policies and procedures to increase organizational capacity. Participant 3 commented, “We are looking at things like shared services among institutions so that we all are not spending at the same level. Are there redundancies among institutions that allows for efficiencies for both?”

Participant 6 stated,

Well, all accreditation agencies, no matter who you're accredited by, has general standards, processes and procedures in place for colleges and universities to move forward in effectiveness and quality. I think that at the end of the day, we use accreditation just to remain compliant, but really those standards can be used in a different kind of way of being able to really push forward improvement and preparation for future decision making. So, with whomever you're accredited by, I really think that those criteria really can be dived into a little further for preparation for future decision making.

Participant 8 stated,

I think the adjustment of FAFSA, which has been a debacle, is where we would start. If that could get fixed, that would help these students a great deal, right?

Overwhelmingly students at HBCUs are Pell eligible, and some of them now couldn't even get through the forms and apply for aid. So that's one fix that. And the second thing is I think reconsideration of Pell and how much students are provided might be useful from a policy perspective.

Participant 7 stated,

Well, it's no question the ease of verification. Eligibility for Title; for funding. If they could simplify that. I heard about the debacle that they had, I guess last academic year or last semester because I think Department of Ed tried to get the IRS involved with it in some way.

The caliber of staff and how those individuals' function in their roles is critical to achieving operational excellence at HBCUs. Even with financial challenges, HBCU presidents should not ignore opportunities to shift funding to human resources and professional development. This is particularly important for areas that directly impact recruitment such as financial aid, enrollment management, and sponsored programs and research.

***Theme 5: Increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students***

Investments in infrastructure, academic, and social offerings supports this theme to increase enrollment. Participant 3 expressed, “And then of course, a lot of students come to a school based on the programs you offer and what kind of things that are happening in those programs.”

Participant 3 stated,

Well, facilities and the student experience are main drivers of enrollment. And your, if you're underfunded, you're not able to do a lot of things on the facility side and the student experience side because of things like deferred maintenance and when your buildings are old, things break and when they break, students are very impatient, and they expect a level of service and rightfully so. And when you're challenged with old infrastructure and lack of investment in facilities at experiences, it has an impact on your ability to attract and retain students.

Participant 4 stated,

But what was interesting was what I thought they did a good job at, look, the advantage of an HBCU for a lot of African-American kids is the culture, is the cultural activities that take place, the link with your heritage and all that type of thing. And that's what was really important.

Theme five revealed that investments are needed in three critical areas that attract prospective students – infrastructure, academic offerings, and social programming. Participants mentioned specific examples that included technology, sports, online learning, new degree programs, homecoming, and research portfolios as items that contribute to a vibrant campus community. Financial resources to strengthen these areas will influence enrollment.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The criteria to establish trustworthiness for this study were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Following is a description of how each process or method contributed to the validity of the study.

**Credibility**

As described in Chapter 3, I used two methods to establish credibility in this basic qualitative study – member checks and reflexivity. Member checks allowed for participants to review their data to ensure that their thoughts were reflected as they previously stated and provided an opportunity to present additional insights (Burkholder et al., 2016), if any. After interviewing each participant, their videos were transcribed, and I drafted summary notes. Both the transcript and summary notes were sent to each participant for verification. Two participants responded with corrections – one to their summary notes and the other to their transcript. An additional method of credibility used was reflexivity, where I reflected on my current situation to uncover biases and made adjustments to control its impact on the data analysis (Burkholder et al., 2016).

**Transferability**

Individuals who are or desire to be presidents of HBCUs can use this data because of its transferability. As described by Burkholder et al., transferability is the ability to apply the case to another situation (2016). In this study, the years of experience, employment status, and data collected provides the necessary information needed for aspiring or current HBCU presidents to develop positive solutions to influence enrollment.

**Dependability**

At its core, dependability as described by Burkholder et al. is the evidence of consistency in data collection, analysis, and reporting (2016). The implementation of triangulation helped ensure the dependability of this study. As described in Chapter 3,

notes were taken throughout the data collection process which had detailed, prescribed steps followed by each participant. No adjustments were made to the initial strategy presented related to dependability.

### **Confirmability**

The strategies outlined in Chapter 3 – an audit trail and reflexivity – were used to meet confirmability. As an individual who previously worked in higher education at an HBCU, it was critically important for me to engage in practices that challenged myself throughout all stages of the research process to eliminate any biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The audit trail consisted of the data collection process, field notes, and other reflective documents. One deviation to the audit trail was the exclusion of an external analyst to validate confirmability. I consistently referred to the transcripts and summary notes as approved by each participant to ensure it was their perception, not mine, that emerged in the study's themes.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore HBCU presidents' perceptions about the unique financial challenges as well as recommendations to overcome these challenges that influence enrollment at these institutions. Through semistructured interviews, eight current or previous presidents shared their thoughts leading to five overarching themes that answered each research question. From their perspective, limited resources and institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management contributed to the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment. For overcoming financial challenges that impact enrollment, HBCU

presidents recommended innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies, investments in operational and human capacity building initiatives, and funding for academic, infrastructure, and social activities that contribute to an excellent collegiate experience. This research study concludes with Chapter 5. In Chapter 5, a discussion on the interpretation of the findings, recommendations, implications for social change, and a conclusion will close out the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Founded with a mission to educate formerly enslaved Black people, HBCUs continue to educate minority students. Yet, they face unique financial challenges stemming from enrollment. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of HBCU presidents on the unique financial challenges influencing enrollment as well as recommendations on how to overcome these challenges. Two research questions that guided the study were (1) How do HBCU presidents perceive the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions and (2) what recommendations would HBCU presidents have for overcoming financial challenges that influence enrollment at their institutions.

The study was conducted to derive if presidents need transformational leadership skills to develop strategies to meet the financial challenges related to enrollment. Eight semistructured interviews were conducted by current or former HBCU presidents who served in this capacity for at least 1 year. I used an interview protocol, designed to answer the research questions and reduce biases from the researcher, which included 11 questions. From the data, five themes emerged from analyzing the data that began by using *in vivo* as the first cycle in the coding process. In summary, key findings suggest that limited resources and deficient strategic operations impact enrollment and innovation, organizational capacity, and financial investments can overcome financial challenges influencing enrollment.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings from this study confirm, disconfirm, and extend the be knowledge that was outlined in the peer-reviewed literature presented in Chapter 2. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Bass’s theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). Bass’s theory defines the factors that leaders possess who have led their organization to great success which often emerges during times of distress and rapid change. They are charismatic leadership, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985), and inspirational motivation (Howell et al., 2022). While there were anecdotal quotes from several participants that speak to charismatic leadership, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation, two themes emerged that confirmed intellectual stimulation. Described as allowing for creativity, innovation, and strategic thinking (Howell et al., 2022) that promotes the rethinking of formal habits (Almaududi Ausat et al., 2022), intellectual stimulation emerged from all participants. The findings showed that HBCU presidents engage in new ways of thinking about their internal and external operational practices that improve the management of human capital, increase student access and enrollment, and strengthen the resilience of institutional finances.

The impact for positive social change from HBCU leaders can be seen at all levels – individual, family, organization, and societal/policy. For individual students and their families, HBCUs that are thriving under transformational leaders have the resources to provide access to anyone seeking an education (Emery, 2020). Educational attainment

can positively impact generational wealth, and often counteracts societal problems such as declining male labor force, rising mortality rates, and opioid addictions (Emery, 2020).

### **Higher Education Enrollment Management**

Enrollment management continues to be an institutionalized system of activities at institutions of higher education (Wendt et al., 2022). Key components of enrollment management not only include new student enrollment and financial aid, but student support services and curriculum development which affects student persistence through graduation (Gilstrap, 2020). Strategic enrollment management further refines enrollment management with the inclusion of the institution's strategic plan and data-informed decisions that guides enrollment management (Hassanein, 2020).

Participant 5 stated,

Enrollment management is a critical area. It's a complex area. It involves everyone on the campus, from the security guards to the grounds and everyone in between. And if that message is not conveyed, then you're going to have gaps.

During the data collection process, all participants referenced the key components of enrollment management with issues related to tuition and scholarships, curriculum development, and strategies for the enrollment of new students being most prevalent. Per the literature, as the concept of strategic enrollment management became institutionalized, colleges and universities established divisions with executive leadership positions (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). The participants did not discuss in detail the structure of their enrollment management divisions. However, several participants alluded to defined enrollment management divisions. Participant 5 shared they were

“building a strong enrollment management team ...,” Participant 8 stated, “we’d hired a new enrollment management vice president...,” and Participant 6 commented, “My style has worked very well with my vice president of enrollment.”

Data informed decision-making is integral to strategic enrollment management. The literature describes how technology became a mainstay for many institutions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hassanein, 2022). The programs and software used for strategic enrollment management was not explicitly stated by any of the participants. General statements about technology and upgrades were made in a broader context related to campus-wide academics and operations. Two participants, Participant 4 and Participant 5, did make general statements regarding technology related to its use in enrollment management. They were “especially with technology to make sure that your processes are effective and they’re efficient” and “we did choose to invest in a technology to upgrade that because it helps in terms of your system management,” respectively.

The data collected from the study supports the literature that strategic enrollment management processes are not without critiques. The Literature Review discusses internal related critiques of strategic enrollment management – it can be time consuming and complicated, often does not align with institutional values, embodies poor marketing, and highlights wrong academic programs and services (Weber, 2025). One of the themes that emerged – resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management – confirms the literature. Participants commented on the lack of time to implement strategies, ineffective and cumbersome processes used to communicate

to prospective students, and the need to refine academic programs to be more relevant to today's demands.

The literature also revealed that external factors can impact an institution's strategic enrollment management plan. The demographic cliff or decline in the number of students graduating high school, evolution of technical and certificate programs, and the rising cost of education were several external factors mentioned by participants that impact enrollment. Students are becoming risk adverse and opting not to attend traditional institutions of higher education. In addition, online universities are a major competitor for traditional institutions of higher education (Juban et al., 2021) including HBCUs. The findings confirm that online education should be a priority for HBCUs. Participant 2 noted, "800,000 Black online learners in the country. Only 20,000 of them are learning online at an HBCU." Three participants suggested new online programs should be added to an institution's academic offerings or current programs expanded to include more offerings as a strategy to increase enrollment.

At the organization level, strategic enrollment management is critical to the success of higher education institutions. When the phases of strategic enrollment management function at a high level, institutions should take into consideration positive social change. Strategic enrollment management, "strengthens the community and contributes to the broader goals of opportunity and lifelong learning," as stated by Weber (2025) in a recent article discussing strategic enrollment management for community college presidents. Institutions experiencing dysfunctional strategic enrollment management cannot properly handle the pressures associated with postsecondary

education such as decreasing enrollments, decreasing funding, and increasing costs (C. Smith et al., 2020).

### **HBCU Enrollment**

HBCUs continue to serve as a vital source for educating students of color or individuals from underresourced areas. The literature provides information about the diversity of HBCUs and their enrollment as compared to PWIs. Despite funding challenges, the data confirms that these institutions are relevant and essential partners in the communities they reside. Even with declining enrollment for underrepresented races/ethnicities (Prescott, 2021), the implication and practice from this study may contribute to positive social change. One participant offered that HBCUs are "... very important piece of creating the Black middle class, very important for upward social mobility for Black and Brown people."

### **Higher Education Funding**

Funding for higher education can come from a variety of sources with PBF, state funding, and federal funding highlighted in the Literature Review. For HBCUs, a variety of methods do not equate to being resource-abundant (DeMonbrun & Warshaw, 2020). As stated in the Literature Review, these institutions continue to face disparities in funding as well as academic training (Bennett, 2022) that embed educational inequity (Allen et al., 2020). This study may contribute to positive social change by identifying a variety of funding streams and ways to mitigate challenges associated with them.

Of the participants interviewed, only one referenced performance-based findings. In this method of funding, educational metrics are tied to dollars received. PBF

negatively impacts HBCUs (Redd, 2020) because they often do not include equity metrics and outcomes for serving first-generation students (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020). Of the participants, only one mentioned PBF. For this institution, creative recruitment strategies helped it receive more money through PBF because a change in the program allowed for additional funds for STEM programs. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Participant 4 described how they changed the recruitment of STEM students from the previous administration to be more selective of students who could complete the program. This finding confirms and disconfirms that PBF can have some positive associations on enrollment (Ra et al., 2023) and a decrease in funding (Burmicky et al., 2024).

Sources of federal funding continue to be a source of financial challenges for HBCUs. Outside of systemic underfunding for land grant institutions, findings from this study confirm that the Pell Grant, Title III, and the Parent Plus Loan negatively impact enrollment. Several participants noted the need to advocate for the revision of policies regulating these, and other federal programs, because students of color are most impacted with policy changes (Portis, 2020). Increasing the amount of the Pell grant was recommended by three participants. Two participants suggested that the calculation or eligibility for Title III funding be reconsidered and one other participant shared that more oversight is needed. The Parent Plus Loan was a concern for only one participant even though the Literature Review noted a disproportionate decrease in enrollment at HBCUs in 2012-2013 statistically linked to the decline in Parent Plus Loan recipients (M. T. Johnson et al., 2019). However, changes that led to the rollout of the new FAFSA as

noted by five of eight participants was a major obstacle to increasing enrollment. Participant 3, Participant 7, and Participant 8 referred to the changes as a “debacle.” Participant 5 noted, “the financial aid application is going to be helpful to many once that's perfected...” Of note, the findings confirm Theme 4 in that the review of and advocacy of external policies is needed for organizations to meet financial challenges that limit growth in enrollment.

### **Unique Financial Challenges at HBCUs**

Of several unique financial challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic was noted in the Literature Review as negatively impacting budgets of HBCUs (Murty & Payne, 2021). While COVID was mentioned by half of the participants, Participants 1 and Participant 2 referenced federal funding release during the COVID-19 as means to improve the state of finances at their institutions. This finding contributes to positive social change by providing an alternative to the narrative presented in the Literature Review—in some cases COVID provided some positive benefits to HBCUs. “The ability to access HERFF dollars and the other financial assistance that came from the federal government certainly helped us to be able to turn the ship around” and “...CARES and American Rescue Plan funds, which was a godsend at the outset of the COVID funding,” stated by Participant 1 and Participant 2 respectively support this finding. Furthermore, Participant 3 and Participant 8 noted the disruption in higher education that the pandemic brought and the need to pivot to meet associated challenges not only for enrollment but academics as well. Participant 6 noted, “No one was ready for COVID, and it absolutely changed the way that higher education works now.”

## **HBCU Leadership**

Leadership and tenure continue to be a concern for HBCUs. The findings from this study can positively impact social change by providing strategies for HBCU presidents to navigate the challenges associated with being in a leadership position while at the same time being governed by a Board of Trustees. As per the Literature Review, the turnover rate for HBCU presidents is four years or less (Palmer & Freeman, 2020). For this study, three of the eight participants fell into this category with one participant speaking directly to its effect on the financial challenges affecting enrollment. Participant 1 stated, “So I have to say the instability in leadership was probably the biggest challenge financially and in a lot of other areas too.” Additionally, several participants commented on how an institution’s Board can negatively impact that leader’s success. One participant decided to retire when a new board chair was selected while another talked about the need to attract better individuals to serve in Board positions. While two participants mentioned shared governance, most participants discussed their desire to control decisions about the teams that they lead, particularly enrollment management. Participants felt that presidents should have the best interest of the institution in mind as inferred from the Literature Review when Preston et al. (2021) mentioned that any changes in senior leadership should be in alignment with the strategic plan.

Innovative leaders, as outlined in the Literature Review, understand that innovation and strategic enrollment management is needed to attract potential students (Palmer & Freeman, 2020). Each participant described innovative ways in each area of strategic enrollment management that would increase enrollment and their financial

position. HBCUs are traditionally underfunded and managing limited resources takes a skilled leader. This study contributes to positive social change by helping current and future HBCU presidents to develop creative problem-solving skills. Participants cited specific examples of changes to policies, vendors, programs, and investments that can move enrollment figures in a positive direction (Hutton, 2021). For example, Participant 1 detailed an intellectual property change that had a positive effect on finances collected, Participant 2 noted how an early college program provided a pipeline for enrollment, and Participant 5 prioritized the investment in enrollment management technology.

The final point outlined regarding HBCU leadership in the Literature Review referenced the “nimbleness” of leaders (Prescott, 2021). Positive social change can occur when HBCU presidents are able to pivot when confronted with extreme external factors. This study provides examples for future leaders by discussing ways participants responded to COVID-19. HBCU presidents are confronted with a myriad of challenges that must be navigated to ensure the financial stability of the organization. The COVID-19 pandemic was brought up in the context that leaders had to shift their thinking and operations without much preparation. Participant 6 stated, “leaders should always be prepared for the unimaginable and unthinkable. No one was ready for covid,…” COVID-19 changed the higher education landscape by forcing institutions to develop or build out their online programs. Another by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic was the huge influxes of cash from the federal government. HBCU leaders had to change their thinking from a scarcity to abundance mindset to make financial decisions that would have a lasting impact on their institution. Participant 1 noted that during COVID, the “financial

assistance that came from the federal government certainly helped us to be able to turn the ship around.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations described in Chapter 1 of this basic qualitative study. One limitation was the ability to meet with participants in person. Using the virtual meeting platform, Zoom, I was able to schedule interviews with participants regardless of where their institution was located. This platform also assisted with meeting the second limitation described in Chapter 1, the difficulty in scheduling. Due to the nature of the job requirements of presidents of institutions of higher education, several interviews had to be rescheduled due to conflicting appointments or unexpected emergencies. I was able to accommodate participant schedules regardless of the circumstances because the Zoom platform permits the creation of meetings in real-time and has paid features that allow for unlimited minutes when conducting meetings. Additionally, three email invitations were sent over the course of five months to reach the recommended sample size.

Another limitation described in Chapter 1 was having a current and former president of the same institution participant in the study. Because each participant was providing their perspective, this limitation was not a concern. Even if the institutions were the same, the differing time periods ensures that the situations happening at each institution – internal and external – were not the same. The final limitation outlined in this study addressed researcher bias. An interview guide was used to reduce my biases as an employee at a HBCU from influencing the questions asked or interpretation of data. Following each interview, I sent participants summary notes and their transcript for

approval as additional methods to reduce biases. Additionally, using in vivo coding, as the first cycle of coding, in addition to the approved summary notes helped to ensure that my background did not influence how I analyzed the data. Therefore, the limitations listed in Chapter 1 did not affect my ability to complete the study as outlined by Walden University's IRB.

### **Recommendations**

HBCUs face a myriad of challenges with enrollment being critical to their success. Many of these institutions are tuition-driven, thus enrollment is key to their financial stability. Based on this study, it is recommended to replicate this research project to only include participants based on an employment status of current presidents. For this study, five of the eight participants were former HBCU presidents. Due to rapidly changing technological advancements and polarizing micro external environmental factors, learning the perspectives from only current presidents can offer additional strategies that can help current or future presidents remain agile in any situation to meet strategic enrollment goals. Additional studies on populations such as presidents who only served at HBCUs versus those who have combined experiences at an HBCU and predominantly White institutions or separating small, private and large, public institutions, may prove worthy.

Five themes emerged from this study that supported the research questions about the unique financial challenges affecting enrollment and recommendations for overcoming financial challenges that affected enrollment. The themes identified are (1) address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to

impact growth and operations; (2) resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management; (3) develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will impact enrollment and increase student access; (4) invest in organizational capacity by improving human resources and optimizing internal and external operating environment; and (5) increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students. These as well as the literature review provide several opportunities for further research studies that will help current and future HBCU president achieve success in meeting their financial challenges affecting their enrollment.

Three topics for research studies that emerged centered on delving deeper into intellectual stimulation, revisiting organizational structure for strategic enrollment management, and exploring educational and professional backgrounds of leaders. It is recommended to conduct a study that focuses on intellectual stimulation, one of the four factors of transformational leadership. With two of the five themes relating to intellectual stimulations, perspectives from current HBCU presidents that explore this factor would offer an insight on the experiences and knowledge that contributed to developing this skill for future presidents. The second topic focusing on restructuring recommends that a study be conducted to explore the perspectives of HBCU presidents who reorganized enrollment functions at their institutions to be more aligned with strategic enrollment management. Participants offered numerous points of view on institutional operations and human capital in this study. Perspectives from presidents who navigated this type of

change can provide valuable insight on how to counteract some of the critiques of strategic enrollment management outlined in the Literature Review. The final recommendation is for a study to be conducted on the educational and professional background of HBCU presidents who increased their institution's enrollment. Learning what formal training or work experience these individuals brought to their current roles can help prepare aspiring leaders focus on key areas that will impact enrollment such as strategic partnership fundraising, integrated marketing and recruitment, and business/operational acumen.

One thought that was anecdotally mentioned by a few of the participants was the merger and acquisitions of existing HBCUs. Since their existence, several HBCUs have closed or merged with other institutions. One participant suggested that discussions need to start regarding smaller HBCUs being absorbed by larger, more financially stable institutions. A study on this topic will allow for a broader perspective on the viability of HBCUs to continue to provide Black students with access to a quality education.

### **Implications**

This study has the potential to influence positive social change at HBCUs and the students that they serve, as well as the leaders of these institutions. HBCUs play a critical role in educating African Americans. While these institutions are not monolithic, their success of preparing students for graduate and professional schools (Palmer & Freeman, 2020) and the workforce is undeniable. Several participants commented on the capacity building aspects of these institutions to build up the middle class and for the upwards social mobility of African Americans.

Implementing strategic enrollment management at an institution provides a comprehensive and collaborative approach for HBCUs to attract, enroll, and graduate students of color (Hassanein, 2020). Through this study, leaders of HBCUs can learn strategies that will help to reduce financial challenges negatively impacting strategic enrollment management. Innovation, a factor of transformational leadership, is needed for leaders to generate entrepreneurial or new funding sources to support tuition and programs needed by underresourced and underserved students to have a wonderful collegiate experience. A byproduct is reducing the burden on families to pay for their student's education, especially those negatively affected by recent financial aid changes such as increased restrictions to the Parent Plus loan. Implications for future research would be to build on this study to delve further into an HBCU leader's implementation of strategic enrollment management.

### **Conclusion**

HBCUs are unique contributors to the higher education landscape. Despite their storied legacy of underfunding and present-day financial challenges, these institutions play a vital part in degree attainment for students of color. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the unique financial challenges that influence enrollment at these HBCUs from the perspectives of the president. Using the framework of transformational leadership, I was able to collect data from eight current and former HBCU presidents. Intellectual stimulation, a factor of transformational leadership, was exhibited by many of the participants. Those participants provided specific examples of financial challenges faced and mitigation to overcome them.

From the study, five themes emerged – (1) address limited resources to create an immersive academic and campus environment to impact growth and operations; (2) resolve the lack of strategic operations – policies, procedures, and people management – that contributes to institutional ineffectiveness and inefficient strategic enrollment management; (3) develop innovative fundraising and recruitment strategies that will impact enrollment and increase student access; (4) invest in organizational capacity by improving human resources and optimizing internal and external operating environment; and (5) increase investments in core elements that makes a collegiate experience attractive to prospective students. The findings from this study can provide practical guidance and inspiration to current and aspiring HBCU presidents to develop best practices, implement strategies, and lead teams to ensure future students have access to a quality education and positive economic outlook.

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