The Shift Ahead

HBCUs, Artificial Intelligence, and a New Vision for Higher Education

A Joint Report by Huston-Tillotson University, Ellucian, and UNCF (United Negro College Fund)

Letter From Dr. Melva K. Wallace

President and CEO, Huston-Tillotson University

Dear Colleagues, Partners, and Changemakers,

It is with deep pride and enduring purpose that I introduce *The Shift Ahead: HBCUs, Artificial Intelligence, and a New Vision for Higher Education*. This report is more than a data summary. It is a declaration — that HBCUs are not bystanders to the AI era. We are bold, mission-driven participants, already experimenting, already adapting, and already leading.

At Huston-Tillotson University — situated in the heart of Austin, Texas, a city known as the Silicon Valley of the South — we know firsthand what it means to balance legacy with innovation. We see technology not as a threat to our traditions, but as a tool to extend them — to bring more students into opportunity, more educators into empowered teaching, and more institutions into sustainable practice.

This report confirms what many of us have long known: Our students, faculty, and administrators are using AI at unprecedented levels. They are curious. They are courageous. They are unafraid. But they cannot and should not be expected to carry the future of innovation on their shoulders alone.

The challenge now is institutional. How do we match our people's energy with the right systems, resources, and support? How do we ensure AI is not just used, but used wisely — with equity, transparency, and intention? How do we turn this wave of individual experimentation into a movement for collective transformation?

This report offers early answers to those questions. It shows that HBCUs are not just adopting AI — we are reimagining it. And in doing so, we are redefining what leadership looks like in this moment of change.

To our fellow institutions, I invite you to lean into this work with urgency and imagination. To our partners in philanthropy and technology, I encourage you to see HBCUs not only as deserving of investment — but as indispensable to the future of ethical, inclusive innovation. And to our students, the most hopeful architects of what comes next — know that your vision, your questions, and your creativity are already shaping a more just digital world.

We are building that future now — and at Huston-Tillotson University, we are honored to be part of it.

With resolve and gratitude,

Melva K. Wallace, Ph.D.
President and CEO
Huston-Tillotson University

Letter From Ed Smith-Lewis

Senior Vice President, Strategic Partnerships & Institutional Programs, UNCF

Dear Colleagues and Partners,

Artificial Intelligence is not arriving. It is already here. In lecture halls and residence halls, in data dashboards and dorm room debates, AI is transforming how we learn, work, and lead. And yet, what this report makes undeniably clear is that HBCUs are not reacting to this moment — we are shaping it.

At UNCF, we believe deeply in the transformative power of HBCUs. These institutions have long been engines of innovation — not despite constraints, but because of their unique ability to lead with purpose, adapt with agility, and build with community. What we see in these pages is a vivid reflection of that legacy in real time.

This report tells a story that higher education needs to hear: one of experimentation, not hesitation; of optimism, not cynicism; of faculty, students, and administrators using AI not just as a tool for efficiency, but as a catalyst for equity. Across the HBCU sector, individuals are already engaged — now we must ensure our institutions are equally equipped.

The insights in this report are not merely descriptive — they are directional. They offer a roadmap for what's possible when we invest in infrastructure, data systems, governance, and professional learning. More than that, they show how HBCUs can model a new way forward for all of higher education: a way rooted in inclusion, guided by mission, and led by the communities too often left behind in waves of technological change.

Let us be clear: HBCUs are not behind. They are ahead, experimenting with courage, questioning with integrity, and building a future worthy of the students we serve. But this future will not be secured by enthusiasm alone. It will require real investment, thoughtful design, and unwavering commitment to the values that have always defined our institutions.

To our HBCU partners, we see you and stand with you. To our colleagues in technology and philanthropy, we invite you to join us — not simply to scale tools, but to amplify justice. And to our students: This future is yours to inherit, shape, and lead. You are not just AI users — you are its stewards, its ethicists, its architects.

The HBCU community is holding the pen. Together, we must write a more equitable digital future.

In solidarity and shared purpose,

Ed Smith-Lewis
Senior Vice President, Strategic Partnerships & Institutional Programs
UNCF

Letter From Laura Ipsen

President and CEO, Ellucian

For over 50 years, Ellucian has been helping higher education institutions deliver cutting-edge solutions that anticipate tomorrow's challenges and drive transformative outcomes. As the higher education landscape faces tremendous change and the skill sets needed to succeed in our economy shift, we are presented with the opportunity to reimagine how we support students and strengthen pathways to the workforce through technology.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already playing a crucial role in creating personalized learning experiences and driving efficiencies, enabling educators and administrators to focus more on guiding and supporting students. With proper implementation, HBCUs can benefit significantly from strategically adopting AI.

The Shift Ahead offers a timely and insightful look into how HBCUs are navigating AI adoption and opportunities for continued growth. HBCUs are already using AI to improve outcomes, streamline operations, and expand access to education. The challenge now is to scale these initiatives, use AI to align curricula with market demand, and streamline educational processes so students gain the skills needed for high-impact careers.

Key findings from the report reflect that 84% of students believe that AI will improve their schoolwork, and 82% believe it will be used extensively in their careers. These findings highlight the need for HBCUs to provide guidance not only on how to use AI in the workplace but also on how to ensure it is used ethically.

AI isn't just enhancing higher education; it's redefining it. I encourage you to dive into the full report to explore how your institution can leverage the transformative power of AI to unlock new pathways for student success and innovation.

Laura K. Ipsen
President and Chief Executive Officer
Ellucian

Executive Summary

Adoption of artificial intelligence is accelerating across every sector, and higher education is no exception. But while much of the national discourse focuses on risk, disruption, and catching up, this report offers a different story: one of early adoption, grassroots innovation, and a chance to build a more equitable digital future.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are not lagging behind in the AI revolution. They are exploring it with purpose, experimenting with it on their own terms, and, if supported, poised to lead.

In May 2025, Huston-Tillotson University, Ellucian, and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) conducted the most comprehensive survey to date on AI usage in the HBCU community. The responses from 235 students, faculty, and administrators reveal key insights into the state of adoption and innovation today.

Key Insights

1 **Individual Experimentation With AI Is Skyrocketing and That Energy Signals Cultural Readiness for Institutional Transformation**

AI experimentation is happening everywhere: in classrooms, advising sessions, administrative offices, and residence halls. At HBCUs, 96% of faculty and 98% of students report using AI for academic or personal purposes. This widespread usage is largely driven by individual curiosity and need, not institutional mandate. The result is a powerful signal: HBCUs are culturally ready for transformation.

2 **Readiness Is the Next Frontier — Institutions Must Match Stakeholder Enthusiasm With Investment in Systems, Strategy, and Support**

Despite the high levels of use, fewer than half of respondents report formal AI implementation at their institutions. Many faculty and administrators don't know whether their institution has any AI strategy at all. The readiness gap is clear: Infrastructure, data systems, governance, and training are lagging behind user interest. Bridging this gap is not optional. It is the key to scaling innovation equitably and effectively.

3 If Deployed Intentionally, AI Can Help Close Generational Gaps in Access, Student Learning, Institutional Capacity, and Workforce Alignment

From learning inequities and operational inefficiencies to misalignment with workforce demands, HBCUs have long carried the burden of doing more with less. AI, if aligned with institutional mission and equity principles, can help relieve that burden, expanding instructional capacity, supporting underserved students, and powering smarter decision-making. But it must be deployed with care, context, and community input.

4 HBCUs Can Model a New Ethic of Innovation That Puts Justice at the Center

HBCUs stand apart not just in their AI initiatives, but in their approach. Faculty and administrators focus on values-driven questions about AI's role in education. Students see AI as more than a useful tool — they view it as a force for improving lives. This is an opportunity to redefine who innovation is for and how it unfolds. HBCUs can lead the nation in building a more ethical, human-centered approach to AI.

This report is a starting point for how HBCUs can transform their role in higher education through the use of AI. To turn momentum into movement, institutions must invest in data modernization, faculty development, ethical governance, and student engagement. Philanthropic partners, EdTech firms, and policymakers must recognize HBCUs as laboratories of innovation.

If resourced and trusted, HBCUs can do more than participate in the AI revolution. *They can define its future.*

Context & Purpose

Artificial intelligence has arrived. It's already embedded in our daily lives, reshaping how students learn and how institutions operate. Higher education leaders now face a critical challenge: harnessing AI's power while preserving the fundamental values of teaching, learning, and human development.

HBCUs are at a unique crossroads in this transformation. Long defined by their ability to innovate under constraints, HBCUs are now navigating the rapid rise of AI tools amid resource disparities, complex data environments, and urgent calls to modernize. Yet, what is emerging from this tension is not hesitation but bold experimentation. Across classrooms, advising centers, and administrative offices, faculty, students, and staff are engaging with AI to improve their work, expand their reach, and support learner success.

This report offers a timely look at that experimentation and how it can be converted into lasting institutional advantage.

With responses from 235 stakeholders across more than 50 HBCUs, this report builds upon the 2024 edition of Ellucian's Annual AI in Higher Education Survey to surface new insights specific to HBCUs.

It captures the perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators who are engaging with AI and shaping how AI tools function in mission-driven, equity-centered environments.

The findings also present a challenge. As the data reveals, HBCUs are filled with innovators, early adopters, and optimists. But their institutions do not yet have the systems, strategies, or resources to fully meet the moment. Without intentional investment in readiness — from clean data and responsible governance to professional development and cross-functional leadership — the sector risks losing the opportunity AI presents to close long-standing gaps in learning, inclusion, operations, and career alignment.

This moment is a generational inflection point. With the right support and infrastructure, HBCUs can model a new way forward for higher education — one that does not simply plug AI into old systems but reimagines those systems with purpose and equity at the core.

Individual Experimentation With AI Is Skyrocketing and That Energy Signals Cultural Readiness for Institutional Transformation

HBCUs are filled with faculty, students, and staff who are already using AI tools to navigate their personal, academic, and professional lives. In fact, **96% of HBCU faculty and 98% of students report using AI** — a nearly universal rate. Far from being hesitant adopters, HBCU stakeholders are eagerly exploring how these tools can enhance learning, boost efficiency, and unlock creativity.

Faculty are experimenting with generative AI to build lesson plans, draft rubrics, and deliver personalized student feedback. Students are leaning into AI-powered tools for tutoring, writing assistance, and career preparation. HBCU administrators are adopting at a lower rate than the general sample at 81% using AI for work or personal reasons. They are, however, using AI to brainstorm communications or explore predictive models. Importantly, this experimentation is not limited to one department or function — it's happening across campus, from the history classroom to the advising office to the president's suite.

But this experimentation is happening largely in silos. The momentum is being driven not by institutional mandates, but by personal initiative. Stakeholders are making use of AI on their own terms, boldly, inquisitively, and largely unsupported.

This moment represents a rare kind of cultural readiness. HBCU members are not just open to innovation, they're already innovating. The opportunity now is to match that grassroots energy with structured institutional vision. Without intentional coordination, individual use cases may remain isolated and uneven. But with a shared strategy, HBCUs can channel this momentum into bold, enterprise-level transformation.

96%
of HBCU faculty and

98%
of students report using AI for academic or personal purposes

81%
of administrators use AI for work or personal reasons

100%
of students surveyed say they have used or plan to use AI and no respondents indicated disinterest

Strategic Opportunity

Institutions should recognize and affirm this wave of experimentation by:

- Building internal communities of practice
- Creating low-stakes innovation labs
- Collecting and amplifying faculty and student use cases
- Elevating AI as a cross-functional priority in strategic planning

When institutions harness individual experimentation as fuel for organizational learning, they don't just adapt. They lead.

INSIGHT #2

Readiness Is the Next Frontier — Institutions Must Match Stakeholder Enthusiasm With Investment in Systems, Strategy, and Support

While students, faculty, and staff at HBCUs are rapidly embracing AI, institutions themselves are still catching up. Survey data show that while over **90% of faculty and administrators expect AI use to grow, fewer than half say their institution has formally implemented AI tools.** In fact, a significant portion of respondents — 23% of faculty and 33% of administrators — aren't even sure whether their institution is currently using AI at all.

This signals a critical readiness gap: the infrastructure, training, and governance needed to scale AI responsibly and equitably simply aren't in place yet.

For HBCUs, this gap is not a matter of will. It's a matter of resourcing and alignment. Stakeholders are experimenting, but without coordinated data systems, institutional policies, or cross-functional strategies, that energy remains fragmented. To fully activate AI's potential for teaching, learning, and operational transformation, institutions must invest in the foundations that make meaningful adoption possible.

That starts with clean, integrated data systems. Predictive analytics and generative tools rely on institutional data, but if that data is siloed, incomplete, or outdated, the insights AI offers may be inaccurate or biased. Without data governance and shared definitions, AI adoption may cause more confusion than clarity.

Equally important is professional development. Surveyed faculty and administrators overwhelmingly reported a desire for training specific to their roles and needs, not generic tutorials. They want to know how to use AI in the context of student support, academic policy, and operational efficiency. That knowledge must be embedded in strategy, not delivered as a one-off workshop.

Finally, HBCUs need clear institutional direction for adoption, governance, and innovation. Leaders must be intentional about integrating AI across their operations, defining what success looks like, and identifying how new tools support, not distract from, institutional goals.

23%
of HBCU faculty and 33% of administrators are unsure whether their institution is currently using AI

80%
of faculty and 87% of administrators said they need role-specific training

Less than half
of respondents report formal institutional AI implementation

Data privacy and bias were cited as top barriers to adoption across all roles

Strategic Opportunity

To move from fragmented experimentation to intentional transformation, HBCUs must invest in readiness at every level:

- Audit, clean, and integrate data systems to support AI use cases
- Develop role-based learning tracks for faculty, staff, and leaders
- Establish AI governance task forces or committees with cross-functional representation
- Embed AI in institutional planning, budgeting, and accreditation processes

This is not just about using AI. It's about designing the kind of institutions that can wield AI to advance mission, amplify student success, and increase operational resilience.

If Deployed Intentionally, AI Can Help Close Generational Gaps in Access, Student Learning, Institutional Capacity, and Workforce Alignment

For generations, HBCUs have navigated systems not built for them — chronically under-resourced, under-connected, and underestimated. However, they have remained engines of opportunity for Black learners and low-income communities. AI, if adopted thoughtfully and equitably, has the potential to address many of the systemic gaps that have long challenged these institutions and their students.

This moment is not just about keeping up with technological change. It's about rewriting the conditions of access, inclusion, and institutional strength.

Survey data makes this clear: HBCU students are already leveraging AI to enhance their learning, but **1 in 5 still report barriers related to technology access and cost.** For institutions, the cost of implementation remains one of the most frequently cited obstacles by both faculty and administrators. These findings underscore a critical truth: AI won't automatically close gaps. It will only do so if institutions *design it to do so*.

22%
of HBCU students reported lack of access to reliable tech or internet as a barrier to using AI

23%
of faculty and

27%
of administrators identified implementation costs as major challenges

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70%
of faculty expressed concern about algorithmic bias, reinforcing the need for equitable design

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Over

90%
of faculty identified student use of AI for career planning as a use case that is likely to grow over the next two years

Strategic Opportunity

If HBCUs can center equity in their AI strategies, they can transform persistent challenges into competitive advantages:

– Use AI to expand academic support without increasing instructional load

– Automate operations to redirect resources to student-facing priorities

– Embed workforce-aligned tools into curricula to prepare students for AI-augmented careers

– Adopt inclusive data governance frameworks that detect and reduce bias in algorithms

This is a moment not just to implement AI, but to use it to intentionally close the equity gaps that have too long been treated as inevitable.

If HBCUs are intentional, AI could become a lever for equity in four key areas:

1. **Student Learning:** AI-powered tools can offer real-time tutoring, adaptive learning pathways, and personalized feedback, which proves especially valuable in resource-constrained academic environments.

2. **Institutional Effectiveness:** Predictive analytics, intelligent scheduling, and AI-assisted process improvements can help HBCUs do more with less, freeing up staff capacity and enhancing responsiveness.

3. **Workforce Readiness:** AI can help align curriculum to labor market demands, guide students through skill acquisition, and enable faculty to incorporate industry-relevant tools into instruction.

4. **Inclusion and Access:** When paired with intentional design, AI can surface patterns of inequity and support early interventions. But without safeguards, it can also entrench bias and exclusion.

HBCUs Can Model a New Ethic of Innovation That Puts Justice at the Center

Across the higher education landscape, AI is often treated as a technical tool in need of guidelines. At HBCUs, it is being met with a different kind of awareness rooted in history, mission, and a responsibility to community.

HBCU faculty and administrators are not blindly optimistic about AI. They see AI's potential and its risks. HBCU leaders seek to use AI to enhance learning instead of replacing it and safeguarding student data, not simply mine data for efficiency. HBCU staff and faculty are asking deeper questions — not just what can AI do, but what should it do for our students, and for whom is it being built?

These leaders are not alone. Students, especially at HBCUs, are eager to learn, shape, and lead in this space. They bring optimism, curiosity, and a lived experience that challenges mainstream assumptions about who belongs in the AI conversation.

Students believe AI will improve their schoolwork (84%) and quality of life (78%) and will be extensively used in their careers (82%). But they also want institutions to provide guidance, guardrails, and co-leadership opportunities.

What emerges from this dynamic — skepticism with optimism, creativity with caution — is a rare opportunity. HBCUs can model what a mission-aligned, community-centered approach to AI adoption looks like when designed for equity from the start. They can build governance models that include faculty, staff, students, and community partners. They can show how AI can be used to expand, not erode, human potential, dignity, and voice.

In doing so, HBCUs can serve as ethical pathfinders for the entire sector, bringing a unique clarity of purpose and a legacy of innovation to an increasingly complex digital era.

84%

of students believe AI improves the quality of their schoolwork

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78%

say it will enhance their quality of life in the next decade

87%

of students, 72% of faculty, and 73% of administrators are optimistic about AI's impact on learning

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80%

of faculty and 77% of administrators believe AI misuse in academic work will rise

Strategic Opportunity

By leading with their values, HBCUs can set a new standard for AI adoption in higher education:

- Engage students as co-creators of institutional AI strategy
- Develop ethical guidelines tailored to the cultural and mission-driven context of HBCUs
- Embed transparency and equity reviews into AI procurement and implementation
- Use AI to augment human learning, supporting inclusive teaching and curriculum design

In an era of accelerated change, HBCUs offer a rare and necessary example of how to advance with both courage and conscience. The future of AI in higher education need not be extractive, exclusionary, or disjointed. HBCUs are showing that it can be liberatory, just, and human-centered if we choose to lead that way.

This Is a Generational Moment And HBCUs Are Poised to Lead It

Artificial intelligence is already reshaping the architecture of higher education — from the classroom to the business office, from advising to alumni engagement. But the question before us is not simply *how fast we adopt* or *how widely we deploy*. The real question is: Who will define the terms of this transformation?

Too often, technology arrives at HBCUs as an afterthought — designed elsewhere, funded sparingly, implemented reactively. But this report makes something clear: AI is different. This time, the energy isn't only coming from vendors or policymakers. It's coming from the ground up. HBCU students, faculty, and administrators are already immersed in experimentation, imagining new possibilities and shaping what comes next.

That energy is a gift — and a signal.

If we meet it with the right strategy, infrastructure, and investment, AI can become a tool to close generational gaps in student learning, institutional capacity, workforce opportunity, and digital inclusion. If ignored or mismanaged, it will deepen the very divides we are working to heal. The stakes could not be clearer or higher.

But this is more than a risk-and-opportunity frame. This is a call to reimagine power in higher education.

HBCUs have always done more with less. They have always transformed scarcity into excellence, and exclusion into agency. Now, they stand at the threshold of leading the next great wave of innovation — not by copying the models of dominant institutions, but by offering a radically better one: a vision of AI rooted in justice, accountability, and human dignity.

Let us be clear: HBCUs are not late to the AI revolution. They are positioned to redefine it.

This report is just the beginning. The work ahead demands new coalitions, courageous investment, and a sector-wide willingness to follow the lead of institutions that have long modeled what it means to innovate with purpose. AI can help us build stronger institutions and better futures, but only if we put the right people in the driver's seat.

Will we replicate the inequities of the past? Or will we seize this moment to build something different, something bold, something better?

The future is already being written — and this time, HBCU leaders and students are holding the pen.