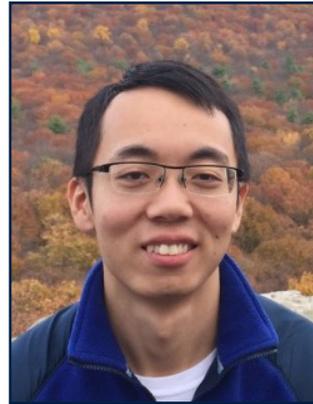# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

The Pipeline Paradox: Hiring and Placement in the HBCU Faculty Landscape

By Erjia Yan, Chaoqun Ni, and Robert T. Palmer

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erjia Yan is an Associate Professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. His research focuses on scholarly communication, academic mobility, and data-driven approaches to understanding science and higher education. He has published widely in the fields of scientometrics, bibliometrics, and information science, and has led several interdisciplinary projects examining institutional dynamics in faculty hiring, retention, and research productivity—particularly within the context of HBCUs and equity in academia.

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Executive Summary

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) play a critical role in producing Black Ph.D. graduates and sustaining diversity in the U.S. academic workforce. This research analyzes faculty hiring and Ph.D. placement patterns at 10 research-intensive (R2) HBCUs between 2011 and 2020 using large-scale faculty employment data.

The results reveal that the 10 R2 HBCUs primarily hired tenure-track faculty from predominantly White R1 institutions. In contrast, HBCUs hired approximately 20% of their own graduates, while less than 10% of hires came from other HBCUs. Regarding placement, approximately 60% of HBCU graduates sought employment at HBCUs, while only a small number found employment at R1 institutions. This downward placement pattern underscores a significant trend: most HBCU hires are from R1 institutions, while HBCU graduates primarily find employment at institutions with lower research intensity. Understanding these patterns is crucial for addressing disparities in faculty representation and supporting the growth of Black professionals in academia.

Why does this matter? HBCUs have a rich history of nurturing talent and providing opportunities for underserved communities, making their human capital particularly significant. This capital encompasses not only academic expertise but also cultural understanding, mentorship, and community engagement, which are essential for fostering inclusive learning environments. Faculty hiring and placement reveal HBCUs' ability to retain their own graduates and their impact on the broader academic labor market. By examining where HBCU graduates are placed and where HBCUs source their faculty, we can gain insight into the institutional challenges and opportunities these institutions face in sustaining their human capital. HBCUs play a critical role in providing employment opportunities for Black scholars, shaping the diversity of the academic workforce, and contributing to the educational pipeline that supports the success of underrepresented groups in higher education. Investing in the development and retention of institutional human capital at HBCUs is essential for preserving their historical legacy, promoting student success, and driving innovation in higher education.

Introduction and Background

HBCUs have long prioritized diversity in faculty hiring, particularly with respect to race and religion. In the 20th century, Black graduates were excluded from PWIs and found academic opportunities at HBCUs (Hiatt et al., 2019). In the 1930s–50s, European immigrants, including Jewish scholars fleeing persecution in Nazi Europe, found employment at HBCUs after facing discrimination at PWIs (Foster, 2001). *Post-Brown v. Board*, HBCUs faced competition from PWIs in retaining top Black faculty, leading to a "brain drain" (Seymore, 2005).

There is a substantial body of literature that discusses the status of HBCUs from legal, political, and economic perspectives (Allen et al., 2007; Palmer et al., 2023; Williams, 2018). Despite critiques,

both supporters and detractors recognize HBCUs' significant contributions in preparing Black professionals. Research shows that they trained the majority of Black Ph.D. graduates (Jackson, 2002; Perna, 2001). However, desegregation led many Black faculty to seek employment at PWIs, resulting in loss of talents (Jackson, 2002). This issue remains a central challenge for HBCUs, as PWIs attract top Black scholars, while non-Black faculty rarely transition to HBCUs (Allen, 1991). Talent mobility in this context began as desegregation allowed Black students and faculty to enter PWIs where academic quality was seen as higher (Zheng, Yan, & Ni, 2024); it is arguably exacerbated by the fact that elite universities in the U.S. are keen to hire highly qualified Black faculty members to increase faculty diversity.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following:
1. What is the level of diversity, as measured by institutional profiles (e.g., PWI vs. HBCU, R1 vs. R2), among tenure-track faculty hired by HBCUs?
2. What is the level of diversity, as measured by institutional profiles, among Ph.D. graduates from HBCUs who secure tenure-track positions at other institutions?
3. What are the differences in institutional profiles between hiring and placing institutions at HBCUs?

The answers to these questions contribute to a broader understanding of the role HBCUs play in the academic labor market and their influence on human capital diversity in higher education.

Data and Method

Collecting comprehensive data on faculty hiring and placement poses a significant challenge due to the fragmented and often incomplete nature of publicly available data. To address this gap, we used data from the Academic Analytics Research Center (AARC), which comprises detailed information on higher education faculty in the United States. AARC compiles its data through a combination of manual data collection, archival extraction, and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. This dataset includes faculty information from approximately 400 higher education institutions. Based on the Carnegie Classifications (CCIHE, 2018), 11 of the 101 HBCUs are doctoral-degree producing institutions. However, due to limited data coverage, Delaware State University was not adequately represented in the AARC dataset, reducing the number of HBCUs in our analysis to 10 doctoral-degree producing institutions (Table 1). The number of PhD graduates is also based on the AARC data; the actual Ph.D. graduates' number might vary. Using the 2018 CCIHE statistics on tenure-track faculty, we estimated that approximately 50% of tenure-track and tenured faculty across the 10 HBCUs are covered by the AARC dataset.

Table 1: Number of faculty and graduates of the 10 HBCUs

Institution name	No. of faculty	No. of graduates
Clark Atlanta University	316	92
Florida A&M University	783	105
Hampton University	83	16
Howard University	939	371
Jackson State University	220	67
Morgan State University	286	31
North Carolina Argricultural and Technical State	167	26
Tennessee State University	91	33
Texas Southern University	96	27
University of Maryland Eastern Shore	206	15
Grand total	3178	783

Key Findings

Faculty hiring at HBCUs

The top five universities that contributed graduates to HBCUs include three HBCUs (Howard University, Florida A&M University, and Clark Atlanta University) and two PWIs (Florida State University and University of Maryland, College Park). The majority of faculty at the 10 HBCUs graduated from R1 institutions, with representation ranging from 42 to 69%. HBCU self-hires also accounted for a significant share of faculty hires, ranging from 4% (Tennessee State University) to 20% (Clark Atlanta University). Graduates from international institutions were also represented, with the lowest percentage at Clark Atlanta University (4%) and the highest at Texas Southern University (17%). Faculty hires from other HBCUs were less common, with the highest representation being 7% at Morgan State University.

Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the hiring network between the 10 HBCUs and their faculty sources. The blocks on the left represent the different types of institutions that contributed faculty to the 10 HBCUs, while the blocks on the right represent the 10 HBCUs themselves. The width of the connecting bands indicates the number of graduates represented, with wider bands signifying larger numbers of hires. The color of the bands corresponds to the type of institution from which the faculty members were hired, arranged in descending order by the number of hires. Figure 1 shows that R1 universities (represented by red bands) were the primary source of faculty hires for all 10 HBCUs. The figure also indicates that self-hiring practices, where HBCUs hire their own graduates, were common across the institutions. Graduates from other R2 institutions (purple bands) and other HBCUs (light blue bands) also found employment at these HBCUs, although to a lesser extent than R1 hires or self-hires.
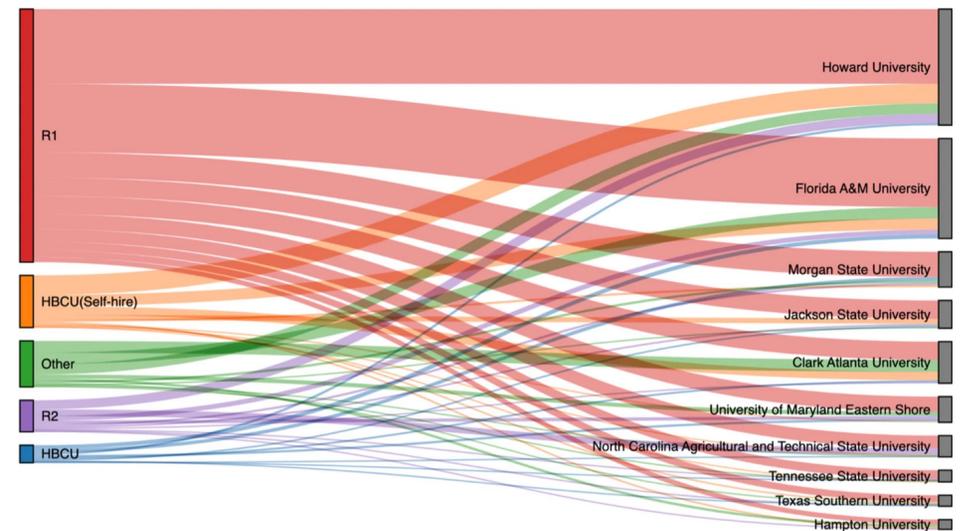

Figure 1. Faculty Hiring Network between the 10 HBCUs and Other Institutions ©2025 The Authors. Reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

Placement of HBCU Ph.D. graduates

In terms of top recruiters of HBCU graduates, only two PWIs made it to the top 10: Middle Tennessee State University, with 12 hires, and George Mason University, with nine hires. Howard University and Florida A&M University stood out in the hiring market, with Howard hiring 150 HBCU graduates and Florida A&M hiring 103. HBCUs' own graduates constitute a significant portion of their placement pool. For example, Howard University placed 39 graduates (11%) at other HBCUs, Tennessee State University placed 17 graduates (52%), and North Carolina A&T State University placed 9 graduates (35%). Howard University contributed 30 graduates (8%) to R1 institutions, while the remaining HBCUs contributed fewer than 10 graduates each. For placements at other R2 institutions (excluding HBCUs), Howard University was again notable, supplying 110 graduates (30%). Other contributors to R2 institutions included Jackson State University (21 graduates), Florida A&M University (16 graduates), and Clark Atlanta University (12 graduates).

The orange bands in Figure 2 represent self-hires at HBCUs, which is the most common destination for faculty placement among the 10 HBCUs. Among the 10 HBCUs in this study, Howard University, Florida A&M University, and Jackson State University had the highest number of placements at R1 institutions. The third-largest destination for HBCU graduates was other HBCUs. Howard University had the highest number of placements in this category, followed by Clark Atlanta University and Texas Southern University. In terms of R2 placements, Howard University and Tennessee State University had the most graduates placed at R2 institutions.
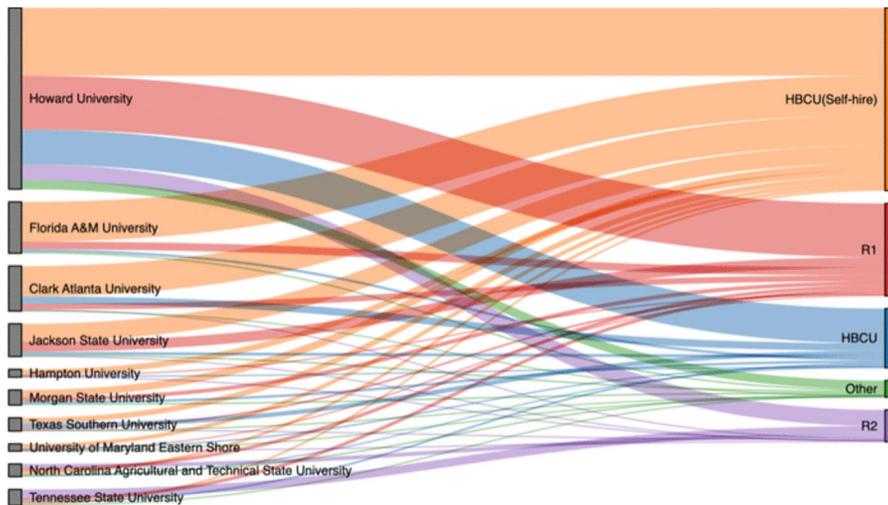

Figure 2. Faculty Hiring Network between the 10 HBCUs and Other Institutions ©2025 The Authors. Reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

Core insight: Asymmetric faculty hiring and placement patterns

Although HBCUs hired many individuals from R1 institutions, their own graduates did not secure many positions at these elite institutions. This pattern can be explained by the fact that all 10 HBCUs analyzed in this study were classified as R2 institutions at the time of data collection but remain less competitive than R1 institutions, and most HBCUs are primarily teaching-focused rather than research-intensive. This aligns with previous research showing that elite institutions dominate the faculty talent pool (Wapman et al., 2022). As a result, HBCUs face challenges competing with elite R1 institutions for placing their graduates in top academic positions.

Research on faculty hiring demonstrates that elite R1 institutions, particularly those affiliated with the American Association of Universities (AAU), tend to recruit faculty almost exclusively from a narrow set of peer institutions, reinforcing prestige-based stratification in academic hiring (Gasman, 2022). These hiring practices are driven by restrictive definitions of quality and excellence that privilege doctoral pedigree, institutional sameness, and AAU affiliation. Consequently, HBCUs face structural constraints in placing their graduates at R1 institutions, not because of individual-level deficits, but because faculty hiring practices systematically reproduce institutional hierarchies and limit cross-tier mobility (Gasman, 2022).

Conclusion and Recomendation

HBCUs are hubs for academic talent and diversity. However, structural barriers, such as insufficient funding support and higher teaching loads in faculty hiring and placement, constrain the upward mobility of HBCU Ph.D. graduates, even as HBCUs themselves rely heavily on hiring R1-trained faculty. Addressing imbalances in faculty hiring requires coordinated interventions that strengthen upward mobility for HBCU doctoral graduates. Postdoctoral bridge programs at research-intensive universities, such as the UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, show structured pathways can reduce placement barriers by providing protected research time and mentorship to tenure-track roles. Doctoral networking and job-preparedness initiatives, including those supported by the Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate, further enhance placement opportunities. Capacity-building programs administered by the NSF, such as HBCU-UP and NSF AGEP, and by the NIH, including RCMI and COBRE, already link research infrastructure, faculty development, and training pipelines. In addition, research-intensive universities should expand pathways, such as postdoctoral fellowships, doctoral student networking and job preparedness, and cluster hire opportunities that include HBCU Ph.D. graduates, and reduce barriers to placement at R1 institutions. Furthermore, aligning research funding with faculty retention and placement outcomes at HBCUs will be critical for effective, evidence-based interventions that promote sustainability in the academic labor market.[1]

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1. Howard University is an R1 institution according to the latest version of the Carnegie Classification 2025.

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