

EMPIRICAL AND APPLIED RESEARCH

Leaders Matter: HBCU STEM Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Protests Against the Epidemic of Police Brutality in the Black Community

Claudia Rankins, Ph.D.¹, Falcon Rankins, Ph.D.¹¹ PRISSEM Academic Services, LLC

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which arose amidst long-standing societal efforts in the US to exclude Black people from higher education opportunities, have established a legacy of making disproportionately positive contributions to the participation of Black Americans in STEM fields. In early 2020, these vital institutions were confronted with a dual threat to their existence – the sudden onset COVID-19 pandemic and an emerging global awareness of police brutality in the Black community. This study seeks to add to understanding of how HBCU STEM faculty and administrators experience and define concepts of leadership in the context of benefitting and caring for their students. HBCUs serve as leaders in the quest to provide Black students with access to opportunities and careers in STEM fields, and it is important that we seek to better understand the practices, beliefs, and philosophies that underpin that success.

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked major disruption across all aspects of global society, including postsecondary education. Most institutions of higher education faced the immediate challenge of pivoting to remote learning mid-semester in order to continue educating students through a period of stay-at-home mandates and social distancing rules. The repercussions of the pandemic have extended well beyond that initial disrupted spring semester. The pandemic has been implicated in disproportionately raising new barriers to postsecondary education access for students of color and widening existing racial disparities in student mental health and well-being (Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021; Fortuna et al., 2020). While the pandemic was raging, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, and over 250 other Black individuals at the hands of police (Campaign Zero, 2023) sparked nationwide protests in 2020 that highlighted inequities in the criminal justice system and led to widespread claims of commitments to anti-racism efforts. Although this racial reckoning brought increased attention to the chronic challenges and stressors regularly faced by Black Americans of all ages, it also led to a

subsequent backlash against efforts to better understand the role of racism in the history and function of the United States (e.g., Blake, 2023; Jefferson & Ray, 2022; Meckler & Natanson, 2021).

Within the context of these disruptive global, national, and community-level social events, faculty and administrators at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were tasked with protecting their mission to educate Black students and ensure their institutions would survive these dual, yet intersecting, crises. Leading HBCUs through crises and adversity is, unfortunately, nothing new. Many schools that would eventually be designated HBCUs arose following the emancipation of enslaved Africans at the end of the American Civil War in the 1860s, and these institutions have weathered myriad challenges in a society that has, in many ways, sought to marginalize educational opportunities for Black Americans. HBCUs have had to survive major periods of adversity, such as the Jim Crow era of White backlash to Reconstruction which resulted in the establishment and brutal enforcement of systematic racial segregation, ongoing civil rights struggle, government underfunding, and ongoing financial challenges (Favors, 2020).

Despite this, HBCUs not only persist; they make disproportionately positive contributions to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) enterprise. For instance, in 2018, despite accounting for only 2% of all 4-year institutions of higher education (IHE) enrollment, HBCUs were responsible for almost 15% of all science and engineering (S&E) bachelor's degrees awarded to Black graduates and served as the undergraduate origin institutions of almost a quarter of Black S&E doctoral recipients (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2021). This success is due to the efforts of dedicated and caring faculty supported by persistent, creative, and race conscious leadership committed to student success (Boncana et al., 2021; Hirt et al., 2006; McGee et al., 2021; McKayle, 2021). Collectively, HBCUs serve as leaders in the quest to provide Black students with access to opportunities and careers in STEM fields, and it is important that we seek to better understand the practices, beliefs, and philosophies that underpin this success.

To meet the more recent challenges related to COVID-19 and social unrest, HBCU STEM faculty were asked to develop and learn new methods and paradigms for teaching, advising, and engaging students while continuing to attend to activities vital to their personal career development, such as conducting research, attending professional development activities, writing grant proposals, and engaging in community service. They were also asked to support a student population that was quickly recognized to be more vulnerable to the health, social, and economic impacts of COVID-19 (Alcendor, 2020; Moore et al., 2022). Finally, they were asked to accomplish these tasks with access to fewer resources and infrastructure than faculty at peer Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Liu, 2021) and during a coinciding period of declining HBCU enrollment (Rankins & Rankins, 2023).

There is evidence that HBCUs collectively rose to the challenge and continue to do so. These institutions played a critical role in the higher education landscape, serving as reliable safe havens for students of color by providing housing, food security, health-care access, and mental-health support (Guy-Sheftall & Jackson, 2021). During this period, they also sought to expand their capacity to serve students and attend to the health and wellbeing of the broader Black community by establishing new coalitions and partnerships with other HBCUs, governments, and corporations (Murty & Payne, 2021).

The goal of this study is to further explore how leaders at HBCUs responded to the challenges that arose beginning in spring 2020. This study seeks to answer the calls of Johnson and Thompson (2020) and others to close the knowledge gap related to HBCU governance and leadership during COVID-19 and enrich understanding of what encompasses effective broadening participation leadership during times of crisis. Specifically, the study seeks to add to understanding of how leaders within HBCU STEM faculty and administrator ranks experience and define concepts of leadership and innovation in the context of recent and current nationwide public health and social challenges.

This study takes an expansive view of the concept of leadership within HBCUs to include those with formal leadership titles (i.e., presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs) and to recognize the important leadership roles that individuals from faculty ranks play in guiding and mentoring peers and students. In addition, given the strong tradition of student-led activism historically associated with HBCUs, this study is also interested in leadership at the student level.

For this study, we teamed with and were supported by the Center for the Advancement of STEM Leadership (CASL), a National Science Foundation-funded Broadening Participation Research Center that seeks to improve knowledge at the intersection of leadership and broadening participation in STEM at HBCUs.

Research Question

This study sought to explore 1) innovative practices implemented by HBCU faculty and administrators during the 2020–2022 period and 2) leadership attributes, behaviors, and practices most valued by participants during this period. This paper focuses on the latter and explores effective leadership during the 2020–2022 crisis, as defined by HBCU STEM faculty and administrators.

Methods

We employed a qualitative case study methodology to explore participants' recollections of their experiences of 2020–2022 and their perceptions and conceptualizations of effective leadership during that time.

Leadership Positionality of Authors

Our work is deeply imbedded in the HBCU community and grounded in our vision of thriving HBCU faculty. Claudia Rankins, a native German woman, has over 40 years' experience working either at an HBCU or on behalf of HBCUs. Her leadership style is democratic, servant, laissez-faire, and always adaptable to and supportive of circumstances. She believes in the HBCU mission to educate Black students and to provide leadership in the communities they serve. Falcon Rankins views HBCUs as a vital part of the infrastructure for Black liberation and looks forward to the day these institutions are free to set their own course rather than looking to PWIs as a bellwether. He aspires to the ideals of servant leadership and his work is heavily influenced by critical race theory scholars and their efforts to add necessary context to situations in which the supposed objectivity of positivist methods can work to marginalize certain racial subgroups (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Falcon identifies as a Black male and is the son of Claudia and James Rankins.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participants were recruited in spring 2021 from a subset of thirty-one institutions affiliated with CASL. This group of HBCUs represents a wide range of institutional types, sizes, and locales. We employed a purposive sampling strategy (Yin, 2011), seeking 10–15 participants who would provide the most relevant and rich data regarding their experiences, perceptions, and responses.

Following Robinson's (2014) stratified sampling approach, we initially selected ten HBCUs from the pool of CASL affiliates on the basis of institution size, locale, and research intensity. We then informed previously identified institutional leadership contacts at these schools of the study and requested that they provide the names of 2–3 faculty and/or administrators at their institution who might be willing to participate in the study. To protect participant confidentiality, the contacts were informed that some of the suggested participants might not be contacted. In total, we were provided with the names of 25 faculty and administrators. We supplemented this list with five additional faculty and institutional leaders with whom we were familiar.

After reviewing the potential contact list, we selected a pool of fourteen potential participants in an attempt to balance the institutional attributes described above with institutional rank, gender, and STEM discipline. We emailed invitations directly to the fourteen potential participants, twelve of whom accepted. Having completed the twelve interviews and early-stage data analysis, we concluded that a sufficient volume of data had been obtained to provide a rich and deep understanding of the participants' experiences. This justified ending the interview process. While additional data from a larger group of participants may have led to a greater degree of convergence, the decision to not pursue such convergence aligned with our epistemology

that the most valuable goal of social science is not the pursuit of predictive theories of human behavior but rather a deeper understanding of the context in which that behavior takes place (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Interview Process

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and focused on three themes. The first sought to articulate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest during 2020–2022, with questions such as, *"Ten years from now, when you're telling someone about 2020 and 2021, what do you think you will be talking about?"* The second explored participants' recollections and understanding of institutional and/or personal responses to these external factors, with questions such as, *"What other changes do you remember arising at [institution] in response to either COVID or the social unrest?"* and *"What do you believe will happen to these innovations as things 'return to normal'?"* The third sought participants' definitions of effective leadership, with questions such as, *"When you think about what it means to be a good leader or to exercise good leadership at your institution or at HBCUs in general, what comes to mind?"* The participants' demographic data were collected at the end of each interview. Two pilot interviews were conducted prior to engaging study participants, which helped to refine the interview protocol and test the technology used in the interview sessions.

The interviews were conducted between January and May 2022, approximately two years after the World Health Organization first declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Each interview engaged a single participant and was conducted by one of the two authors. All interviews were conducted remotely using [riverside.fm](https://www.riverside.fm), a web-based video conferencing software. Audio transcripts were recorded; video was not. Audio recordings were transcribed using automated cloud-based speech-to-text software which produced verbatim transcripts. Transcripts were then reviewed and edited for accuracy by three researchers, and participants were asked to review the transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts served as the primary source of data for the study. Field notes that we compiled during the interviews served as a supplementary source of data.

Throughout the design and implementation of the study, we remained mindful of maintaining confidentiality and guarding against the risk of deductive disclosures (Kaiser, 2009). We asked all participants to review an institutional review board (IRB)-approved consent form that detailed steps that we would take to protect participant identity and data. Given the relatively limited number of HBCU STEM departments (particularly within the subset of CASL-affiliated institutions), some of the data presented in this article have been intentionally obfuscated to protect the identities of participants.

Analysis

Written and audio transcripts, interview field notes, and research memos were stored and organized in ATLAS.ti v23. We took an inductive approach (Frieze, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to our analysis of the data, using ATLAS.ti to fracture and categorize interview data using emic codes that remained close to those data. As codes were developed, they were annotated within ATLAS.ti to ensure consistent use and to enable external review. As analysis progressed, we continuously revisited the transcripts to revise descriptive codes and to generate thematic codes that connected multiple lower-level codes.

Research participants

The study included twelve participants who represented institutional ranks, ranging from associate professors to chairs, deans, provosts, and president, and STEM disciplines, including biology, chemistry, mathematics, allied health sciences, and engineering. Eight participants identified as female and four as male. Eight participants identified as Black or African American (six females), two as Asian, one as multiracial, and one as White. The participants represented eight 4-year bachelors or master's level HBCUs with enrollments of fewer than 5,000 students. Two-year community colleges and doctoral level HBCUs were not represented within the study; nor were the largest HBCUs, by enrollment. Participating institutions were evenly split between public and private schools.

Findings

The interviews covered a wide range of topics and uncovered a wealth of information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest on HBCU faculty, administrators, and students. This paper focuses specifically on aspects of the participants' recollections and understandings that spoke to concepts of effective and desirable leadership, and includes participants' explicit definitions and descriptions of effective leadership at the time, together with qualities that we deduced from other aspects of their responses.

Defining effective leadership during a time of pandemic and social unrest

Participants were asked to define the concept of effective leadership throughout the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most equated effective leadership with actions and decisions taken by key individuals that prioritized the institutional mission of continuing to provide a quality educational experience to students during the crisis. Many of the examples of effective leadership actions and decisions related to the abrupt shift to remote learning that occurred in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants recalled leadership taking swift action to provide students and, in some cases, faculty with laptops and internet hotspots to enable class attendance, and ensuring that faculty received training to adapt

to the new teaching modality. Training and preparing faculty for online teaching was facilitated by administrators, IT staff, and faculty who went beyond their assigned duties, thus ensuring that students continued to receive a quality education. However, some participants felt that some leaders could have better served the institutional mission by holding themselves and others accountable and addressing problems in a timely manner.

Participants valued leaders who interacted well with others and pointed to strong communication skills as a marker of effective leadership, particularly as leaders were tasked with helping others to navigate the uncertainty of the period. Some leaders established structural pathways to ensure effective communication of student and faculty needs and concerns, while others, who participants praised as “good listeners,” relied on a more interpersonal framing of communication and took advice from those around them. Similarly, participants valued leaders they perceived to be accessible and who entrusted responsibility to others.

Finally, participants valued a number of individual leadership traits and behaviors, including competence, adaptability, confidence, and foresight.

Leading with Empathy

A recurring theme focused on the value of incorporating empathy and compassion into leadership practice. For most, 2020 was a novel experience in which they came face-to-face with the a multitude of challenges that students generally do not endure while pursuing degrees. Participants shared stories of students dealing with health issues, caring for family members who were sick with COVID-19, and prioritizing paid employment, sometimes in order to support parents and family members who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. More than one participant recalled students attending online classes while at work.

For most participants, this clearer recognition of the multitude and depth of the challenges students face prompted changes to their classroom approach, reflecting empathy rooted in student care. Participants said that they and their peers became less stringent about enforcing deadlines and, in some cases, drastically changed their own lifestyles to better accommodate students’ work schedules, meeting them virtually in the evenings or at weekends. One participant used funds from an existing grant to hire more students as peer tutors, an action that both provided academic support and reduced financial stress on those students.

Participants also paid greater attention to student wellbeing throughout this period. Multiple participants spoke of utilizing class time for wellness “check-ins” and, in some cases, this practice continued even as the pandemic began to ebb. Morgan, an executive level administrator who teaches natural sciences at a private HBCU in the South, said:

I used to be straight by the book [e.g., in class] we’re talking about electrons and reactions, and that’s all we’re talking about. We don’t need to be touchy feely. I’m not trying to go outta context.

But...one of the areas I grew in [during the pandemic] was to make sure that I'm acknowledging [students'] humanity. And my humanity. So, we can stop at the beginning of the class and do an icebreaker. And, you know, I did that during COVID just to make sure they were okay and to see where everyone was and...I'm still doing that now.

Participants generally did not explicitly define these actions as examples of leadership. However, as researchers, we view as leadership the initiative taken by participants to recognize an emerging set of student needs and to adapt their approaches (often at significant personal cost) to benefit those in their care.

Participants' calls for empathy and grace extended beyond the classroom, and they valued efforts by institutional leadership to take a more compassionate approach to their support of faculty, many of whom also faced personal and family challenges, such as added responsibilities caring for aged and vulnerable family members and the loss of loved ones. Jean, an executive level administrator at a public central-Atlantic HBCU, reflected on the stress of experiencing a personal loss while leading faculty and students who had also experienced loss:

I lost a loved one. I lost my best friend. Dealing with that and still having to deal with students who also were going through their personal issues, their personal losses, um, their dysfunctionality. So, you're dealing with your own [issues] as a faculty, and then you have to deal with the students' and I'm supposed to pull all this together? I have so many faculty members [who] just said, 'I can't do it.' I'm like: I cannot do it. I am so stressed out, you know?

Despite the difficulty, Jean recognized the need to continue acknowledging and addressing the myriad challenges faculty were facing. She said, "I mean...you cannot close your eyes when people say, 'I have a problem.'"

Morgan summarized the need, post-2020, to incorporate empathy into the concept of effective leadership:

The concept of leadership has changed, you know? Leadership was, before, the decision maker. It was the individual that acted because they were trying to push you to a specific goal. They wanted you to gain something. They wanted you to produce something. And I think all of that is still the case. But now, in this time where...we're dealing with the health crisis, we've dealt with racial issues, we've dealt with really strange politics, and a lot of tragedies, leadership has to be about caring. And there was a time, you know, in leadership where as long as the job got done, it didn't matter about the mental wellbeing of those who were doing it. It's like: you're here to do a job, that's all we care about.

But leadership right now has, it has to expand. It has to be able to connect with your humanity, acknowledge your humanity and make room for it.... It's gonna be hard moving forward without being able to think about the humanity of those you're leading and connecting with them.

Leading from Unexpected Places

During this time of crisis, HBCU leadership sometimes came from unexpected places. At Morgan's institution, junior faculty pushed for leadership positions on the faculty council. This was unprecedented and was resisted to some extent by more senior faculty. Some participants also described students and student organizations rising to the challenges of the pandemic and social unrest, especially in the area of community service. Cassietta, a faculty member at a public midwestern HBCU, recalled the leadership taken by students in the institution's social justice institute: "To see them in a pandemic, handing out food or, you know, trying to gain resources, give resources, was incredible."

Other leaders defied stereotypes in their efforts to support faculty as they adjusted to the rapid changes taking place in education. It was widely recognized that older faculty members experienced difficulties in the sudden transition to online learning. However, one participant recalled a Chair of natural sciences at a public midwestern HBCU with over 30 years of teaching experience, who "dedicated herself to learning Zoom and these other resources to the level of mastery.... And within a week she had gathered together faculty that she thought needed to learn and she was teaching them." The participant credited this Chair's humility, willingness to learn and teach, and "tireless" advocacy for faculty, with the institution's relatively seamless transition to online learning. Similarly, Jean described faculty members using their social media presence and expertise to disseminate information to students and help connect them with resources.

Notably, one institution took an unexpected direction of housing its students on campus through the early days of the pandemic. Avery, an executive level administrator at this institution, recalled that the decision to keep students on campus at a time when nearly all other institutions of higher education were closing their dorms was prompted by the recognition that "our student population was one that the environment here [on-campus] was gonna be more safe and productive for them than if we were to send them home." While classes were delivered online through this period, students were housed in single dormitory rooms and fed in the cafeteria that adhered to social distancing guidelines.

Leader Boundary Crossing

Participants valued certain leadership characteristics that could be considered to blur or even cross traditional socially-negotiated boundaries. For instance, some participants referred to others at their institution not just

as peers and students, but as family. Many participants referred to treating students as if they were their own children, and Avery believed that this attitude was key to being a successful HBCU leader:

You know, I basically treat these young people as if they're my kids. And if you can't look at them and see your own children in them, then you know, you're in the wrong business, you're not gonna be successful.

The importance of instilling a family atmosphere was reinforced by Helen when she described leaders, including the dean and heads of departments, teaching courses and interacting with students at her small private HBCU:

Part of leadership [connecting directly with students] allows for the invocation of this, this family affair, right? So, we think about the smaller institutions and connectivity with students and that we are a family, and that's why we can have this kind of nurturing environment. And so, to me, we were able to see our leaders act in that fashion as kind of elders.

Strong leadership also crossed physical boundaries to influence the world beyond campus borders. HBCUs were generally established in Black communities to which they have held close ties. Participants recalled the many ways their institutions showed concern for these communities through the pandemic. For instance, HBCU faculty and administrators took leadership roles in educating communities about COVID-19, sometimes in opposition to local and state policies. As early as February 2020, Avery, an institutional leader with a background in healthcare, became involved in COVID-19 related issues on a state and national level. Later, her deep South university held free community vaccination clinics and offered gift cards as incentives to faculty and students to get vaccinated. Meanwhile, Helen compared a series of community education projects to the Civil Rights struggle. These projects were created by PhD students to inform the community in their small southern town on issues related to COVID-19. Furthermore, Helen recalled that her institution intentionally slowed the return of students to campus in Fall 2021 in order to protect the surrounding community's relatively high percentage of elderly citizens from the omicron variant of the virus that was surging at the time.

Conclusions

Participants were asked to talk about effective leadership during a period of time characterized by a deadly global pandemic and social unrest. Unsurprisingly, they highlighted individuals who prioritized institutional responsibilities and who exhibited traits and behaviors that facilitated communication and collaboration. They also listed desirable leadership qualities, including competence, confidence, and adaptability.

Reflecting on the actions taken by leaders and on their own experiences, the participants painted a picture of leadership that valued compassion, empathy, and care in the midst of crisis. The participants were unanimous in their appreciation of institutional responses that prioritized student, faculty, and surrounding community safety, even if this prioritization delayed a 'return to normal.' Leaders generally understood the need to accommodate and support faculty struggling to integrate new technologies into their teaching practice or who requested switching to virtual courses owing to health concerns. As classroom leaders, some participants reshaped how they taught and interacted with students, and most expressed concern for students that extended well beyond the classroom and academic achievement. In some cases, this sense of care motivated institutions to reach beyond campus limits to serve those surrounding communities.

A recurring focus on ensuring student care aligns with literature which suggests that the relative success of HBCUs in educating Black students is due to the caring environments they create (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Lent et al., 2005; Perna et al., 2009; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). These findings also support other recent work exploring leadership within CASL HBCUs, particularly Hendrickson et al.'s (2021) conceptualization of caring-oriented STEM leadership. Throughout this study, we encountered concern about maintaining learning standards and rigor (academic caring), novel solutions to ensuring access to resources for institutional stakeholders (managerial caring), calls for holistic approaches to educating students and supporting faculty (leadership caring), and recollections of individuals leading by example as they worked to shift culture (champion-driven caring).

Implications

The findings of this study point to a set of key considerations for policy and practice at multiple levels of HBCU leadership:

Leaders should establish and utilize lines of communication, particularly during times of crisis. This will provide guidance and promote transparency in decision making. Some participants recalled the confusion and fear that arose in the early stage of the pandemic when clear communication from executive leadership was absent. Participants from one HBCU lamented how better communication from executive leadership could have quelled discontent related to a police shooting near campus by helping students and faculty better understand why controversial key decisions were made.

Leaders should ensure that they are visionary, creative, and supportive of students and faculty *between crises*. Study participants inarguably valued leaders who moved quickly and thought creatively to uphold the institutional mission at the onset of the pandemic. They highlighted the efforts of administrators to reallocate funds and find resources to support students and faculty through the abrupt transition to remote learning. However, some participants also questioned the preparedness of their institutions prior to the pandemic, particularly with regard to internet infrastructure and faculty awareness of online education best practices. One participant suggested that

the pandemic not only exposed the lack of on-campus infrastructure necessary to support online education, but the lack of faculty understanding of how to assess online learning and student engagement. Similarly, another participant was grateful that the shift to remote work prompted their public institution to adopt software to electronically process requisitions and submit faculty evaluation portfolios. While institutional function depended on these innovative systems during the remote work phase of the pandemic, these systems also reduced faculty workload upon return to campus. This raises the question of whether institutional leadership could have found creative ways to prioritize faculty workload reduction *prior* to a crisis in which the continued function of institutions depended on such measures. Participants did not dwell on such questions during the interviews. However, we encourage HBCU leaders to continue to search for innovative ways to support faculty and students, even as the crisis subsides and society ‘returns to normal.’

Finally, HBCU leaders must embrace and protect the unique institutional mission of HBCUs to educate Black students. These are institutions where Black students can pursue higher education immersed in their culture and relatively sheltered from the worst elements of White supremacy (Favors, 2020). Students’ responses to recent events have shown that they continue to view these institutions as important refuges (Green, 2022). While HBCUs clearly must adapt to changing demographic and enrollment trends (Rankins & Rankins, 2023), the findings of this study reinforce the importance of HBCU leaders appreciating the unique mission and role of their institutions in society. Leaders must build institutional environments that better support those faculty inclined to adopt mentoring – or even paternal (Hirt et al., 2008) – roles in their students’ lives. They must also embrace the role of HBCUs as leaders in their surrounding communities and tend to the health and wellbeing of this ‘extended family’ outside of the campus gates. As Cassietta put it, when asked what advice she had for HBCU leaders:

...the first thing that popped into my head was about ‘being an HBCU.’ You know, I think we have the ability to diverge in so many different directions and get caught up in so many other waves and forget about our foundation. And it’s so important. It’s so important. It is the most important thing, the unquestionable need for [HBCUs]. Undeniable. We need to keep it about being an HBCU.

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Falcon Rankins has a PhD in Educational Research and Evaluation from Virginia Commonwealth University and MS and BS degrees in aerospace engineering from University of Maryland, College Park. He owns and operates PRISSEM Academic Services, LLC, a consulting firm that seeks to help Black HBCU STEM faculty thrive by providing research development, grant writing, and evaluation support. He has assisted faculty at more than a dozen HBCUs in the development of STEM disciplinary and education research proposals. He engages HBCU faculty in strategic coaching sessions to help them thrive as members of the STEM academic community.

Claudia Rankins has MS and PhD degrees in Physics from Hampton University. She is a senior research associate for PRISSEM Academic Services, LLC, where she conducts faculty development and research development consulting activities, specifically aimed toward supporting HBCU faculty in the pursuit of STEM research and education research funding. She previously served as Program Director at the National Science Foundation, overseeing the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Undergraduate Program and the HBCU Excellence in Research program. She served at Hampton University for 22 years, holding positions including Chair of the Department of Physics and Dean of the School of Science.

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