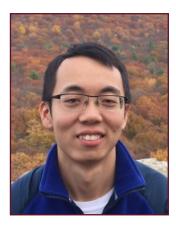
## CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

### Faculty on the Move: Understanding Retention and Attrition at HBCUs

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#### **Executive Summary**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) serve as vital engines of opportunity for Black and underrepresented students. However, these institutions face a growing challenge: the ability to recruit and retain faculty is threatened by declining numbers and stiff competition from institutions with more resources. Between 2013 and 2022, the number of HBCU faculty declined by 8%, even as total faculty at U.S. universities increased (NCES, 2022). We surveyed and interviewed faculty at 11 research-focused HBCUs to understand why faculty leave or stay. This brief synthesizes findings from those studies to illuminate the complex interplay of economic, institutional, and personal factors that shape faculty mobility.

The research reveals that attrition is primarily driven by the pursuit of better career opportunities, inadequate salary and research support, heavy workloads, and bureaucratic hurdles. Faculty considering departure cite higher pay, lighter teaching loads, and more robust research infrastructure at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) as major attractions. Qualitative interviews underscore these concerns with stories about insufficient lab space, minimal funding for professional development, and low salaries. Without competitive compensation and infrastructure, faculty might be more susceptible to recruitment by other institutions.

At the same time, many faculty remain at HBCUs because of deep commitments. They value the mission of educating historically marginalized students, enjoy close relationships with colleagues and students, and seek to give back to the Black community. Collegiality, supportive leadership, and opportunities for professional growth also bolster retention. However, mission commitment alone cannot compensate for chronic underfunding and excessive workloads. Sustainable retention requires strategic investments in salaries, research support, workload management, and building inclusive cultures.

#### Introduction

HBCUs were founded in the nineteenth century to educate Black citizens (Gasman, 2013; Bracey, 2017). In the years since, they have transformed into multifaceted institutions that serve diverse student bodies and contribute to the nation's scientific, cultural, and civic life. They produce a disproportionate share of Black teachers, researchers, engineers, doctors, and judges (Seymore, 2005). Faculty at these institutions are educators, mentors, and role models who not only impart knowledge to students but also instill confidence and serve as facilitators of social capital (Gasman & Esters, 2024; Hiatt et al., 2019; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Perna et al., 2009). When faculty leave, students lose access to experienced mentors and the institution loses expertise and social capital (Allen, H.L., 1991; Zarrillo et al., 2022).

Recent demographic shifts underscore the urgency of understanding faculty mobility at HBCUs (Broady et al., 2021). Between 2013 and 2022, the number of HBCU faculty declined by 8%: full-time instructional staff declined to 13,566 in 2023 from 14,798 in 2013, while the total faculty at U.S. universities increased from 704,717 in 2013 to 735,917 in 2023. This brief draws insights from recent studies supported by a National Science Foundation project (award numbers: 2122525, 2121861, and 2122691) to illuminate why faculty leave or stay and what institutions can do to foster stability.

#### Literature Review

Faculty attrition at any university affects students, remaining faculty members, and the institution's reputation while also burdening institutional budgets and academic continuity, all impairing the quality of education and research output (Ambrose et al., 2005; Bucklin et al., 2014; LaBerge et al., 2024). For HBCUs, the threat of faculty attrition may pose even greater problems. Compared to PWIs, HBCUs suffer from a greater loss of investment in human resources due to budget shortfalls and intense competition for

faculty recruitment (Ellis, 2011; Fountaine, 2012; Nguyen, Sutton, & Mason, 2024). Currently, most faculty mobility and attrition studies focus on faculty at PWIs. The leading reasons for faculty moves include pressures in producing research outputs, permanent employment opportunities, salary, funding, and other financial supports (Heffernan & McKay, 2018), workplace culture and climate (Spoon et al., 2023), job seniority, minority status, and external attraction (Kwiek & Szymula; 2025).

In the context of faculty at HBCUs, a lack of research and professional development funding was the primary reason for faculty attrition (Escobar et al., 2021). The unsatisfactory and inequitable work environment also exacerbated faculty attrition (Rogers et al., 2022). Various strategies to help retain faculty at HBCUs have been made, including sustained efforts to transform the recruitment, professional development opportunities, leadership opportunities, and policy and climate changes (Allen et al., 2022). Despite this, very few studies have directly explored faculty's motivations and considerations for remaining at or departing from HBCUs by employing empirical data, particularly quantitative evidence.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Our research is anchored in Social Exchange Theory, which assumes that individuals maintain relationships when perceived rewards outweigh costs (Homans, 1961; Blau, 2017). In academia, rewards include salary, research support, professional development, collegiality, and mission alignment; costs encompass heavy workloads, low pay, limited resources, and bureaucratic frustration. Faculty members evaluate these primary factors when deciding whether to remain at or leave an institution. Social Exchange Theory also highlights the role of reciprocity: faculty expect their contributions to be acknowledged and supported by their institution. Faculty may seek more rewarding contexts when institutions fail to reciprocate through fair compensation and resource access (Blau, 2017).

Additionally, Social Exchange Theory posits that there is a relationship between how an individual perceives support from an organization and their subsequent commitment to the organization. Organizational commitment has three components: affective, continuous, and normative. Affective commitment refers to the affective attachment to the organization, continuous commitment refers to the perceived costs associated with leaving the organization, and normative commitment refers to the obligation to remain in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1991). The commitment faculty demonstrate to their employers is directly related to the perceived organizational support they receive (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2009). In this study, we have used Social Exchange Theory to understand attrition and retention among HBCU faculty better.

#### **Research Approach**

#### Survey Design and Participants

The quantitative component of the research involved an online survey administered to faculty who worked at one of 11 R2 HBCUs between 2006 and 2020. R2 institutions were classified as doctoral universities with high research activity; there were 11 HBCUs with this designation during the 2024 data collection period. The survey captured demographic information (race, gender, discipline, rank), employment history, intentions to leave or stay, and perceptions of institutional support across various domains. Items included Likert-scaled statements and open-ended questions about reasons for staying or considering departure. Respondents represented a range of disciplines, from STEM fields to humanities, and included both tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. Their diversity allows for insights across different career stages and academic cultures.

#### **Interviews and Qualitative Analysis**

The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with a subset of survey respondents. Interviews were conducted via phone or video conference and lasted approximately 60 to 90

minutes. Participants described their experiences with teaching, research, service, mentorship, and interactions with administrators. They were asked to reflect on what they valued about their HBCUs and what challenges they faced. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding. Codes were developed inductively, then grouped into themes aligned with the survey findings. This mixed-methods design ensures that statistical patterns are contextualized with rich narratives, revealing the human stories behind the numbers.

#### **Findings**

We report two themes from the survey and interview results: one focuses on the factors that propelled faculty to want to leave, and the other focuses on the factors that persuaded them to stay. The first theme discusses participants' dissatisfaction with the resources and operational challenges to support their scholarly endeavors, teaching, and financial compensation. The second theme shows a desire for some faculty to give back to students or the Black community and thus stay or move to HBCUs.

#### Findings: Why Faculty Leave

#### **Competition and Career Advancement**

A theme across both studies was the allure of higher salaries, lighter workloads, and better facilities at PWIs and other research-intensive universities. HBCU faculty reported that job offers from other institutions often included significantly higher pay and more generous research packages. One respondent noted that colleagues who left received "30 to 40% pay raises" and access to state-of-the-art laboratories. Survey analyses confirmed that faculty who intended to leave rated their institution's support for research and professional development lower than those who intended to stay. The disparities in compensation are well documented: average salaries at HBCUs are roughly \$18,000 lower than those at non-HBCUs, and the gap widens at research institutions (Flannery,

2021). For early-career faculty carrying student loan debt, such salary differentials make staying financially untenable.

Careeradvancementopportunities also factor into mobility decisions. Some faculty perceived limited paths for promotion at their HBCU. Others felt that administrative instability and frequent leadership turnover created uncertainty about the future. In contrast, PWIs offered more precise career trajectories and stable administrative environments. Thus, even faculty committed to HBCU core social missions felt pressure to move to secure promotion and tenure.



#### **Structural Resource Constraints**

Many respondents pointed to the lack of research infrastructure as a primary reason for contemplating departure. Faculty described outdated laboratory facilities, limited access to technology, and insufficient funding for research assistants, travel, and equipment. They noted that high teaching loads left little time for grant writing or data analysis. Survey results showed that faculty who considered leaving perceived significantly lower levels of research support. In interviews, respondents recounted stories of projects delayed due

to a lack of equipment or administrative support. One scientist said, "I couldn't secure the lab space needed for my experiments, and that hindered my ability to publish."

These constraints at HBCUs extend to professional development: funding for conference attendance, workshops, and training can be scarce, limiting faculty's ability to stay current in their fields. Faculty may miss opportunities to present research, network, and bring new ideas back to their students without travel funds. The absence of such support diminishes scholarly productivity and signals that institutions undervalue faculty development, weakening the bonds of continued commitment.

#### **Heavy Teaching and Service Workloads**

Respondents uniformly highlighted the heavy teaching and service demands at HBCUs. Many are expected to teach four courses per semester, advise dozens of students, serve on multiple committees, and participate in institutional events. Such workloads leave little time for researching topics of interest or enjoying personal time. Faculty frequently reported burnout and frustration, with one participant explaining that "being overwhelmed and underpaid" made them question their future at the institution. Others described unrealistic expectations to attend events like convocation, homecoming, and graduation without compensation. Survey data indicated that faculty contemplating departure rated institutional policies and climate—including workload fairness—significantly lower than their counterparts who intended to stay.

With limited funds to hire additional faculty or administrative support, HBCUs rely on existing faculty to fill multiple roles, exacting heavy service tolls due to understaffing. This situation compounds stress and reduces time for research and mentoring; it is deeply problematic, as mentoring can engender a sense of institutional loyalty to students, who continue to spend their money on tuition

to fund the university. The sense of being pulled in many directions is a significant factor in attrition decisions (Broady et al., 2021).

#### Administrative Hurdles and Governance Challenges

Faculty expressed frustration with bureaucratic processes that often impede research and teaching. Delays in institutional review board (IRB) approvals were particularly salient, as prolonged approval timelines hinder grant submissions and slow research progress. Some exasperated faculty considered IRB processes so cumbersome that they considered shifting research topics. Others noted that constant leadership turnover led to changing priorities and inconsistent policies, creating uncertainty and eroding institutional trust. Without stable leadership, faculty questioned whether investments in long-term projects would be supported.

#### Salary and Benefits Gaps

Compensation emerged as a central factor in faculty decisions. While some faculty were willing to accept lower pay due to mission alignment, the gap between HBCU salaries and those at comparable institutions was often too large to ignore. Faculty described salaries as "insultingly low," noting that they struggled to meet personal financial obligations, particularly in metropolitan areas. Benefits packages also lagged those at PWIs, with limited retirement contributions and fewer health insurance options. Faculty found it challenging to justify remaining at their institution when opportunities with better financial security and more competitive compensation packages were available.

#### **Findings: Why Faculty Stay**

#### Mission Alignment and Identity

A theme that emerged from across the interviews was the profound commitment to the HBCU mission. Faculty wanted to educate and uplift Black students and other underrepresented groups (Gasman, 2021). Many described being inspired by their experiences as HBCU students or by mentors who believed in them. This sense of giving back to the community fostered a deep commitment. One interviewee said he stayed because "my professors cared about me, and I have an obligation to do the same." Faculty also appreciated the opportunity to teach courses that integrate culturally relevant content and to pursue research that directly benefits their communities.

#### Collegiality and Supportive Work Environment

Faculty who remained at HBCUs highlighted their supportive relationships with colleagues and students. Though smaller departments can limit options for course offerings and distribution of responsibilities, those more intimate groupings fostered close interpersonal connections and created a sense of family. Survey respondents intending to stay reported higher collegiality and respect within their departments. Interviewees noted that their colleagues understood the unique challenges faced by HBCU students and were committed to their success. The ability to work in an environment where colleagues share values and collaborate across disciplines was a major retention factor. These findings are consistent with previous research that demonstrates that faculty are inclined to work and remain at HBCUs because they feel encouraged to give to the Black community and to make a difference in the lives of students (Broady et al., 2021; Gasman, 2021; Gasman et al., 2010; Johnson, 2022). For example, Gasman (2021) delineated that some faculty were attracted to work and remain at HBCUs because they wanted to take their talents to institutions that uplift Black people and promote Black excellence.

#### **Professional Growth and Leadership Opportunities**

While resource constraints limit certain opportunities, HBCUs offer unique avenues for professional growth. Faculty often take on leadership roles early in their careers, serving as department

chairs, program directors, or committee chairs. These experiences provide valuable administrative skills and prepare faculty for higher-level leadership positions. Mentoring relationships also play a vital role. Senior faculty and administrators who guide junior colleagues through grant writing, publication strategies, and institutional politics help them navigate challenges and envision a future at the institution—survey respondents who intended to stay reported higher satisfaction with professional development and institutional support.

#### **Affective and Normative Commitments as Stabilizers**

The studies highlight that affective and normative commitments act as stabilizing forces. Faculty remain because they value their relationships with students and colleagues, identify with the institution's mission, and feel morally obligated to contribute. These commitments can somewhat offset the costs of lower pay and heavier workloads. However, they cannot fully compensate for systemic underfunding, and when resource constraints become too burdensome, even the most socially dedicated faculty may leave. Recognizing the limits of altruism is essential for designing retention policies.



#### **Discussions and Recommendations**

The synthesis of these studies reveals a nuanced picture of faculty mobility at HBCUs. On one hand, HBCUs provide a sense of purpose and community that many faculty find deeply fulfilling, and the affective and normative commitments, along with leadership opportunities, create strong incentives to stay. On the other hand, structural barriers, heavy workloads, low salaries, and administrative inefficiencies erode continuance commitment and push faculty away. The interplay of these colliding forces explains why some faculty leave while others remain.

Examining those forces, Social Exchange Theory underscores that faculty assess tangible and intangible rewards when deciding whether to stay. The relationship thrives when institutions reciprocate faculty contributions with fair compensation, research support, and respect. Faculty seek exchanges that better meet their needs when institutions lapse in those key areas. Notably, this research shows that mission-driven motivations are not limitless; they must be supported by adequate resources to sustain faculty engagement. The findings also situate HBCU faculty mobility within a broader set of systemic inequalities. Historically, underfunding HBCUs by state and federal governments constrains institutional capacity to invest in faculty, leading to the conditions that drive attrition.

This history of being underfunded is part of HBCUs' present reality, especially when compared to their PWI counterparts (Johnson, 2022). Using three publicly available datasets, Palmer and Griffin (2009) revealed a lack of parity in faculty salaries and workload between HBCUs and White institutional peers. The chronic underfunding of HBCUs has made upgrading infrastructure for faculty research difficult and has resulted in a higher teaching load for HBCU faculty (Broady et al., 2021). Many faculty leave HBCUs not because they want to, but because they cannot access the

support needed to sustain productive research careers. HBCUs should prioritize strategic investments in research infrastructure, even in resource-constrained environments. This includes modest support for travel to conferences, seed grants for pilot studies, access to graduate or undergraduate research assistants, and dedicated staff to assist with grant development.



Regarding institutional governance, previous studies have yielded inconsistent findings on faculty experience of and satisfaction with HBCUs' governance, particularly in aspects of representation, democracy, and respect for faculty governance in institutional decision-making (Gasman, 2013). Our study demonstrated that the dysfunction of leadership and management at HBCUs is an important source of dissatisfaction and contributes to their decisions to leave HBCUs. To dedicate to a better governance environment, HBCUs must strive for more competent institutional leaders, and more effective support for faculty from all levels. Promising strategies include more reasonable leadership position representation at the university and department levels, external and internal leadership development programs and workshops for HBCU leaders, and periodic surveys collecting faculty's feedback and suggestions on institutional governance (S. V. Allen et al., 2022). Additionally, transparency in how teaching and service assignments are made and offering acknowledgment, along with adaptations of

expectations when workloads become burdensome, can also help reduce burnout and feelings of inequity.

Our study's quantitative and qualitative results show that faculty who left HBCUs were the result of inequitable rewards and perceived organizational support. Our study shows that faculty left HBCUs primarily due to the frustration of the lack of rewards and support. HBCUs need to concentrate on establishing a strong and thorough support system for faculty's professional development and research profile. Similarly, strengthening retirement contributions, health insurance, and tuition remission programs can enhance the overall employment package, especially for mid-career scholars weighing whether to stay or leave.

One essential reason for faculty to stay at or desire to return to HBCUs was their internal organizational commitment, including normative, affective, and continuous components. Specifically, normative and affective commitment are altruistic and less likely to change even if faculty receive unsatisfactory rewards or support from HBCUs. However, continuous commitment only shows that faculty are weighing the cost of leaving HBCUs and waiting for better offers. In this study, many faculty members who chose to stay at or wished to return to HBCUs were more driven by their altruistic commitment to devote themselves based on their alignment with HBCUs' values and missions than by considerations about exchanging or gaining. This suggests that altruistic commitment played a crucial role in retaining faculty, given the deficiency of organizational support.

#### Conclusion

Faculty form the intellectual and mentoring backbone of HBCUs; their stability is crucial for sustaining these institutions' transformative impact on students and communities. The research synthesized in this brief reveals that economic, institutional, and

personal factors shape faculty decisions to stay or leave. The lure of better opportunities, inadequate resources, heavy workloads, and bureaucratic challenges drives attrition, while mission alignment, collegial relationships, and professional growth opportunities bolster retention. However, altruistic motivations alone are insufficient for long-term dedication; tangible investments in salaries, infrastructure, and supportive policies must reinforce them.

By adopting the recommendations outlined here, HBCUs can create environments that honor faculty commitment and provide the resources needed to thrive. Policymakers and funders must also recognize HBCUs' critical role in American higher education and address long-standing funding inequities. Only through a concerted effort to address the structural and personal dimensions of faculty work can HBCUs stem the brain-drain conditions they face and continue to be engines of opportunity for generations.

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