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*in*Depth
REPORT

TRANSCENDING THE CURRENT HIGHER
EDUCATION JOURNEY FOR BLACK STUDENTS:
Colleges that Buck the Trend

Student Success

*in*Depth
REPORT

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Introduction

> *Something that has inspired me here at Towson is the culture and diversity. When we walk around campus there are a lot of things we're unfamiliar with but I feel like I'm safe, and I can ask questions, and that inspires me to keep going.*

Black student at Towson University, MD (Source: Towson University Values page.)

When discussing higher education and Black students, two things are well-established:

- Underrepresentation among traditional-aged undergraduates
- Below-average six-year graduation rates

Underscoring point #1, a 2020 report from the Education Trust chronicled sustained underrepresentation of Black and Latino undergraduates at the majority of the country's 101 most selective colleges and universities. The 2019 *Black Students at Public Colleges and Universities: a 50-State Report Card*, published by the Race & Equity Center at the University of Southern California, also considered Black enrollment by gender, completion rate, and Black faculty-to-student ratios. Across 506 institutions, the authors awarded an average *Equity Index Score* of C.

This Eduventures report, drawing on data, websites and interviews, considers the rare institutions, selective and otherwise, that not only transcend this unfortunate state-of-affairs, but also demonstrate a combination of: a sizeable and growing traditional-aged Black undergraduate cohort, a superior overall graduation rate, and a Black graduation rate that surpasses the institutional average. The report attempts to go beyond the numbers to consider something of institutional history, initiative, leadership, and culture.

If higher education leaders are to overcome decades of under-serving Black students—a trend the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen if fall 2020 enrollment shortfalls among less traditional populations are sustained—these exceptional but far from uncomplicated institutions deserve more attention. Who are they, and what is their secret?

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Wrong Direction

First, some background data to set the scene.

The Black share of the undergraduate student population (those students who identify as "Black or African American") stood at 11.9% in 1999, peaked at 14.7% in 2011, and then fell to 12.9% in 2019 (the most recent year available). Black enrollment surged during and immediately after the Great Recession, and then—more than average—fell off over the course of the long recovery. Between 2010 and 2019, total undergraduates dropped 9%, but Black undergraduates declined 20%.

Figure 1 shows Black undergraduate representation regardless of age by institutional type in 2005, 2011, and 2019.

Figure 1. Black Students are Under-Represented at Most Types of Four-Year Schools
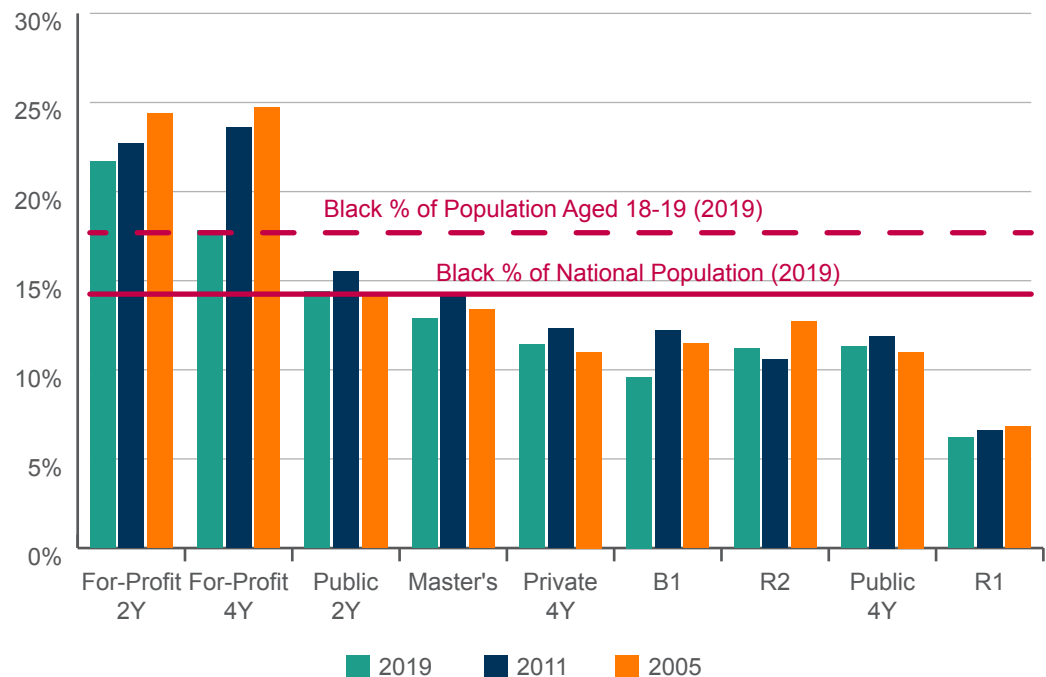
Source: Eduventures analysis of IPEDS and U.S. Census data.
"Undergraduates"= degree or certificate-seeking students (fall).

Figure 1 highlights that Black students are much more common, proportionally speaking, at some types of institutions. At for-profit schools, Black students made up a quarter or more of undergraduates, compared to about 14% at community colleges, 11% at public four-year schools, and fewer than 7% at leading research universities (R1). This reflects higher Black representation among older undergraduates, enrolling in higher education for the first time later in life or completing an unfinished program.

Only for-profit schools report an enrollment ratio higher than that of Black students aged 18-19 in the general population. Private four-year, B1, R2, public four-year, and R1 institutions fall below both this ratio and that of the Black population overall.

Excluding for-profits, other institutional types show gains during and immediately following the Great Recession, but then a decline by 2019. This aligns with more marked Black enrollment decline over the past decade.

In summary, Africans Americans are disproportionately enrolled at lower-tier, nontraditional, and second-chance institutions. Some of these institutions are first-rate and perform a valuable role, but others suffer poor graduation rates and are low quality. Underrepresentation persists at most other school types and has worsened in recent years.

R1 schools show a steady increase over time, but from the lowest base. At this pace—a net 0.5% increase in the Black undergraduate ratio over 12 years—it will take R1s about 140 years to match the Black share of people aged 18-19 in 2019. Indeed, some R1 gains in Black enrollment may be attributable to the expansion of the R1 category in recent years.
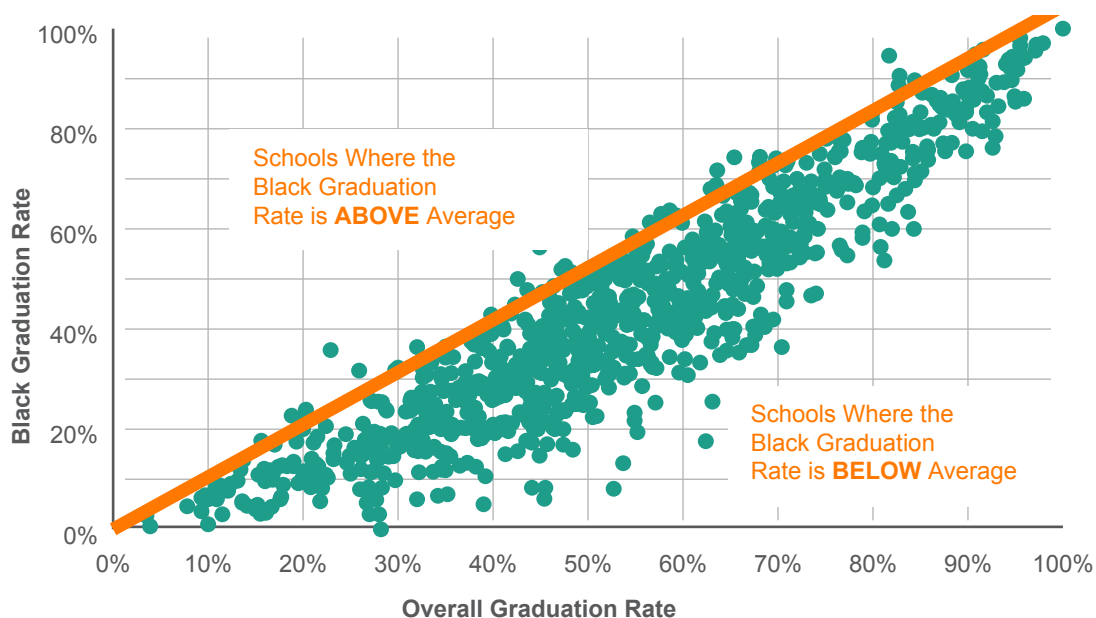
For all school types, there is a litany of reasons for the status quo. How can higher education do more to overcome rather than simply reflect stubborn societal disparities?

Right Direction?

Some schools have bucked the trend: enrolling a sizeable and growing Black cohort and reporting higher graduation rates than the rate for the institution overall. In 2019, the six-year graduation rate for all first-time, full-time undergraduates was 60%; for Black students it was 40%.

Figure 2 compares graduation rates by institution for the Black and overall population. The focus is four-year schools and the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time bachelor's-seeking students.

Figure 2. Exceptions to the Rule

Schools Where the Black Graduation Rate is **ABOVE** Average

Schools Where the Black Graduation Rate is **BELOW** Average

Source: Eduventures analysis of IPEDS data. Four-year schools (n=940) with an overall cohort size of 100+ and an African-American cohort size of 30+. Excludes HBCUs.

A mere 37 institutions (3.9%) have the distinction of graduating Black students at a rate of three percentage points or higher than average. Another 154 schools (16%) report a Black graduation rate within +/- three percentages points of the average. Simply outperforming or matching the institutional average, however, says nothing about the African-American graduation rate itself. Beating or equaling a lowly average is hardly worth celebrating.

Before considering schools that report both a high overall graduation rate and a high Black graduation rate, mention must be made of HBCUs.

> *The opponent to being able to feel like you belong is the feeling of alienation. So, to belong somewhere is feeling a complete wholeness in the self. What we have been sort of grappling with on campus and in the world, is this: Are we looking for acceptance, or are we looking for tolerance?*

- Jonathan Jackson, class of 2019 at Amherst College.
(Source: Amherst College Belong Campaign page.)

What about HBCUs?

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are not the focus of this report. HBCUs are remarkable institutions that have thrived against the odds and decades of under-funding, but educate only a small minority of traditional-aged Black undergraduates.

In 2019, HBCUs (84 schools at the four-year level) enrolled 18% of first-time, full-time Black undergraduates, down from 20% in 2010. The absolute number of such students enrolled at HBCUs fluctuated over the period, with the 2019 total about 12% smaller than in 2010, consistent with the overall decline in Black (and general) undergraduate enrollment during these years. HBCUs are overrepresented (28%) among the 50 schools that enroll the largest number of such undergraduates.

In 2019, according to IPEDS data, Black students at an HBCU were, on average, less likely (38%) to graduate in six years compared to those at a non-HBCU (40%). From 2011 to 2019, the HBCU graduation rate held steady between 34% and 36%, while the non-HBCU rate fluctuated from 35% to 42%. In four of the past eight years, the non-HBCU average was six-to-seven percentage points higher than the HBCU average.

Of course, the Black graduation rate at some HBCUs is much better than the HBCU average: such as 76% at Bennett College, 75% at Spelman, 64% at Howard, and 60% at Hampton.

HBCUs are enjoying something of a resurgence in the midst of this year's Black Lives Matter movement, with anecdotes citing enrollment gains and a boom in corporate and other donations. The 2019 FUTURE Act and the COVID-19 CARES Act boosted federal funding for HBCUs. The coming years may look brighter for HBCUs, but if the goal is to understand the experience where the vast majority of Black students enroll, and to find the rare schools that combine significant Black enrollment and superior graduation rates, we must look beyond HBCUs.

Top 50?

Out of the 191 non-HBCUs that report either in-line or superior Black graduation rates compared to the institutional average (highlighted in Figure 2), 67 also report a Black graduation rate of at least 70% (10 percentage points higher than the all-student national average of 60%).

Table 1 characterizes the top 50 best performing schools by size (Black cohort) and type (Carnegie Classification):

Table 1 Top 50 Four-Year Schools for Black Graduation Rates (2019)

Size/Type	Research	Master's	Baccalaureate	Specialized
Large (500+)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Medium (100-499)	13 (26%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Small (30-99)	15 (30%)	7 (14%)	12 (24%)	2 (4%)
TOTAL	28 (56%)	7 (14%)	12 (24%)	3 (6%)
TOTAL non-HBCU Black Cohort	44%	27%	23%	6%

Source: Eduventures analysis of IPEDS data. For this analysis, four-year Carnegie Classification "14" schools (Baccalaureate/Associate) were classified as "Baccalaureate".

An obvious takeaway from Table 1 is the prominence of highly-selective institutions: two-thirds of the top 50 schools for Black graduation rates are either R1s or top-tier liberal arts colleges. Most of the Ivies are in this group, along with the likes of University of Chicago, Emory University, and Tulane University. Outperforming public R1s include University of Georgia, University of South Florida, and Stony Brook University. Top liberal arts colleges include Amherst, Davidson, and Vassar.

A national brand, no shortage of high-quality applicants, and sizeable financial resources give these schools considerable advantages. Perhaps it is more important to ask why similarly prestigious schools perform less well.

R1s in particular are much more prominent in this exclusive company (40% of the 50 schools) than their share of the total Black first-time, full-time cohort (19%); but R1s account for 24% of the 2019 graduating Black cohort. In general, R1s enroll relatively few Black students but have a high graduation rate for this population.

Cohort size is another takeaway from Table 1: there is an inverse association between Black cohort size and graduation performance. Only 21% of first-time, full-time Black bachelor's-seeking students in the 2019 six-year graduation cohort were enrolled at schools with an Black cohort of under 100, but 72% of top 50 schools fall in this category.

Nationally, there are 53 non-HBCU colleges and universities that reported a Black adjusted graduation cohort of 500+ in 2019, enrolling 26% of non-HBCU, first-time, full-time Black students, but none featured in Table 1. These 53 schools exhibit a Black graduation rate below 70% and/or one significantly below the institutional average.

The next question is: which of the top 50 in Table 1 also exhibit sustained Black graduation rate outperformance, and which have combined outperformance and Black enrollment growth?

One striking finding is that, collectively, the top 50 schools in Table 1, the schools with the best Black graduation rates, reported 18% growth in first-time Black undergraduate enrollment between 2010 and 2019, a period when overall Black first-time undergraduate numbers slid 25% and total first-time undergraduate enrollment declined 12%. A critical mass of successful Black students has attracted yet more Black enrollment. It is important to note that a minority of top 50 schools showed a steady decline in Black enrollment over this period, or a fluctuation.

Over time, many top 50 schools exhibit a relatively stable overall graduation rate and a more volatile Black one. This is consistent with generally much smaller Black cohorts but may also reflect inconsistent institutional attention to this population. Also, most top 50 schools reported a similar or superior Black graduation rate in only one or two of the past seven years, suggesting that outperformance in 2019 (Figure 2) is not necessarily a sound guide to longer-term trends.

Top 10?

Ten schools in the top 50 stand out from the rest, outperforming on all or some of the following metrics specific to Black students:

- Sustained growth in enrollment
- Steady gains in the graduation rate
- A graduation rate above the institutional average over the period
- A first-time undergraduate ratio above the national average

Table 2 names these schools and details their performance:

Table 2. National Leaders
Top 10 Schools: Black Enrollment & Graduation

School	Black First-Time Undergraduate Enrollment (2010-19)	Black Graduation Rate Trend (2011-19)	Number of Years Black Graduation Rate Matched or Surpassed Institutional Average (2011-19)	Black Ratio of First-Time Undergraduates (2019). National Average is 13%
Amherst College (MA)	Stable then down somewhat	Flat, some fluctuation (90s)	4	10%
George Mason University (VA)	Up 73%	61-74% (some fluctuation)	7	13%
Loyola Marymount University (CA)	Up 42%	76-82% (some fluctuation)	3	7%
Stony Brook University (NY)	Up 15%	70-76% (some fluctuation)	9	6%
SUNY Albany (NY)	Up 112% (some fluctuation)	66-68% (some 70s mid-period)	7	19%
SUNY Cortland (NY)	118%	63-69% (some fluctuation)	1	6%
Towson University (MD)	Up 199%	55-73%	3	26%
University of Georgia (GA)	26%	79-86%	3	7%
University of South Florida (FL)	Mix of decline and fluctuation	53-78%	9	7%
Washington University in St. Louis (MO)	Up 70%	Flat (mid-90s)	7	8%

Source: Eduventures analysis of IPEDS data.

No school passed all four tests. But all 10 schools show strong (quantitative) evidence of serving Black undergraduates much more assiduously than average.

It is ironic that seven out of the 10 schools report a below-average Black first-time undergraduate ratio, although most are growing Black enrollment at a pace that might change that in the coming years. The ultimate test for these schools will be to both continue to grow Black enrollment and sustain or improve graduation rate outperformance for this population.

SUNY Albany and Towson serve a much higher ratio of Black students than average and have simultaneously grown said population, pushed up the Black graduation rate, and (at least

sometimes) pushed that rate above the institutional average. It should also be said, however, that the City of Albany's population is about 27% Black, suggesting that the university still has some way to go to match local demographics. Albany County—the university straddles the city and county—is about 14% Black. The city of Towson is 15% Black, while nearby Baltimore is 63% Black.

School location is notable: most are on the east coast. This may be in part a function of regional demographics, but (aside from University of Georgia and University of Southern Florida) schools in southern states with large Black populations are conspicuous by their absence, as are schools in a number of major urban areas, such as Chicago. Figure 3 is split 7/3 between publics and privates.

A more diverse and inclusive campus will be achieved through senior-level leadership with strategic vision for the design, promotion, and delivery of best-practice diversity, inclusion and cultural competency efforts across campus.

Creating a more diverse and inclusive campus is one of eight presidential priorities that are linked to and aligned with Towson University's strategic plan. These eight priorities will help us build a stronger foundation for Towson University's promising future.

Source: *Towson University's Diverse & Inclusive Campus page* on the President's website.

These top 10 schools are not role models for others in any simplistic sense. Each has a particular mission and target audience. Some are highly selective institutions, while others are closer to open admission. All of these schools would acknowledge they have plenty of work still to do. But they are role models in that each has managed something very few other schools, of any type, have achieved: to graduate traditional-aged Black undergraduates at a rate far above the national average and close this population's graduation gap that is the norm at most peers.

From Numbers to Culture

The next section looks at three of the top 10 schools from the bottom up, considering not only data but also illuminating something of the policies and practices behind these apparent success stories. Eduventures reviewed each school's website to get a sense of how the institution operates. The three schools represent very different institutional types.

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- SUNY Albany (also known as University of Albany)
- Towson University
- Amherst College

SUNY Albany

This report is not the first to recognize SUNY Albany's superior record on Black enrollment. Indeed, the Education Trust report mentioned at the start cites the university as something of a rarity among R1s. In 2000, the Education Trust gave the university a failing grade on Black and Latino access, which turned into an "A "by 2017. The University of Southern California (USC) Race & Equity Center report, however, gave the university a "B-minus", based in part of the contrast between the university's Black student ratio and that of New York State.

SUNY Albany's website offers some clues about its approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and Black students in particular. Examples include:

- **Homepage:** "A More Diverse and Inclusive Campus" is one of six lead statements/images on the homepage, signaling the institution's commitment. "Diversity and Inclusion" is one of the six pillars of the SUNY Albany 2018-23 Strategic Plan.

- **Imagery:** Student, faculty, and staff promotional imagery throughout the website conveys a diverse community.

- **Office of Diversity and Inclusion:** Oversees diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work institution-wide, which is positioned not in narrow compliance or equality terms but as fulfilling the university's mission to "ensure that diversity—in our people and ideas—drives everything we do." At SUNY Albany, DEI enables the university to fulfill its mission. The ODI oversees implementation of the university's *Diversity and Inclusion Plan*, which encompasses quantitative hiring targets for underrepresented faculty and staff as well as a number of training and climate initiatives. Many academic units have their own DEI officers and efforts.

- **Taskforce:** The Diversity and Inclusive Excellence Taskforce, representing faculty, staff and students, is in the midst of a comprehensive review of organizational structures, programs and services in support of DEI. Included is a review of the core curriculum at all levels. Individual colleges are conducting their own reviews. Today, based on the school website, DEI dimensions to admission and academics are less obvious.

- **Campus Climate Surveys:** Annual faculty, staff and student surveys spanning a variety of DEI topics, and used to benchmark tensions and progress. The university publishes ongoing institutional responses to collated student DEI concerns and requests. In an effort to decentralize DEI, every academic and administrative department has its own "Climate Committee."

- **Student Support:** The university hosts a range of tutoring, mentoring and similar services, targeting all undergraduates. A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article credited such offerings as central to supporting a diverse student body at SUNY Albany.

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- **Faculty Diversity:** SUNY as a whole funds a variety of diversity programs, including the *Faculty Diversity Program*, providing central funds to part-support hiring of "outstanding scholars" from historically underrepresented groups. At SUNY Albany, a DEI-driven review of faculty hiring processes is underway, and search committee members engage in DEI training.

- **Presidential Leadership:** SUNY Albany's president, Havidán Rodríguez, continues to play an active part in DEI efforts, leading prominent discussions and underlining their importance to the institution.

What about admissions arrangements, Black faculty and leadership, and institutional spend on student support? Do these help explain SUNY Albany's outperformance?

SUNY Albany is currently test-optional during the pandemic, but previously required a standardized test score. The school also makes clear that it practices holistic admissions, and seeks a "diverse educational environment." The university's overall admission requirements are standard at peer schools, and there is no evidence of a "special" admissions pathway targeting underrepresented groups (such as the A2A initiative at Amherst College—see below).

Black faculty can be role models for students. Is SUNY Albany's outperformance when it comes to Black enrollment and graduation attributable in part to above-average Black faculty ratios? Indeed, in 2019, the most recent year available, SUNY Albany reported that 4.2% of tenured faculty were Black, compared to an R1 average of 3.3%; and 6.5% vs. 4.5% tenure track. The university lagged the peer average for non-tenured faculty, however. No doubt individual Black faculty make a difference, but the low ratios—acknowledging above-benchmark performance for two faculty types—suggest that Black faculty are not a distinguishing feature of the SUNY Albany story.

As of the time of publication, one of SUNY Albany's Executive Council is Black, and the president and provost are non-white. None of SUNY Albany's deans are Black.

SUNY Albany's success in recruiting and graduating traditional-aged Black students is not associated with atypical per-student spend on support services, at least at a macro level. Per-student "student support" spend at SUNY Albany consistently trailed the peer average over the past decade—according to Eduventures analysis of IPEDS data—although the gap has narrowed.

In summary, it is clear that SUNY Albany decided to embrace an equity agenda. Without such commitment, it is hard to explain the university's move from a failing grade to an "A" on the Education Trust's measure of equitable admissions. Yes, SUNY Albany is located in a city with a large Black population, but so are many peer schools with less stellar track records.

But it is also apparent that the institution's admission arrangements, Black faculty presence, and per-student support spend do not suggest anything exceptional.

The presidency of Robert J. Jones, SUNY Albany's first Black president from 2007 to 2012, however, undoubtedly had a major impact, symbolically and strategically. Under Jones' leadership, an overall enrollment decline from the late 2000s, prompting renewed effort to improve recruitment and retention, convinced the university to pay more attention to talent in its backyard. New York's new Excelsior Scholarship and the longstanding Equal Opportunity Program, together offering free tuition, additional financial aid, and post-enrollment support for

low- and middle-income residents matriculated at in-state public colleges, has helped SUNY Albany widen access.

The school's website highlights plenty of DEI-related activity, and some ambitious work-in-progress (e.g., faculty hiring targets) but it is not obvious that such activity drove SUNY Albany's outperformance. It appears more as an outgrowth of a surge in the Black student population, and rooted in a desire to address DEI issues institution-wide, but no doubt built on prior work that aided the student surge in the first place, and that began under Dr. Jones' presidency.

It should be noted that many Black students at SUNY Albany hail from New York City as well as from the Albany area. Like in many places, numerous local high school graduates are eager to study elsewhere, and the SUNY systems offers plenty of choice.

The measure of SUNY Albany in the coming years will be whether the university can continue to build on its strong performance with Black traditional-aged undergraduates, driving further graduation rate gains even as student numbers rise. Yet the university's overall six-year graduation rate has actually fallen in recent years, even as the Black rate has generally improved and surpassed it. Ambitious curriculum reform and faculty diversity initiatives currently underway, alongside new state funding, may prove key to lifting the entire institution to the next level.

SUNY Albany graduation (Source: SUNY Albany website, "In 1844, UAlbany's Greatness was Born.")

Towson University

Towson University (Towson), a public doctoral-professional institution just outside Baltimore, is a large, comprehensive university that has embraced its location and has strived to embrace diversity and close achievement gaps. Once a whites-only college, Towson began to integrate seriously in the late 1960s, and hired its first dean of minority affairs, Julius Chapman, in 1969. Chapman, who served at Towson for 13 years, is cited as a driving force in reimagining the university as a welcoming place for Black students.

The Towson website sheds light on why today the university features among the most successful institutions when it comes to enrolling and graduating traditional-aged Black undergraduates. Examples include:

- **Strategic Plan:** Towson's current plan calls for the university to be a "model for campus diversity": including to enhance recruitment and retention of underrepresented or underserved populations, and to close any achievement gaps. A *Diversity Strategic Plan* is under development.

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- **Office of Inclusion and Institutional Equity (OIIE):** Under the auspices of the Towson president, OIIE coordinates numerous DEI efforts, rooted in a philosophy of shared values and responsibility, and tied to institutional mission. OIIE strives to set the climate for the university, and curates a Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit (third party resources for faculty, staff, and students).

- **SAGE (Students Achieving Goals Through Education):** This longstanding student support unit, almost two decades old, works with new students (on an opt-in basis) and develops student mentors. Significant use by Black students. SAGE students have an above-average graduation rate. In 2014, a SAGE Residential Learning Community was started. SAGE staff share space with the Center for Student Diversity- see below.

- **Diversity & Inclusion Faculty Fellow:** The university offers annual funding for selected faculty to work on DEI-related projects, ranging from curriculum reform to undergraduate research. Fourteen faculty were named as 2019-20 fellows.

- **Center for Student Diversity:** Housed under OIIE, the Center supports multicultural organizations at Towson, coordinates financial assistance for underrepresented students and runs DEI education events. Videos relay how individual students experience DEI at Towson.

- **Black Student Development Program:** Under the Center for Student Diversity, and with a history stretching back 30 years, the AASD works to "aid in the recruitment, retention and development of students of African and Black descent and heritage and to assist the university in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment across campus." AASD activities include events to build up current aspiring Black leaders and an annual *Celebration of Black Excellence* across the Towson community.

- **President's Inclusive Leadership Institute:** Established in 1996, annual cohorts of 20-25 senior staff and faculty are nominated to take part in a series of group activities, case studies, and projects over an academic year. Each class ends with a joint project that benefits the university. The institute began with a general leadership focus, but has in recent years focused on DEI. All cabinet members take part to share their experiences and perspectives.

- **University's Diverse Progress Report:** In 2015, Towson agreed to work toward twelve DEI goals, ranging from advocating for a required American Race Relations course to increasing tenure and tenure track faculty by 10%. A website monitors progress.

- **University Diversity & Inclusion Awards:** The awards, inaugurated in 2019, "recognize individuals and departments that foster greater awareness, understanding and advancement of diversity and inclusiveness at Towson University." There is one faculty, one staff, one department, and one administrator award each year.

- **Academic Departments:** Each department's presentation is distinct but across the board departments made a point of underlining their commitment to DEI at Towson, and using diverse imagery and examples. All Towson's college are required to have a diversity action plan. Founded in 2019, the *Faculty Academic Center for Excellence* at Towson is beginning to explore curriculum and pedagogy questions, and all new faculty must engage with the Center.

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What about admissions arrangements, Black faculty and leadership, and institutional spend on student support?

Like SUNY Albany, Towson is currently test-optional, but only in the midst of the pandemic. Towson's admission requirements are conventional, and appear to offer no special pathway for underserved populations.

Towson's record on Black faculty is generally much better than the national and peer average: 10.2% of Towson's tenure-track faculty were Black in 2019 (compared to 6.3% at peers), and 8.7% of non-tenure track faculty were Black (vs. 6.1%). Towson is in-line on Black tenured faculty: 3.9% were Black in 2019 (and down from 4.9% in 2013) compared to 3.9% at peer schools. Overall, for Towson, a stronger case can be made for an association between superior Black student and faculty representation. An Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion works with faculty. Prospective faculty must speak to DEI plans.

Of the 13 members of Towson's president's cabinet, two are Black: the vice president for inclusion and institutional equity and the vice president for student affairs. As with faculty, this does suggest some association between leadership and student representation. None of Towson's deans, however, are Black. Towson has never had a Black president. Towson was the first school in the University of Maryland System to hire a vice president for equity and inclusion, a now common position.

Per-student, Towson spends only three-quarters of what peers devote to student support, a ratio that has held since at least 2010. Of course, higher spend does not necessarily mean better service, but any service superiority at Towson must transcend spend alone.

In summary, Towson's organizational commitment to advancing DEI is clear on its website, and student, staff, and faculty diversity is visually obvious. The wide-ranging Diversity Issues Progress Report shows DEI work many aspects of the university, and a mix of discrete and ongoing efforts. Towson has combined strong gains in both the Black and overall graduation rates in recent years. The university's Black first-time, full-time undergraduate population has tripled over the past decade, suggesting a positive relationship between numbers and student success. Maintaining this outperformance, with a rapidly increased Black cohort, is the next test for Towson.

The still wide gap between the Black enrollment ratio at Towson and the Black presence in Maryland overall persuaded the USC Race & Equity Center to give the university an "F" on student "representation equity," even though Black representation at Towson is superior to that at the vast majority of other schools. Indeed, the majority of Black students at Towson do not come from Baltimore. Many hail from north of Washington DC. Robust alumni networks and the efforts of the *Black Faculty & Staff Association* have strengthened Towson's visibility in African American neighborhoods.

Institutional location is consistent with above-average Black enrollment, but graduation rate outperformance is less easily explained. There is some evidence of atypical Black faculty and leadership presence, but admission arrangements and per-student support spend suggest nothing out of the ordinary. Sustained institutional commitment is clear, but the specific services, strategy, and tactics that closed the achievement gap are less apparent.

What is clear is that Towson's transformation from a white-only college in the 1960s to a multi-ethnic comprehensive university today, boasting one of the largest and most academically successful Black undergraduate populations nationally, is a remarkable achievement.

Amherst College

Amherst College (Amherst) is a private liberal arts college in Amherst, Massachusetts, about two hours west of Boston. The town's Black population was 6.1% in 2019.

Amherst has a long history of recruiting small numbers of talented Black students from far afield, notably from the Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, the first Black public high school in the nation, in Washington D.C., in the Jim Crow era. At the same time, up until the 1950s, campus housing was unofficially segregated, many campus activities were off-limits, and Black student recruitment strictly curtailed. It was not until the college became co-educational in the 1970s that the Black cohort really expanded and diversified.

Eduventures reviewed the Amherst website for insight into the College's contemporary approach to DEI, with particular reference to Black students:

- **Ethos:** Amherst claims to be "one of the most diverse liberal arts colleges in the country," citing a 45% "students of color" ratio, and connects this to the institution's founding ideals.

- **Visuals:** The homepage includes an "Amherst in Pictures" slideshow, showcasing all sides of campus life, including plenty of diverse imagery.

- **Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (ODEI):** The Office (founded in 2016) works for a "just, equitable, vibrant, and intellectually challenging educational environment, and a culture of critical and compassionate campus engagement." The ODEI site includes a statement from the campus police about the department's commitment to DEI. ODEI includes the Office of Inclusive Leadership, focused both on recruiting a more diverse staff and fostering an inclusive workplace.

- **ODEI Strategic Plan:** Goal two of the Office's strategic plan is to "create a sense of belonging for all Amherst students." Initiatives to that end include focus groups, cross-referencing various DEI reports across Amherst, work to better connect "cultural centers" and "student life," discussions on the role of DEI in the core curriculum, and consulting with all student-serving centers on creation of DEI plans. A three-year ODEI plan evaluation report is available, but is framed in general terms. It is not clear what progress has been made on the various goals and strategies from 2016. There is also a *Presidential Task Force on Diversity & Inclusion*, formed in 2017, with a multifaceted staff, faculty, and student membership. The object is to take practical steps to further ODEI's work across the institution, but its reports are password protected.

- **Wade Fellowship:** Named in honor of a former student, Harold Wade Jr., author of *The Black Men of Amherst*, a history of pioneering Black students at the college from the late 19th century, the annual fellowship connects alumni winners with current Black students. Fellows visit campus over a year to give talks and mentor.

- **Open Curriculum:** Since 1971, Amherst has adopted the "open curriculum," emphasizing intellectual breadth and student development. There is no core curriculum, and no distribution requirements. The College website makes no mention of any mandatory DEI course, a path some schools have taken. Instead, students are encouraged to explore across the college's 850+ courses, in every subject imaginable, not to mention those of the Five Colleges Consortium of which Amherst is a part.

- **Need-Blind Admission:** There is no question that resources aid Amherst's DEI commitment. Amherst enjoys one of the largest endowments among liberal arts colleges. The College meets 100% of demonstrated financial need for all admitted students. The average financial aid package in 2019/20 was $58,000.

- **A2A:** The *Access 2 Amherst* initiative works to introduce the College to prospective students, prioritizing underrepresented groups, and any prospects with limited financial resources. Participation—a no-cost weekend on campus—is selective based on an application. About three-quarters of past A2A participants applied for Amherst admission, and half this cohort were admitted (a much higher ratio than average). A team of *Diversity Outreach Interns* help students settle in.

What about Black faculty, leadership, and institutional spend on student support?

Amherst College slightly trails its peers on Black faculty ratios: 4.7% among tenured faculty (vs. 5% at peers), and 7.9% among tenure-track faculty (vs. 8.3%) in 2019. Amherst is on par with peers when it comes to non-tenure track faculty at 7.1% in 2019 (vs. 7%). Compared to national averages, the College is in-line or ahead. This suggests respectable but not exceptional Black faculty presence, although there have been gains over time: the Amherst website states that in 2015, Black faculty made up 3.1% of the total, rising to 5.4% in 2018.

Senior administration includes one Black leader (chief equity and inclusion officer) and a non-white chief student affairs officer. There are no Black leaders on the provost's senior team. Amherst has never had a Black president.

The College vastly outspends its peers on student support, with a per-student dollar amount of nearly $19,000 in 2019, more than double even its lofty peer average. Indeed, Amherst grew per-student support spend over 65% between 2010 and 2019, much faster than usual. The extent to which growth in spend was driven by DEI-specific activities is unclear.

In summary, Amherst is a well-resourced, independent-minded institution wedded to diversity as a core attribute. Various initiatives have helped the college to better live up to its ideals when it comes to student and faculty diversity, but there remains plenty of scope for development. Indeed, Amherst's Black first-time, full-time population was flat over the past decade, a period when the likes of SUNY Albany and Towson increased Black enrollment strongly. According to Amherst College's *2019 Common Dataset*, the college enrolled more first-time, full-time international students than Black students that year.

Location, list price, and selectivity are challenges, real and perceived, for Amherst. Local developments may give a new dimension to the college's DEI efforts. The Town of Amherst is considering a reparations fund for its Black community in recognition of systematic housing and other discrimination in decades past. Amherst College has expressed support.

The Bottom Line

Very few U.S four-year colleges and universities (excluding HBCUs) truly exemplify a commitment to Black students: enrolling them at or above population incidence, growing this cohort strongly over time, posting a Black first-time, full-time graduation rate above 70%, and a graduation rate that matches or exceeds the institutional average. Among the handful that get

close to this ideal, most hit some of these metrics but not others: a stellar graduation rate but flat or down Black enrollment, for example.

Institutional location has something to do with our "Top 10," but there are far more counter-examples. SUNY Albany and Towson University would perhaps not have such a strong track record on Black enrollment and student success if they were not located in large urban areas with significant Black populations. But there are numerous other institution in somewhat similar settings with no such track record. Amherst College shows that location need not be an impediment to greater student diversity, and both SUNY Albany and Towson still lag their settings in terms of representation.

History and personalities also matter. Towson University's transition from whites-only college in the 1960s to a multi-ethnic university much more aligned with its north-of-Baltimore home, was inspired by early Black leaders such as Julius Chapman. SUNY Albany's first Black president, Robert J. Jones, provided a focal point as the university looked for new direction.

Resources also matter, but are not decisive. Amherst College operates need-blind admission and spends lavishly on student support but has seen Black first-time, full-time enrollment flat-line in recent years. SUNY Albany and Towson are less well-off and spend less than peers on student support but have grown Black enrollment substantially, and simultaneously raised graduation rates and closed equity gaps.

When it comes to faculty and leadership, only Towson's Black faculty ratios stand out, and only for non-tenured faculty. Black senior leaders are either absent or exceptional at the three case study institutions featured here. SUNY Albany's Dr. Jones aside, the most obvious Black senior leaders have a DEI brief, suggesting that other top roles remain a frontier even at schools with a strong track record on Black enrollment and graduation. Towson's Black vice president for student affairs is notable.

On school websites at least, DEI units and plans are perhaps the most visible manifestation of institutional commitment, along with photos and videos of student diversity. DEI units and plans, often formed only relatively recently, are still finding their way when it comes to advancing Black equity, as well as more generally. Numerical targets for faculty, evident at some schools, are not employed when it comes to students, wary of political and legal sensitivity about affirmative action. Similarly, curriculum reform tied to a DEI agenda is absent or tentative. Some voices imply that the "problem" is admission and support, while the academic "content" is neutral; others, like Amherst, view any course prescription as antithetical to learning.

It is often difficult to discern exactly what a school is striving for when it comes to different dimensions of DEI, including the Black experience. This is partly because the subject is hard-to-pin-down "culture" and "climate," and partly because higher education is defined by intricate interplay between institution and individuals, not top-down targets. Deeper explanatory layers, such as the intersections of race, gender, and field of study, have not been tackled in this report.

In the end, data cannot tell the whole story. Institutions operate in complex social realities beyond their control, and the lived experience of individual students is both diverse and ultimately beyond studies like this. What is apparent is that a handful of schools have much to teach others about how to make meaningful progress, from different starting points and with much work still to do, on the Black student experience.

It is clear that schools that recruit and graduate Black students in larger numbers get rewarded: the schools with the best Black graduation rates reported 18% growth in first-time Black undergraduate enrollment between 2010 and 2019, a period when overall Black first-time undergraduate numbers slid 25% and total first-time undergraduate enrollment declined 12%. Success breeds success.

Higher education leaders cannot be "neutral" on DEI, not least sustained Black underrepresentation. Commitments to truth and excellence sit uneasily with access and success gaps that both reflect and perpetuate centuries of systemic racism in the United States. There are no simple answers, but those rare institutions that have made more progress than most deserve acknowledgment and emulation, and more needs to be done to unpack and propel their success.

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