

March 13, 2025

Students at HBCUs Have Better Mental Health Than Other College Students

According to a new study, HBCU students were nine percentage points more likely to report signs of mental “flourishing” than American college students over all.

By Johanna Alonso



Students at North Carolina Central University, a public HBCU, attend graduation in spring 2024.

DeAndres Royal/North Carolina Central University via Getty Images

Students at historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly Black institutions are happier and feel a greater sense of belonging, on average, than both

Black students at small, predominantly white institutions and college students over all, according to a [new report](#) commissioned by the United Negro College Fund.

The report, “Community, Culture and Care: A Cross-Institutional Analysis of Mental Health Among HBCU and PBI Students,” utilized findings from two years’ worth of data from the Healthy Minds Study, a large annual survey of college students nationwide, to create what the researchers believe is the most comprehensive analysis to date of HBCU and PBI students’ mental health.

“HBCUs have a long tradition of being centers of excellence and academic achievement,” said Akilah Patterson, the lead researcher on the study and a Ph.D. candidate in the University of Michigan’s Department of Health Behavior and Health Equity. “But this work also highlights that HBCUs are much more than that. They’re cultivating an environment of affirmation and belonging and support.”

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Among the study’s sample of HBCU and PBI students, 45 percent demonstrated positive mental health according to the Flourishing Scale, a series of eight statements—such as “I am a good person and live a good life”—that are used to determine whether a respondent

is “flourishing” mentally. The three statements most commonly selected by students in the sample were “I am a good person and live a good life,” “I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others,” and “I am confident and capable in the activities that are important to me.”

Meanwhile, only 36 percent of college students in general and 38 percent of Black students at PWIs indicated positive mental health. HBCU and PBI students also reported lower rates of anxiety, depression and eating disorders than college students broadly.

Rate of Flourishing

The percentage of students who scored a 48 or higher on the Flourishing Scale, indicating positive mental health.

Source: “Community, Culture and Care: A Cross-Institutional Analysis of Mental Health Among



✱ A Flourish chart

HBCU and PBI students also demonstrated a greater sense of belonging on campus, with 83 percent agreeing with the statement “I see myself as part of the campus community,” while 73 percent of all Healthy Minds respondents said the same. High numbers of HBCU and PBI students reported having close connections with others on campus; 54 percent said they have a social group or community where they feel they belong, and 60 percent said they have friends “with whom I can share my thoughts and feelings.”

Serena Butler-Johnson, the director of the counseling center at the University of the District of Columbia, a public HBCU, said that those findings seem especially noteworthy as mental health professionals increasingly warn of the dangers of loneliness and

isolation, which have been associated with physical harms, like increased risk of stroke. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general under former president Joe Biden, declared loneliness a public health emergency in 2023, calling community and connection its “antidotes.”

Butler-Johnson also noted that the findings tie in with the field of Black psychology, which focuses on Black people’s lives, history and experiences.

“Black psychology emphasizes community, connection, rituals, traditions, which are all very much part of an HBCU experience, whether it’s homecoming or stepping or band,” she said. “Just in general, the concept of Black psychology is mirrored in the findings.”

Though the findings did not necessarily show causation between the high rates of belonging and the other positive mental health outcomes of HBCU and PBI students, previous research has linked a sense of belonging with high academic achievement and mental well-being.

Mental Health Concerns

Despite the mostly positive findings, the sample did report higher rates of suicidal ideation among HBCU and PBI students (17 percent) than the general student population (14 percent). It also highlighted two areas of stress for many HBCU and PBI students: financial instability and, despite feeling high rates of belonging on their campuses, loneliness. The respondents experienced similar levels of stress (56 percent) to the national sample (55 percent) but higher rates of financial stress; 52 percent said they are always or often stressed about finances, compared to 43 percent of the national sample.

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Butler-Johnson said that HBCUs should take extra steps “outside of the four walls of the therapy room” to address these issues; at UDC, that has included opening a new Office of Advocacy and Student Support, which partners with the counseling center to connect students with financial assistance and case management. UDC’s counseling center also offers informal, nonclinical group meetings where students can drop in and talk with others, no paperwork required, as a way to address loneliness.

Mental Health Treatment Use

The percentage of students with at least one mental health challenge who have received mental health treatment over the past year.

Source: “Community, Culture and Care: A Cross-Institutional Analysis of Mental Health Among



* A Flourish chart

Another concerning finding: HBCU and PBI students with mental health challenges are significantly less likely to receive mental health support than Black students at PWIs and students over all. The report notes that this could be due to those institutions having fewer resources, leading to less availability of clinicians on campus. The perceived stigma of

going to therapy could be a factor as well; while only 8 percent of respondents said they would judge someone else for getting treatment—slightly above the national rate of 6 percent—52 percent said they feared they would be judged if they sought out treatment. That's 11 percentage points higher than the national sample.

Patterson said these findings indicate that HBCUs and PBIs are doing an incredibly successful job supporting students' mental well-being despite barriers like lack of resources and concerns about stigma. And while she said many HBCU students can benefit from traditional counseling, the results indicate that it's also important to recognize that therapy is “not the be-all, end-all” of mental health support on HBCU campuses.

“Knowing and providing multiple options for all students is really important,” she said.

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