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The US Grant Funding Landscape for HBCUs

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Presented by Ashley Schultz and Dr. Marc Smithers • Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Ashley Schultz:
Hello everyone. Thank you for coming to our event today. My name is Ashley Schultz. I'm the Manager of Community Engagement here at Grants Office, and today we're going to be discussing the US grant funding landscape for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs.

HBCUs were officially designated by the US Department of Education in 1965, but they really have been a force in American higher education for more than 100 years. The nation's first HBCU, Cheyney University, was founded in Pennsylvania nearly 200 years ago in 1837. But even with this rich history and prominent role in the US higher education landscape, HBCUs are still woefully underfunded.

According to a 2023 analysis by the US Department of Education, 16 of the country's HBCU land-grant universities have been underfunded by their states by a total of $13 billion. The federal government, under the Biden administration and now under the Trump administration, has been taking steps to try and correct this lack of funding. Today we're going to go over some of the different ways that HBCUs can pursue this funding, particularly when it comes to some of the more competitive grant opportunities that are open to them.

Housekeeping

Ashley Schultz:
Before we get started, I've just got two quick housekeeping items for you. First, you can ask questions at any time today using the Q&A interface in the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. Feel free to submit as many questions as you'd like — we'll get to as many as possible toward the end of today's event.

Also know the session is being recorded. The recording will be available for download at the Grants Office website starting tomorrow. The PowerPoint slides shared here today are also going to be available in that same location.

Today's Speaker and Agenda

Ashley Schultz:
So again today we're talking about the funding landscape for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I'm joined today by Dr. Marc Smithers, who is one of our in-house experts on all things higher education funding. Marc works with folks every day, just like you, who are out there searching through the Department of Education for grants, trying to keep track of state and local school infrastructure funding, polishing up NSF grant proposals, et cetera, et cetera. Marc has a great wealth of grants expertise in this area, and I think you're going to really learn a lot from him today.

Here's a quick rundown of our agenda over the next 30 minutes or so. We'll talk about the types of projects that funders want to support. We often talk about grants in the direction of, “What do you need to get funded?” But Marc's going to invert that question and say, “What do the funders themselves actually want to give their dollars to?”

Next we'll transition to the types of awards that are out there, including those that may come to your institution in the form of a competitive grant or as a formula allocation. And then we'll end the conversation with what steps you can take to capture more of this funding for your institution: what can you do to build a more competitive application, and what can you do right now that's going to prepare you for that next funding cycle. Like I said, at the end we'll leave time for Q&A, so please do feel free to drop as many questions as you have in the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. With that, I'll pass things over to Marc. Marc?

What Is an HBCU?

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Thanks, Ashley, and thanks everyone for being here today. I want to start off first by just going over what exactly an HBCU is, just so that we have some working definitions to go off of.

This is a distinct category of higher education institutions within a larger designation of Minority Serving Institutions that the Department of Education recognizes. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are defined as institutions that were established prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and they were founded with an expressed intention to serve African American students due to the refusal of most of the rest of American higher education in admitting Black students.

The Department of Education currently recognizes about 100 HBCUs, with a few institutions that previously had held this designation either closing or losing accreditation. Of these 100 institutions, 49 of them are private nonprofit institutions and 51 are public institutions, so pretty well split evenly there. Within the 100 HBCUs, 21 of them are considered land-grant institutions, meaning that they were

established with a focus on agricultural and mechanical disciplines, and the majority of these are public institutions.

HBCUs vs. Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)

Dr. Marc Smithers:
I say all of this in part to distinguish HBCUs from another type of institution designated by the Department of Education within this Minority Serving Institutions label that they're often confused with: Predominantly Black Institutions. The designation of a PBI actually can fluctuate year to year based on enrollment changes, because a PBI is defined as one that has at least 1,000 undergraduate students, at least half of which must be either low-income or first-generation students, and they enroll at least 40 percent of students who identify as Black Americans.

So the “historic” part of the label Historically Black Colleges and Universities is really important here, because this designation does not change unless the college closes or loses accreditation, for the most part. The difference between these designations actually becomes really important when considering the eligibility requirements of different programs. Programs that are designed specifically for HBCUs must meet the Department of Education definition outlined here.

Eligibility: Concentric Circles of Opportunity

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Now going into a little bit of these various eligibility requirements that HBCUs can consider, it can be helpful to think about them almost in terms of concentric circles, as you see here.

The outermost ring of programs that HBCUs can apply for are those programs that are basically open to all institutions — and actually quite a few programs from agencies like the National Science Foundation are structured in this way. They're labeled as unrestricted and open to all what they call “capable entities.”

When you get closer to the middle, the second-most-outer ring is those programs that are open to all higher education institutions. This would include community colleges, graduate schools, and four-year baccalaureate colleges of all shapes and sizes.

In addition to these programs, and as you get closer to the center of the circles, HBCUs can also apply for programs that are specifically designed for Minority Serving Institutions, or MSIs. These programs include HBCUs but are also typically open to other MSIs that the Department of Education recognizes — institutions like Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, and all of the other MSIs as well.

And then finally, the innermost ring is those programs that are specific just to HBCUs. While these are perhaps some of the most recognizable grants sought by HBCUs, it's important to not restrict your grant search just to HBCU-specific grant programs, and instead be sure to expand your search to consider programs from each of these different rings of opportunity, as long as they align with your institutional initiatives.

Types of Projects Funders Want to Support

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Once you have a good handle on the types of programs that you're eligible for, it's really important to first consider exactly what kinds of projects will be most competitive in these programs. Just to look a little bit at the kinds of projects that grant funders are interested in funding in higher education, you'll actually see the most popular kinds of projects funded at HBCUs are the same kind of general trends we see throughout grant funding for higher education institutions.

Student Learning Programs

Dr. Marc Smithers:
One major area is student learning programs. These would be things that enhance the learning environments both broadly speaking, but also you see some programs within specific disciplines like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. These programs often aim to encourage innovative instructional methods or outfit facilities with new technology that students can access.

Faculty Research

Dr. Marc Smithers:
In addition to this theme, you also see some funding for faculty research — for initiatives like faculty fellowships or even new cyberinfrastructure to support faculty research. These are offered through a number of various agencies.

Access and Completion Projects

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Another general theme is access and completion projects. These are also really popular. This would be things like projects that offer dual enrollment or bridge programs for high school students, or even recently graduated students.

Job Readiness and Career Pathway Programs

Dr. Marc Smithers:
And then this final theme that we see is job readiness and career pathway programs. These are increasingly popular, and they tend to emphasize projects like credentialing programs or apprenticeships.

These are all general higher education trends, and funding for HBCU-specific areas also generally falls in these categories as well.

Example HBCU Funding Programs

HBCU Undergraduate Program (HBCU-UP)

Dr. Marc Smithers:
I'll share just a few examples of specific programs that fund these types of initiatives, and I'll specifically talk about these first two themes. First, as a way of highlighting how agencies fund student learning projects, here is a program through the National Science Foundation called HBCU Undergraduate Program, or HBCU-UP. This is a program that specifically looks to fund projects that help prepare students at HBCU institutions for careers in STEM fields. They specifically look to try to implement innovative methods and technologies into those undergraduate STEM programs.

A couple of recent awarded projects to HBCUs include the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff receiving an award for almost $400,000 to improve mathematics instruction using coding projects, data analysis, and peer mentoring; and also Winston-Salem State, with an esports computer science curriculum and tournaments and faculty development workshops on integrating esports into STEM education with their recent award of $400,000. Interesting program there.

Minority Research Grant Program

Dr. Marc Smithers:
In addition to student learning, here is a program that focuses primarily on faculty research, and it's from the US Department of Health and Human Services. They offer the Minority Research Grant Program. This is a great example of one that HBCUs can apply to that is also open to faculty at all MSIs, not just HBCUs.

Here are some projects that were awarded at HBCUs recently, including one to faculty at North Carolina A&T State to study cardiovascular health and some of its potential causes, and an award to Texas Southern University to look at predictive modeling of prostate cancer among African Americans. This is just a sampling of some programs that really focus on these general themes, but these are the kinds of things that we see throughout various agencies.

Two Broad Types of HBCU Funding

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Now, before actually going into strategies for pursuing these opportunities, it's important to first have a good grasp of the two broad types of funding that HBCUs can utilize: formula or entitlement funding, and competitive funding programs.

Formula (Entitlement) Funding

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Entitlement funding is sometimes called statutory funding, since it's funding that's been allocated by law to be dispersed to HBCUs. It's typically based on certain metrics like full-time student enrollment or other kinds of metrics like that.

Competitive (Discretionary) Funding

Dr. Marc Smithers:
The other type is competitive or discretionary funding. This is the kind of funding that various agencies will issue a Notice of Funding Opportunity, or NOFO, for institutions to submit a competitive application for. Within competitive funding, there is a wide variety of different kinds of programs, as I mentioned earlier with that concentric circle graphic — with some of these programs open only to MSIs, or open to all institutions of higher education, or all kinds of different institutions.

It's important to note that much of the grant-seeking strategies that we'll cover today hold true for any type of program you'll be pursuing, whether it's specifically for HBCUs or any other program open to colleges and universities. I want to especially stress that a good grant-seeking strategy for your HBCU will incorporate both funding specifically designed to support HBCUs and also targeting programs that are open to all institutions. So be sure to be thinking about how you can apply these concepts in all of your grant-seeking efforts, not just those designed specifically for HBCUs.

Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Each Funding Type

Dr. Marc Smithers:
There are a few big reasons that you want to be sure to be attentive to both formula funding opportunities and competitive funding opportunities, because they each have their own strengths and vulnerabilities.

Formula funding, for instance, tends to be a bit more predictable. Institutions can rely on a more or less reliable baseline of funding from programs like the Strengthening HBCUs program from the Department of Education, for instance. Competitive funding is a lot less reliable, both because it's not certain that

you'll be awarded funding from a competition, and these programs may not be offered year to year. They are, though, as a general rule, a bit more flexible in the ways that funding can be spent.

Formula funding will often have some strict guidelines around appropriate uses of funding, but if an institution wants to use federal funding for resources outside of those parameters, they can also consider competitive programs that explicitly allow for those types of expenses.

Another consideration, particularly for formula funding, is its vulnerability to public and political scrutiny that competitive funding doesn't have to the same extent. Because formula funding is awarded based on institutional characteristics rather than the competitiveness of the proposal, this tends to draw some attention from some political arenas, creating a kind of pressure that more competitive programs don't tend to have.

Taking these matters into account is really important, because it shows how important a balanced grant-seeking approach is — one that utilizes formula funding as a consistent source of outside support, but that also incorporates more competitive opportunities to balance out that holistic approach. And again, competitive programs shouldn't just include those specifically designed for HBCUs, but should also include programs that are open to all institutions.

Agencies That Fund HBCU Initiatives

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Let's look at a few agencies that fund HBCU initiatives. There are a myriad of options for HBCUs to consider.

Formula Funding Options

Dr. Marc Smithers:
A number of different federal agencies provide HBCU-specific programs for formula funding options. The main ones come from the Department of Education — their Strengthening HBCUs program and one from Title VII specific for master's institutions — as well as the Department of Agriculture's program specifically for HBCU land-grant institutions. These also have some state funding components to them that are outside the scope of our time today. But know that your grant seeking should not just end at the formula funding options.

Competitive Funding Options

Dr. Marc Smithers:
There are so many competitive programs to consider — those that specifically target HBCUs and other MSIs, but also others that are just open to all institutions of higher education. Of course this is not an exhaustive list by any means, but do take this as a list off of which you can build your search. The

National Science Foundation, Health Resources and Services Administration, and the Department of Defense have a number of different programs, some of which, like those listed here, specifically call out MSIs and HBCUs in particular.

The thing to keep in mind, though, is that some of these programs — such as the HBCU Excellence in Research program — would not be great fits for HBCU institutions that don't have strong centers of faculty research, and specifically research in STEM fields, as a major component of your institutional profile. So, like two-year institutions or even medical schools — as the NSF doesn't really typically fund medical research. When considering eligibility and competitiveness for these programs, remember to consider not just your status as an HBCU, but also the kinds of programs that your institution has and how aligned these are to the priorities of the particular agency that you're considering.

Foundation Funding

Dr. Marc Smithers:
This also goes for foundations as well, of which we've listed just a few. There are a number of foundations interested in funding a broad range of HBCU initiatives such as student scholarships, capital projects, and faculty research, so be sure to cast your net wide when searching for foundation opportunities.

Strategies to Build a Competitive Application

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Once you've found the right program to pursue and you have a project to develop, this is when you can employ some smart strategies to build a competitive application.

Look for Competitive Preferences That Align with Your Institution

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Some especially key strategic moves that you can consider are, first, to look at programs that have competitive preferences that align well with your institution. This could be programs that especially seek to fund HBCUs, but don't stop there. Also consider other aspects of your institutional profile and how that aligns with their preferences.

If you're a rural institution, seek out programs that have a competitive preference for rural institutions — which we're actually starting to see in some Department of Education programs. If your faculty's particularly strong in an area of research, try to align your search with programs that are interested in that field. Alignment with the aims and focus of a program is perhaps the single biggest factor that an institution should be taking into account if they're looking to increase their grant-seeking effectiveness.

Use HBCU-Specific Funding to Build Internal Capacity

Dr. Marc Smithers:
In addition to alignment, also think about how you utilize different streams of funding for grant-specific purposes. Consider ways that you might be able to utilize HBCU-specific programs, whether that's federal, state, or foundation level, and have that funding increase your internal grant capacity. View this almost as a way of investing in your institutional grant-seeking efforts, using that funding to bolster your institution's internal capacity, which you can then use as leverage to improve your competitive grant-seeking efforts.

Emphasize Regional Impact

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Finally, also think about ways that you can emphasize the impact that your institution has on your region as a way to strengthen your proposal. This is because funders are interested in maximizing the reach that their dollars have. Institutions that are unsuccessful in grant-seeking efforts tend to focus a lot just on the impact that a funder's money will have on their own institution and on their own students. That's understandable that an institution would do that. But an institution is going to be much more successful if they can demonstrate how this funding will impact not just their own specific institution for the better, but also their surrounding community and region. HBCUs often have a really large impact on their surrounding community, and they serve as a regional anchor and driver of economic growth for their communities and their counties. So seek for ways that you can include this impact in your next proposal.

Standardize Your Key Data Points

Dr. Marc Smithers:
A couple of other things that you can keep in mind. First, try standardizing some of your key data points that are used in various grant proposals. These are data points that are used in nearly every application that you'd be submitting — things like enrollment data, educational outcomes, things like that. Consider making even a one-pager with this information so that all of the grant seekers at your institution are not bogged down by having to hunt down this information in various places for themselves. This actually also has the added benefit of ensuring that this information is standardized across the institution. So no matter who's running point on your next grant application, these numbers look the same.

Mirror the Funder's Language

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Next, make sure that you try and mirror as much as possible the language that the funder is using in their application or their Notice of Funding Opportunity. So if they're interested in funding projects on

"career readiness," for instance, mirror that language for your project narrative rather than saying "employability," "workforce development," or "job skills." Even this small step can go a long way in showing that your project is directly aligned with their areas of focus.

Build in Evaluation and Assessment

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Also, don't forget about some of the post-award pieces, especially evaluation and assessment of your project's effectiveness. Funders care a lot about evidence that shows that their funding made a difference, and evaluation is a key piece of proving that your project did what it said it was going to do. Don't be afraid to build evaluation into your budget if it's not required, because it's really important. So think about spending some money on external evaluators or some robust data-gathering efforts, as well as potentially even conference presentations to showcase your efforts. This also shows the funders that you care about how their money is spent and giving them credit for their good investment in your project.

Include Stories and Community Voices

Dr. Marc Smithers:
Finally, including stories and quotes from members of your community can further strengthen your proposal. Seek to include those voices, tell a compelling story, and give the funder every opportunity to encounter the direct beneficiaries of their potential investment.

Do these things, and your next proposal is sure to stand out. I'm going to pass things back over to Ashley to finish this out.

Q&A Session

Ashley Schultz:
First of all, thank you so much, Marc. Again folks who are here, the bottom right-hand corner is where you can ask questions. I'm just going to give Marc a second to grab a glass of water before we head over to the Q&A session.

Q1: How can HBCU researchers sustain funding for ongoing investigators?

Ashley Schultz:
So with that, Marc, hopefully you had a big glass of water. I've got two questions here for you. Again, bottom right-hand corner if you have any additional questions. One question here is about research funding. Several researchers at HBCUs are receiving competitive funding grants from the NIH and other institutions. But there's always this challenge about continuing to receive funding, and then possibly

losing quality staff or maybe a disconnect either in the short or long term. Any funding mechanisms or ideas that you have to fund these investigators to continue their research with HBCU funding?

Dr. Marc Smithers:
That's a very common challenge, I would say, at HBCUs — and at all institutions honestly — is the sustainability of funding. In terms of sure things and easy mechanisms to continue these sort of sustainable funds, there's not any one thing that I can point to you.

I would say, again, this is where evaluation and assessment is really, really important. One of the things that I most frequently see grant seekers not give a lot of attention to is this idea of ensuring that the funding that you're seeking is being well spent, and that you can point to direct outcomes and knowledge gains from your research. So building in that evaluation and assessment funding is really, really important.

The other thing I would say is, if there is a continued struggle in continuing to receive sustainability funding through places like the NIH or other agencies, I think this is where some of those foundations really come into play. There are a number of different foundations that have specific areas of interest in whatever field that you're pursuing. It might be worthwhile to — they might not be interested in funding a pilot study or something like that, but if you can demonstrate to them that you've received a substantial amount of funding and have some proven research results, that actually raises the ears of some of those foundations that maybe are a little bit more leery in investing in an unproven research inquiry. But if you can demonstrate some wins there, this is where foundations actually can really play a key part.

Q2: How can a faculty member find out if their institution receives formula funding?

Ashley Schultz:
Great. Wonderful. Thank you. And then one last really fast question. This person is also a faculty member at an HBCU and they're talking about not sure if they receive formula funding or not. Who should they reach out to to find out that information — how much, and in what ways?

Dr. Marc Smithers:
This will differ by the institution depending on the size of the institution. If your institution has an Office of Sponsored Programs — not all of them do, but if they do, they would be your first stop. If your institution doesn't have an Office of Sponsored Programs or a grants office, whatever that office might be called, I actually think it would be helpful to talk with maybe your department chair, depending on your relationship, or maybe your academic dean. And then if you strike out in all three of those different areas, follow the money: talk to somebody in the finance office, they'll know who to talk to.

Closing

Ashley Schultz:
Wonderful. Thanks very much, Marc, again, for all this great information, and thanks to all of you for joining us here today. We hope you found this to be a good use of your time, and we hope to see you on a future Grants Office webinar. Have a good day.

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