HOW LEADERS DEFINE STUDENT SUCCESS AT **MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS**

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Executive Summary

At a time when colleges and universities are under increased pressure to deliver measurable outcomes, the conversation around student success at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) demands a richer, more nuanced approach. Within the MSI context, student success cannot be reduced to graduation rates or quantitative metrics; it extends far beyond these indicators. Instead, it encompasses an institution's capacity to affirm student identity, foster community, promote wellness, and equip students to lead lives filled with meaning and personal agency. These broader goals align with the historical and current missions of MSIs, which have a long history of serving students from communities underserved by traditional higher education systems, providing culturally rich environments that nurture self-esteem, critical thinking, leadership, and persistence. For example, according to research, MSIs enhance underrepresented students' identity formation and engagement in greater ways compared to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Garcia & Dwyer, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Garcia, 2023; Gasman & Esters, 2024).

This report shares findings from a survey and interviews with emerging MSI leaders. Their insights offer a grounded and practical view of how MSIs define, foster, and sometimes struggle to advance student success during persistent inequities and shifting expectations. These definitions highlight the multiple and varied developmental dimensions of success, which are often overlooked by conventional academic performance indicators but are central to the holistic progress of students at MSIs.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) -- Established before 1964 with the principal mission of educating African Americans, HBCUs have long been centers of Black intellectual life, leadership development, and cultural affirmation.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) -- Founded and chartered by federally recognized tribes, TCUs provide culturally grounded education that strengthens Native languages, traditions, and sovereignty while preparing students for contemporary careers.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) -- Defined by enrolling at least 25% full-time equivalent undergraduate Hispanic students, HSIs are a diverse mix of community colleges, regional institutions, and research universities, many of which serve large numbers of first-generation and low-income students.

Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) -- Institutions where at least 40% of undergraduates are Black and at least 50% are low-income or first-generation, PBIs often serve urban communities and work at the intersection of race, poverty, and access.

Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) -- With at least 10% Asian American and Pacific Islander enrollment and a high proportion of low-income students, AANAPISIs address the needs of a student population often rendered invisible by aggregated data.

Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Serving Institutions (ANNHIs) -- Serving significant populations of Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian students, these institutions integrate indigenous knowledge and traditions into their academic offerings.

Literature Review

Evolving Scholarship on Student Success

Over the past several decades, the scholarship on student success has shifted from deficit-based frameworks, which often placed responsibility for attrition on students themselves, to models that recognize the structural, cultural, and institutional conditions shaping student experiences, particularly for students of color. Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, which foregrounded academic and social integration as the keys to persistence, offered an important early framework. However, it did not account for systemic racism, economic inequality, and cultural dissonance, factors that disproportionately have an impact on students at MSIs (Baker et al., 2021; Guiffrida, 2006; Núñez, 2022; Palmer & Young, 2023; Strayhorn, 2012; Williams et al., 2022).

Bensimon's (2007) call to apply an "equity lens" to institutional practice has become even more urgent in the era of predictive analytics. Likewise, Gándara et al. (2023) cautioned that algorithmic student success systems can reproduce racial biases. They urge institutions to critically investigate the equity implications of their data-driven interventions to avoid deepening inequities. At the same time, emerging technologies can present opportunities for advancing equity: Wang et al. (2025) explored how Large Language Models (LLMs) can support educators in integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into daily practice, potentially broadening access to inclusive teaching tools.

The literature has also increasingly highlighted the role of relationships, belonging, and holistic supports in student success. McClain and Perry (2017) showed that mentoring relationships, especially those grounded in shared identity and cultural understanding, serve as critical tools for students confronting academic and sociocultural challenges. Similarly, Museus et al. (2010) proposed the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) framework, which identifies cultural validation, holistic support services, and opportunities for cross-cultural engagement as core elements of environments that foster increased success among racially diverse students. This framework, unique in its scope, remains influential in current student success research and practice at MSIs.

These contributions mark a significant shift in the field, from understanding success primarily as persistence and completion to framing it as a multidimensional process of personal, cultural, and communal transformation. The MSI leaders who participated in this study echoed these perspectives, describing success as a process that affirms identity, builds community, promotes wellness, and equips students with agency beyond graduation. This perspective aligns with contemporary research that situates student success within broader institutional commitments to equity, cultural relevance, and systemic change (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Núñez et al., 2016; Núñez et al., 2015).

Research Approach

Our research draws from a mixed-methods study that included both survey and qualitative interview components. The survey was distributed to mid-career and senior leaders working at a range of MSIs, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), with a 38% response rate (N=167). Participants responded to questions about how their institutions define student success, what elements they see as essential for fostering it, and where they perceive strengths and gaps. In addition to the survey, open-ended responses and interviews allowed participants to share more detailed reflections about their institutional contexts and personal philosophies (N=66). These data sources show how student success is understood and pursued across diverse institutional landscapes.

Findings & Analysis

Survey Results - Defining Student Success

The survey results highlight clear patterns in how MSI leaders view the essential components of student success and the populations they most intentionally serve. Among the supports rated, academic advising and support services emerged as the top priority, with 76.9% of respondents rating it as extremely important. This was followed by culturally responsive pedagogy (61.5%), faculty–student engagement (53.8%), and financial aid and scholarships (53.8%). Mental health and wellness support was also widely valued, with nearly 70% rating it as extremely or very important. Peer mentorship programs were identified as very important or extremely important by 76.9% of respondents.

When asked about priority populations, half of the respondents reported that first-generation students (50%), low-income students (50%), and students of color (50%) are fully prioritized in their campus-wide student success strategies. Transfer students were fully prioritized by only 27.3%. Students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students were fully prioritized by 16.7%. Adult learners were the least frequently fully prioritized, at just 8.3%.

Regarding resource needs, more faculty and staff training on equity was the most frequently ranked top priority, with 41.7% selecting it as their number one need. This was followed by increased financial aid and scholarships (25%), strategic partnerships with community and industry (16.7%), and expanded student support services (8.3%). Notably, no respondents ranked better technology and learning infrastructure as their highest priority resource need.

Interview Results - Defining Student Success
How Leaders Define Student Success at Minority Serving Institutions

The way leaders at MSIs define student success reflects a deep resistance to narrow or standardized metrics. While graduation rates, retention data, and job placement statistics were acknowledged as necessary, participants consistently emphasized that these measures alone cannot capture the full scope of success. Instead, they pointed to the transformation students experience at the institution—emotional, intellectual, and social growth. One participant put it succinctly: "We define success through leadership development, community engagement, and career readiness, not just grades or diplomas." Another elaborated,

> "Student success is about transformation. It is about who they become while they are here, not just whether they finish."

This holistic understanding reflects a broader shift in the literature toward inclusive definitions of success that emphasize identity formation, community connection, and post-college purpose. For many leaders, student success at MSIs is also inseparable from questions of equity and representation. Several respondents tied their definitions directly to social justice, underscoring the unique role MSIs play in preparing students to navigate and challenge systems not designed with them in mind. One leader explained,

> "For our students, succeeding means learning to navigate and challenge systems not built for them. That is part of the education we are trying to provide."

Essential Elements for Supporting Success

As leaders reflected on what it takes to foster this broader vision of success, culturally responsive pedagogy and meaningful faculty–student engagement emerged as foundational. These elements were described as more than instructional strategies; they validate students' experiences and affirm their place in the academic community. One leader explained, "Our students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and to be taught by people who value their experiences."

Faculty–student engagement was described as relational work, grounded in care, mentorship, and trust-building rather than simple availability. "It is not just about having faculty from similar backgrounds," one participant noted. "It is about how faculty engage. Students know when they are seen." The literature on culturally engaging campus environments supports this perspective, finding that faculty connections and validation are critical in fostering belonging and persistence for students of color.

Leaders also emphasized the importance of advising, peer mentoring, and access to mental health services. These supports were critical to addressing the complex realities many MSI students face, from financial pressures to family responsibilities to systemic discrimination. As one participant shared,

> "Our students are navigating grief, housing insecurity, and racism. We have to meet those needs if we want them to thrive academically."

However, despite robust programs, several respondents noted that a lack of coordination diminished their impact. As one leader observed, "There are great programs here, but they operate in silos. That limits their impact and makes it harder for students to access what they need."

Institutional Strengths and Gaps

Moving from individual support to the institutional context, participants frequently identified the dedication of faculty and staff as one of their institution's greatest strengths. This commitment was often described in relational terms, faculty and staff "going above and beyond" to ensure students succeed. "What we have is care," one respondent said.

> "Students know we want them to win."

This ethos of care is a defining characteristic of MSIs and a key driver of student persistence, as echoed in research highlighting the role of relational engagement in student success.

At the same time, participants were candid about persistent gaps. They pointed to the absence of integrated systems for tracking and supporting students across departments and inconsistent advising frameworks. One leader described the challenge: "We do not have a real way to track students across offices. We are always reacting instead of anticipating." Limited staffing, resource constraints, and shifts in leadership compounded these gaps. Another participant reflected, "There is much talk about student success, but not much strategic action. That disconnect is frustrating."

The Role of Leadership

Leadership emerged as a decisive factor as conversations turned to the conditions that help or hinder student success. When senior leaders communicated a clear, equity-centered vision and backed it with tangible resources, participants felt supported and empowered to innovate. "When our president talks about student success, it is not just rhetoric. It shows up in budget decisions and hiring priorities," one respondent shared.

However, others described leadership as disconnected, risk-averse, or hampered by bureaucracy. "We want to innovate," said one aspiring leader, "but the system resists anything new. There is too much red tape." This tension between aspiration and institutional constraints underscored a recurring theme in the interviews: that leadership for student success requires vision and the willingness to disrupt entrenched processes that slow progress.

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What Needs to Change

Participants offered structural and cultural solutions when asked to name the most impactful change that could improve student success. Structurally, many called for integrated advising and data systems enabling proactive, rather than reactive, student support. Culturally, they emphasized the need to embed student success as a shared responsibility across the institution. "We need to treat student success as a shared responsibility," one participant argued, "not something relegated to one office or vice president." Another added, "We should stop reacting to crises and start building environments where students are positioned to thrive from day one."

These calls for systemic alignment reflect a wider body of research showing that sustainable student success initiatives require cross-functional collaboration, shared accountability, and leadership commitment.

Advice to Future Leaders

Participants returned to humility, intentionality, and visibility in advising aspiring leaders. They stressed that leadership for student success cannot be practiced from behind a desk. "You cannot lead from your office," one respondent said. "You have to be in the spaces where students are." Others emphasized listening as an act of respect and a foundation for effective action. "Do not assume you know," one participant cautioned, "Ask students. Listen carefully and act boldly."

These reflections illustrate a vision of student success that is relational, equity-driven, and deeply tied to the mission of MSIs. They suggest that advancing this vision requires strategic and resource-conscious leaders willing to be present, listen, and challenge the systems that stand in the way of transformation.

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Recommendations

The findings from this study point to a series of recommendations that address institutional change and leadership development, aiming to align mission, practice, and student needs.

Broaden Metrics of Student Success

Institutions, policymakers, and scholars must expand their definition of student success to reflect the experiences of their students. While traditional metrics such as graduation rates and job placement remain important, they cannot be the sole indicators of success. Leaders repeatedly emphasized that true success also encompasses belonging, identity development, and persistence in systemic adversity. This means recognizing how students grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally during their time at the institution, and valuing outcomes such as leadership capacity, community engagement, and agency alongside degree attainment.

Prioritize Students' Basic Needs Supports

All campus functions must prioritize and integrate basic needs support. Participants underscored that many MSI students arrive with significant financial pressures, food insecurity, unstable housing, and mental health needs. Emergency aid, food pantries, housing assistance, and accessible counseling services should be considered essential infrastructure rather than supplemental programs. These supports cannot exist on the margins; they must be woven into the institution's broader student success strategy to ensure that basic stability is not a barrier to academic achievement.

Break Down Internal Silos and Build Institution-Wide Coalitions

Institutions should commit to breaking down internal silos by building intentional coalitions across divisions. Respondents described many student success initiatives as fragmented and disconnected, often operating in isolation. Cross-functional teams, shared goals, and strategic alignment between academic affairs, student affairs, institutional research, and other units are essential for coherent, coordinated action. Such integration streamlines student services and enables institutions to respond proactively to emerging challenges.

Invest in Infrastructure Enabling Early Intervention

MSIs must invest in the infrastructure that enables early and effective intervention. Participants pointed to gaps in advising systems, data tools, and coordinated support services that hinder their ability to track student progress and identify at-risk students before challenges escalate. Robust, user-friendly systems allowing real-time information sharing across departments can significantly enhance staff capacity to respond quickly and effectively to student needs.

Center Equity and Student Voice Across Institutional Planning

Leadership must center equity and student voice in all aspects of institutional planning From curriculum design to budgeting, leaders should engage students in shaping the policies and practices that affect their educational journeys. Equity cannot be a rhetorical commitment; it must guide the allocation of time, attention, and resources. Involving students as partners ensures that strategies are relevant and fosters a culture of trust and shared responsibility.

Prioritize Investments in Human Capital, Financial Support, and Physical Infrastructure

Budgetary decisions must directly reflect institutional commitments to equity and student success. If these goals are to be more than aspirational statements, they must be resourced accordingly. This means prioritizing investments in human capital, financial support, and physical infrastructure that advance equity goals, even when doing so requires difficult trade-offs. As several participants noted, when budgets align with stated commitments, it signals to the entire campus community that equity is not just a value but an operational priority.

Conclusion

The voices in this study make clear that student success at MSIs is complex, urgent, and deeply human. It takes place at the intersection of relationships and structures, nurtured by the faculty, staff, and peers who see and support students, yet is often constrained by systems that fail to meet their needs. Participants spoke of the extraordinary commitment within their communities and the persistent barriers that demand structural change. They reminded us that success is not merely about retention or graduation, but about students leaving MSIs with a stronger sense of identity, purpose, and agency.

Even in the face of limited resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and inequities, the leaders continue to focus on creating institutions where students of color are not simply surviving but thriving; where they are not only earning degrees, but also gaining the confidence, networks, and skills to lead in their chosen fields and communities. The leaders in this study have a sense of urgency around this vision, seeing in their work the possibility of reshaping the educational landscape for future generations.

Their insights challenge educators, policymakers, and the public to ask hard questions: Are we building institutions that reflect the lives and aspirations of the students they serve? Are we willing to invest the time, resources, and trust needed to transform culture and systems? The answers to these questions will determine whether MSIs remain, as they have for generations, places where talent is cultivated and opportunity is expanded.

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