

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Modeling Inclusion: HBCUs and LGBTQ+ Support

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are treasured intellectual institutions that serve as mobilizing forces to educate all who enter their halls of learning (Gasman, 2013; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). These institutions have a history of providing Black students with unwavering support and offering them an education that fosters Black excellence. As hubs for Black racial uplift, the work of these 100+ institutions has broken educational barriers to improve opportunities for African Americans – providing an environment in which one could learn regardless of race or economic status (Allen, 1992; Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Yet, in the 21st century, additional measures of HBCUs' commitment to serve as equitable educational settings will be incumbent upon forging institutional practices that welcome, admit, and include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\* and Queer (LGBTQ+) students (Mobley & Johnson, 2019; Reynolds, Suggs, & Mitchell, 2014). Some researchers are concerned that HBCU environments foster persistent and pervasive conservative traditions and operational approaches that disproportionately disenfranchise LGBTQ+ students (Lenning, 2017; Lewis, & Ericksen, 2016; Mobley & Johnson, 2015). Moreover, much of the literature that exists today surrounding LGBTQ+ students comes from studies done at four-year colleges and universities, not consisting of HBCUs (e.g., Rankin, 2003; Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, & Frazer, 2010; Renn, 2010). Although many HBCUs have made substantial progress towards LGBTQ+ inclusion, many are still grappling with enacting policies that provide holistic support to LGBTQ+ students and fostering a campus community in which all students feel welcome.

This report examines the ways in which HBCUs have cultivated cultures of LGBTQ+ inclusion and highlights institutions that are doing exemplary work related to increasing LGBTQ+ student support. We explore four areas: admissions, health and wellness, student life and student engagement, and housing.

## ADMISSIONS

An institution that is doing exemplary work around ensuring that there are equitable admissions and enrollment practices for LGBTQ+ students is Spelman College, a private all women's HBCU that adopted an admissions policy to admit transgender women to the school.

## SEXUALITY TERMS TOOLKIT

**LGBTQ+:** An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer.

**Cisgender:** A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

**Gender identity:** One's innermost concept of self as woman, man, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**Transgender (“Trans”):** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

**Gender non-conforming:** A broad term referring to people who do not identify or express themselves in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of a gender binary.

**Ally:** A person who is not LGBTQ but shows support for LGBTQ+ people and promotes equality in a variety of ways.

SOURCE: HRC Glossary of Terms: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

Spelman College is located in Atlanta, Georgia and is one of two single-gender, woman-serving HBCUs. It was founded in 1881 and enrolls 2,097 students. In an effort to modernize its admissions policy, Spelman College modified its policy to include transgender women in 2017. According to a policy memo released from the president's office, the undertaking was crafted by an intercollegiate taskforce with student leaders, student services administrators, organizational executives and faculty (Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update, 2017). The Transgender Policy Taskforce was established to make recommendations regarding changes to the admissions policy (n.d.). Publicly shared information contained resources to help the broader community understand the research associated with the beliefs behind the move, experiences, and models of support for the trans community within Spelman. The LGBTQ+ inclusive admissions policy stipulates Spelman will “consider for admission women students including students who consistently live and self-identify as women, regardless of their gender assignment at birth.” The policy, one of the first to be enacted by a single-gender historically Black college, sparked a discussion on the significance of institutional structures that support prospective students that are LGBTQ+. In desiring to update and make their admissions policy more inclusive, Spelman infused the school's culture and mission of social justice into its admissions policy. As a pioneering single-gender HBCU their approach was consistent with the work of Mobley & Johnson (2015), who stress the importance of creating safe spaces on campus for LGBTQ+ students.

In 2019, Morehouse College, the only single-gender, men-serving, historically Black college in the nation, introduced their plan to consider the admissions of those who self-identify and live as men (Morehouse, n.d.). Although Morehouse's policy was regarded as innovative, inclusive, and revolutionary for the institution, it was met with some resistance. Proponents and advocates of LGBTQ+ inclusion felt the policy initially excluded trans women, or those who were born male but self-identify as women. The policy stated, “If a student transitions from a man to a woman, that student will no longer be eligible to matriculate at Morehouse” (Morehouse, n.d., p.1). Students who transition while enrolled at Morehouse face expulsion from the institution – this perceivably paradoxical statement caused some to praise only segments of the policy and condemn other components. This policy has since changed and the College now states, “if an enrolled student begins to self-identify as a

woman, we will offer guidance and resources to assist in making choices that are best for that student” (Morehouse Gender Identity Policy, 2020).

## SPELMAN COLLEGE

Atlanta, GA

### MISSION STATEMENT

Spelman College, a historically Black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical and leadership development of its students. Spelman empowers the whole person to engage the many cultures of the world and inspires a commitment to positive social change.

Founded in 1881

Enrollment: 2,097 students

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2017), LGBTQ+ individuals are twice as likely to struggle with a mental health disorder than those who do not identify as LGBTQ+. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ are also four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. More specifically transgender adults are at the highest risk for suicide attempts (APA, 2017). Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are also more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual and cisgendered counterparts (HRC, 2018). These statistics shine light on the dire need for higher education institutional leadership to provide direct support to this population. Similar to other underrepresented students, these individuals are often faced with unique experiences that often multiply the stressors they encounter on college campuses. With stress deriving from victimization and isolation from family and friends, these individuals are often in need of individualized support to address these stressors and to persist (National LGBT Health Education Center, 2018).

Bowie State University stands out among its peers for its LGBTQ+ inclusive Health Center. Bowie is a pioneer of LGBTQ issues at HBCUs



and produced the first LGBTQ Center on any HBCU campus in 2012. The institution has since developed a thriving LGBTQ+ community on its campus and is one of the only HBCUs that actively provides and promotes their LGBTQ+ health services.

LGBTQ Health Services are of particular importance at HBCUs because Black students are disproportionately affected by HIV. According to HRC (2018), HBCUs, which are largely situated in Southern states, are often in areas that have “higher than average HIV prevalence” (p.4). In 2018, most HBCUs (54%) had no formal HIV prevention policy in place at their institution (HRC, 2018). Additionally, Nguyen et. al (2018) found that Black students were less likely to wear condoms and get tested for STIs and HIV.

Bowie’s extensive Health Center offers three main resources—The Henry

Wise Wellness Center, Counseling, Services, and Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drugs Prevention Center (ATOD)— that each provide LGBTQ inclusive health care. In the ATOD, students can apply to be “HIV/AIDS Peer Educators,” tasked with spreading safe sex practices and tools with their peers, the Peer Educators also become advocates for increasing HIV/AIDS prevention education on their campus.

The Henry Wise Wellness Center provides free condoms and HIV screenings for all of its students as well as extensive women’s health care and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) testing. Regarding mental health, it is crucial to offer counseling services and other wellness resources for LGBTQ students due to the distinct mental health challenges that are prevalent within the community. Bowie’s Counseling Services provides free support for students and lists “issues of sexuality” as one of the possible issues to be addressed during counseling.

Bowie State University's Health Services offers many resources for LGBTQ+ students and makes information clear and accessible. Its positive and inviting language, as well as its actions and initiatives to address sexual health and mental health disparities within the LGBTQ+ communities, underscore why Bowie is considered an LGBTQ-friendly HBCU.

### BOWIE STATE UNIVERSITY Bowie, MD

#### MISSION STATEMENT

As Maryland's first historically black public university, Bowie State University empowers a diverse population of students to reach their potential by providing innovative academic programs and transformational experiences as they prepare for careers, lifelong learning, and civic responsibility. Bowie State University supports Maryland's workforce and economy by engaging in strategic partnerships, research, and public service to benefit our local, state, national, and global communities.

Founded in 1865  
Enrollment: 6,171 students

## STUDENT LIFE AND ENGAGEMENT

LGBTQ+ centers allow sexual and gender minoritized students the ability to feel safe, welcome, and included on their respective campuses. With the presence of LGBTQ+ centers on campus, LGBTQ+ students are able to receive support for not only their academics, but also their sexual identities (Coleman, 2016).

LGBTQ+ centers educate students, host LGBTQ-inclusive programming and trainings, and advocate for inclusive policies that aim to center the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students on college campuses (Kirby, 2011). As mentioned above, Bowie State University was the first HBCU to establish an LGBTQ+ center for its students (Lenning, 2017). Bowie State University also adopted an inclusive policy that states, "The Gender and Sexual Diversities Resource Center is a safe space for LGBTQIA+ students and their allies. Faculty, staff, and students are expected to demonstrate

respect to each other. Any individuals (or groups) that do not respect and  
**NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY**  
Durham, NC

#### MISSION STATEMENT

North Carolina Central University, with a strong tradition of teaching, research, and service, prepares students to become global leaders and practitioners who transform communities.

Founded in 1910  
Enrollment: 8,207 students

support others on the basis of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity will be asked to leave" ("Gender and Sexual Diversities Resource Center," n.d). This statement highlights and emphasizes the University's commitment to all students, especially those who may hold multiple marginalized identities.

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is another leader in LGBTQ+ innovation and support. NCCU was the second HBCU to open an LGBTQA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Ally) Center and did so on April 9, 2013 ("LGBTQA Center," n.d). The LGBTQA Center is a key element in the lives of queer students at NCCU, providing different events and groups with which students can be involved. Within the resource center, there are different initiatives that help the development and success of LGBTQ+ individuals. Some of these initiatives included LGBTQ+ sensitivity training, an LGBTQ+ prom, and a homecoming drag show ("LGBTQA Center," n.d).

On Tuesdays, the LGBTQA center hosts "Queer Queens: Where Queer Women Talk... About It All"; on Wednesdays, "Gender Queeries"; and on Thursdays, "Queer Men Around the Room" (NCCU LGBTQA Center, n.d.). NCCU also observes Transgender Awareness Week where the LGBTQA Center hosts transgender health panel discussions and screens trans-positive films. In addition to this programming, NCCU has four organizations devoted to the LGBT community: COLORS, Polychromes for LGBT faculty and staff, DOMS, and OutLAW for LGBT faculty, staff, and students within the NCCU School of Law. Each organization is open not only to those that identify as LGBT, but allies as well.

NCCU offers Safe Zone Trainings several times a year where students, faculty, and staff alike can learn more about queer issues and culture. The goal of Safe Zone is to educate and encourage inclusivity in one's personal, professional, and academic lives. In addition to Safe Zone, NCCU offers Kaleidoscope, an LGBT-friendly residential program where residents can engage in an active and supportive LGBTQ+ community. Regarding Kaleidoscope, junior De'Aundre Barnes states, "I saw an opportunity to be able to be my true self in a safe environment and around like-minded individuals" (Vassago Barker, 2018).

Barnes is not the only student who expresses their appreciation for NCCU's LGBTQ+ initiatives. Junior Teyona Hall shared, "As a person who is just coming out this year, it's wonderful to see everyone here being supportive" Graduating senior, Mayce Vassago Barker writes for his school newspaper, "All of these resources have led to me having an amazing undergraduate experience as an LGBT student and me celebrating my identity like never before. I have become nothing but confident in my sexuality and I know NCCU can do the same for so many other students" (Vassago Barker, 2018).

Without a doubt, NCCU is playing an essential role in making sure its LGBTQ+ identifying students feel supported on campus. An LGBTQ+ resource center often provides academic, emotional, and emotional support to sexually minoritized students, faculty, and staff, while advocating for comprehensive inclusion within the university (Consortium, 2008). Its resources, programming, and student organizations all contribute to making North Carolina Central University a model of LGBTQ+ inclusiveness that other HBCUs should strive to follow.

Currently there are five Historically Black Colleges and Universities with LGBTQ+ resources centers: Bowie State University (MD - established 2012), North Carolina Central University (NC - established 2013), The University of the District of Columbia (DC - established 2019), Prairie View A&M University (TX - established 2019), and North Carolina A&T State University (NC - established 2020).

## HOUSING

HBCUs have the potential to advance LGBTQ+ rights in calls for inclusive housing policies. Mobley and Johnson (2015) argue that despite an

### HOWARD UNIVERSITY Washington, DC

#### MISSION STATEMENT

Howard University, a culturally diverse, comprehensive, research intensive and historically Black private university, provides an educational experience of exceptional quality at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels to students of high academic standing and potential, with emphasis on educational opportunities for Black students.

Founded in 1867

Enrollment: 9,689 students

established history of HBCUs as pioneers of civil rights issues, same-gender housing on HBCU campuses can serve to silence gender-nonconforming, trans, and LGBT-identifying individuals. They call on institutions to understand how storied and established policies such as same-gender housing can negatively shape the fight to advance LGBT rights at HBCUs and the nation (Mobley Jr. and Johnson, 2015).

Several options exist for LGBT-inclusive housing. Krum, Davis, and Paz Galupo (2012) concluded in a survey study of 103 college-aged adults belonging to LGBT student organizations that apartment-style housing, where roommates share a common living space with a private bedroom, and self-contained singles, where each room has a private bathroom or is on a floor of gender-inclusive bathroom, were the two most preferred options for LGBT-inclusive housing. Within each college's residential life offerings, gender-nonconforming and LGBT students can seek inclusive and safe spaces in many ways.

This issue is gaining traction at HBCUs around the country, although demographic and policy issues remain. Among 148 universities surveyed in 2012, Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll (2012) concluded that gender-neutral housing is a topic of discussion at half the schools sampled, although its implementation remains uncommon. Additionally, their results revealed geographic and institutional type divides among these schools. For example, no schools with current gender-neutral housing policies are



from the South, about half are from the Northeast, and about two thirds were private rather than public institutions (Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll, 2012).

A central contested issue in virtually all college campuses with all gender housing is how to emphasize gender-neutral housing as a commitment to trans and gender-nonconforming inclusivity, rather than as a housing opportunity for romantic couples. Colleges and universities generally espoused a norm of discouraging romantic couples from rooming together, whether in written statement or conversations with student couples (Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll, 2012), but questions remain on how to enforce their policies while respecting student privacy and students' various reasons for all gender housing.

Although gender-neutral housing has been at the center of discussions on LGBTQ+ inclusion, we found that only one HBCU has made public that they have gender-neutral housing available, Howard University.

According to Howard (n.d.), the Office of Residence Life, in partnership with Howard's Coalition of Activist Students Celebrating the Acceptance of Diversity (CASCADE), and the Title IX office, developed the Gender Inclusion Housing Experience or GIHE "to create a housing experience that that incorporates students of all genders." The website for GIHE shares that the housing is in the lower level of College Hall South. This option was piloted in 2016, according to *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* (2018), and has been in operation ever since.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As HBCUs become increasingly diverse and as they continue to enroll LGBTQ+ students and students with various gender expressions, they should examine how their existing policies and practices can help or hinder their student populations. Additionally, according to Fine (2012), "an institutional culture of silence and intolerance, may have LGBTQ+ students who are not receiving the integral emotional, academic, and community support that could promote their success" (p. 298). To provide an inclusive and equitable educational experience for students of various social identities, we offer the following recommendations for bolstering LGBTQ+ student support:

### [Use resources on campus to undertake school wide policy changes.](#)

Supporting students can be done at the institution-wide level by making changes to the policies that already exist on HBCU campuses. HBCUs should assess their policies and ensure they are using gender-neutral language and avoiding binary representations of gender. For example, one small change that could reveal an institution's commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion would be changing all admissions forms to eliminate questions that mandate students to choose a sex (male or female) and shifting the language to an open-ended question allowing students to provide their preferred gender identity. Altering housing policies, healthcare policies, and policies to be more inclusive could increase LGBTQ+ inclusion among students, and even among the staff and faculty.

### [Allow students to change their gender identity in student records.](#)

Changing one's gender identity can be a daunting process. HBCUs should assess their policies and investigate solutions regarding name changes, gender changes and the like, in an effort to reduce any additional

challenges for LGBTQ+ students who may want to change their gender identity to one more representative of themselves.

**Consider establishing an office or space specifically designated for LGBTQ+ students.**

NCCU and Bowie State University are excellent examples of institutions that have created a robust programming agenda specifically geared toward their LGBTQ+ population. Using their Center as a hub of support, these HBCUs have been able to provide students who identify as LGBTQ+ with vast resources for being successful and offer staff and faculty trainings on supporting LGBTQ+ students. Such an entity is important for signaling institutional support of LGBTQ+ students and also for ensuring that students feel safe when seeking help.

**Offer mental health resources that address the distinct challenges facing LGBTQ+ students.**

Mental health services that are relevant to the challenges facing LGBTQ+ students are incredibly important to providing students with holistic support. HBCU mental health practitioners should be trained to address these distinct challenges, and should be well-aware of the resources on campus that can help support these students.

**Demonstrate high visibility of and support from campus leadership, in particular the college president.**

Institutional buy-in is important for ensuring that LGBTQ+ students feel supported on campus. Institutional leadership should be sure to engage with the LGBTQ+ community, provide space for these students to share their experiences related to their identities in safe spaces on campus, and advocate for policies that serve this population.

**Make LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.**

Developing an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum begins with assessing the curriculum for bias and harmful depictions that misrepresent the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ peoples. Institutions should aim to introduce positive representations of LGBTQ+ people and share accurate stories of LGBTQ+ history that honor and spotlight their experiences (GLSEN, 2019). Furthermore, centering research on Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC), with theoretical frameworks such as Queer of Color Critique and Quare Theory, can act “as an analytic to interrogate and

inform pedagogy, research and practice, while highlighting the agency and resilience of Queer Students of Color” (Duran, Orozco, & Gonzalez, 2020, p. 72).

## OUR APPROACH

For this report, we reviewed existing literature and conducted a landscape analysis of HBCU websites in search of publicly available information on LGBTQ+ inclusion. We sought literature that answered the following research questions:

1. What do we know about HBCUs and LGBTQ+ inclusion?
2. How are HBCUs supporting LGBTQ+ students in various areas such as admissions, housing, healthcare, and student engagement?

In addition to reviewing the existing literature on LGBTQ+ support and examining institutional websites for inclusive practices, we conducted a document analysis of news articles, press releases, and memos related to HBCUs. The document analysis provided a more comprehensive look into the ways LGBTQ+ students are being supported at HBCUs. Using the research questions to guide our inquiry, we identified HBCUs that are models of success in advancing LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

When identifying institutions that were doing exemplary work, we did not reach out directly to any of the institutions. The findings derive from information that can be easily accessible on an institutional website. This study does not delve into the individual-level supports or the intimate interactions between student affairs professionals and LGBTQ+ students.

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