TRANSFORMING
TOGETHER

THE HBCU FRONTIER SET EXPERIENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) have played a significant role in providing access to higher education and facilitating degree attainment for Black students and other marginalized student populations. The sector's origin story is of radical transformation in US higher education. Groups of determined individuals found the resources necessary to carve out spaces to educate and empower persons faced with numerous societal barriers to independence, full citizenry, and economic prosperity.

The Frontier Set (FS), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (the Foundation), dedicated six years to assisting a group of 29 higher education institutions and two systems (Georgia and Tennessee) identified as high-performing, high potential organizations committed to reframing and redefining student success and achieving this success through intentional and transformative efforts. The six HBCU cohort institutions were selected because of their outstanding student-centered approaches to increasing student success and served admirably as contemporary representations of the sector's history of transformative higher education.

As the HBCU cohort accomplished the two key FS objectives to:

- **Improve student outcomes and continue progress toward closing success gaps at member campuses and systems.**
- **Share insights and resources with additional campuses and systems to set new standards and transform how institutions operate.**

A key element of the HBCU cohort's success lay in the role of the HBCU Intermediary Team and, more specifically, the strategic vision of Intermediary Dr. Kathy Thompson. This report will explore the highlights of this journey in the following sections:

- **Contexts and objectives.**
- **Fostering the Connection: The Role of the Intermediary Team**
- **Building a Learning Community**
- **Future Building: Key Lessons and Recommendations**

Upon the conclusion of this report, the success of the cohort's transformation processes and the essential role of the HBCU Intermediary in facilitating said successes will be communicated.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were founded during the US reconstruction era to educate newly freed enslaved persons. Though unique in their executions, HBCUs hold a shared mission of empowering underprivileged and underserved populations through education, leadership development, and economic opportunity. Most Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) were not founded with the unique needs of African Americans in mind and did not consider providing access or opportunity to this population until societal pressures necessitated change. HBCUs' transformative approach of engaging in non-race-based admissions and establishing a mission/institutional culture centered on African Americans contemporarily evolved into institutional cultures that provide access and facilitate the success of underserved and under-resourced students and communities.

Six HBCUs, Claflin University, Delaware State University, Fayetteville State University, Jackson State University, Johnson C. Smith University, and Morehouse College, were selected to participate in FS as contemporary models of transformative approaches to serving students and fostering student success. The HBCU cohort included both public and private HBCUs, allowing for an opportunity for information sharing across the institutional types that may not occur as often in other spaces. The HBCU cohort worked towards collective goals aligned with the Foundation's goal of accelerating student success by integrating solutions and strengthening capacities. The institutions were selected for their existing transformational strengths in aligning current work and planning around a vision for transformation. They accomplished this by building sustainable partnerships with state legislators, using data to guide decision-making, strengthening community partnerships, investing in online learning, and redesigning general education. The institutions sought to implement the FS's theory of action and transformation model by integrating their existing solutions with FS's operating capacities and enablers to transform for more equitable student success through these five transformational capacities:

- **Leadership & Culture**
- **Institutional Research**
- **Information Technology**
- **Strategic Finance**
- **Institutional Policy**

UNDERSTANDING THE HBCU CONTEXT

CLAFLIN UNIVERSITY

DELAWARE STATE

FAYETTEVILLE STATE UNIV.

JACKSON STATE UNIV.

JOHNSON C. SMITH UNIV.

MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

Institution	Carnegie Clas.	Classification	Target Students	Focus Area	Primary Initiatives
Claflin University, Population 2,172	Master's Degree	Private, 4-Year Orangeburg, SC	Black/African American	Advising, Digital Learning, Developmental Education	Early Alert System Online Undergraduate and Graduate Programs, Hybrid Online Courses, Prematriculation Program
Delaware State University Population 4,586	Doctoral Degree: High Research Activities	Public, 4-year Dover, DE	Black/African American	Digital Learning, Advising, Developmental Education	iPad Initiative, 15 Strong to Completion, Elimination of Math, Developmental Courses
Fayetteville State University Population 6,318	Research Doctoral: Single Program Education	Public, 4-year Fayetteville, NC	Black/African American	Advising, Developmental Education, Digital Learning	BroncoConnect, Degree Works, Math Support Center, Adaptive Learning Pilot
Jackson State University Population 8,479	Doctoral Degree: High Research Activities	Public, 4-year Jackson, MS	Black/African American	Developmental Education, Advising, Digital Learning	Co-requisite English, composition and college algebra, Include Ed, Centralized Advising Model
Johnson C. Smith University Population 1,565	Baccalaureate Degree & Single Master's Degree	Private, 4-year Charlotte, NC	Black/African American	Advising, Developmental Education, Digital Learning	First-Year Experience, Biddle Institute, Canvas
Morehouse College Population 2.206	Baccalaureate Degree	Private, 4-Year Atlanta, GA	Black/African American/Men	Advising, Developmental Education, Digital Learning	ADISA, Black Ink Project, ALEKS

HBCUs embrace a shared mission of empowerment, uplift, and transformative education for disenfranchised and marginalized populations. By integrating and focusing on solutions such as Developmental Education, Advising, Digital Coursework, and other solutions supported by certain operating capacities and enablers, such as student-centered state, federal, and accreditation policies, institutions can transform for more equitable student success. Though the Intermediary team proposed the focus solution areas, the institutions identified primary initiatives unique to their individual institutions which served best for integrating these solution areas to foster transformational and increase student outcomes.

As the HBCU cohort worked toward collective goals, they faced individual challenges. These individual challenges included:

- Claflin- Lack of faculty training in best practices
- Delaware State- Limited IT Infrastructure
- Fayetteville State- Lack of clarity regarding communication and intended audience
- Johnson C. Smith- Need for increased training participation regarding research projects
- Jackson State- Communication challenges in academic units
- Morehouse College- Lack of faculty training and administrative support

They needed support implementing and integrating policies and practices associated with increasing student success, strengthening institutional capacity for sustained change, and sharing progress, insights, and lessons learned, both inside and outside the FS. The HBCU Team Intermediary conceived paths forward by partnering the HBCUs with solution providers to propel the process towards transformation. Despite their commitment to the process, the institutions were apprehensive about sharing information with their competition. In the past, HBCUs have had institutional information weaponized against them and have suffered the insult of improper credit for their innovative techniques. These experiences caused cohort members to question the value of what they considered radical transparency. One cohort member stated,

You're asking us to give away… what we think is special about our institutions…. why would we share that? Why would we give that out to the world?"

Within the HBCU community, HBCUs are often represented by two major entities—The United Negro College Fund (UNCF) and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF). Representing private and public HBCUs, respectively, it is not uncommon for representatives from the organizations to serve in similar capacities as an intermediary across various projects.

Taking a different approach, The Foundation selected an intermediary not associated with either TMCF or UNCF. Some participants found this a positive attribute, making them more comfortable engaging in the FS. However, as a precondition for success, this neutral intermediary would still have to create a high level of trust to produce a robust and intimate understanding of institutional transformation in the HBCU sector. The Foundation selected Dr. Kathy Thompson to serve as this independent, neutral intermediary to assist sites in meeting grant obligations and surface opportunities for close collaboration and connection. Ultimately, Dr. Thompson became a "weaver within her segment," aiding in facilitating sharing and learning. As the HBCU cohort embarked upon its FS journey, the HBCU Intermediary assuaged their concerns and challenges by serving as a partner, advocate, interpreter, and visionary in navigating its path to success.

Intermediaries who work with historically misrepresented and exploited institutional sectors (i.e., HBCUs) must be equipped to facilitate trust and relationship building with and between the cohort members. This will likely not be a linear process, but rather circular and ongoing. However, commitment to this process aids in institutions sharing and embracing practices that accelerate transformation.

FOSTERING THE CONNECTION

" I want every person I deal with to know that I hear them. What they say is important, and I'm going to reflect it in my actions."

— DR. KATHY THOMPSON

Frontier Set institutions represented various institutional sectors (e.g., public institutions, minority-serving institutions, HBCUs). Important to note is that most of these institutional sectors have associations or member foundations that focus on and advocate on behalf of the sector. Within the HBCU community, two significant entities often act as intermediaries and advocates for the sector, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF). The United Negro College Fund and TMCF have and continue to serve as strong advocates and intermediaries to various stakeholders. However, the nature of one is primarily focused on public institutions, and the other is on private institutions. The Foundation's bold move of bringing in a neutral intermediary with experience working with HBCUs and leading transformative change was groundbreaking. It would prove a crucial first step in creating an environment conducive to helping the institutions meet the goals and outcomes of the initiative.

The FS cohort intermediaries selected by the Foundation were given very specific tasks to assist their sites in meeting their grant obligations and building close connections and collaboration. More specifically, intermediaries were to a) work with institution leadership and site leads through various milestones, initiatives, and deliverables to support and advance institutional transformation and contribute to the body of knowledge relating to institutional transformation; b) implement identified solutions to advance student success and remove gaps in educational attainment; c) foster connection and dynamic idea sharing, not only between the Foundation and the institutions but also between the institutions and solution partners in order to facilitate discussions centered on challenges and solutions to achieving transformation; d) advocate for and support institutions in identifying resources that align with their needs and priorities; e) create a community of practice in the solutions areas and capacities
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Dr. Thompson brought many beneficial qualities, strengths, and skillsets to the Intermediary role. Those who describe her contributions describe her as an "architect, pacesetter, innovator, interpreter, advocate, partner, and friend." These unique traits shaped and formed her approach to helping the HBCU cohort build a learning community amongst themselves, the larger FS group, and the Foundation.

Dr. Thompson adopted a web of inclusion (Hegelsen) that positioned her as a connector, collaborator, communicator, and advocate—a hub for the various entities with which she interacted. Dr. Thompson began building a team within this web of inclusion framework to work with her and the institutions to ensure they met their goals and had access to the necessary resources to successfully institutionalize their transformational success. Together with the team, Thompson would coalesce the Intermediary Team goals into four major areas:

- **Capacity Building**
- **Relationship Building**
- **Cohort Management**
- **Service Design & Delivery**

The next section of this report will discuss how the HBCU Intermediary Team approached and executed its goals in these four areas. Innovative strategies employed, significant milestones, pivot points, and the impact on the participating HBCUs' transformative processes will be presented.

THE INTERMEDIARY:
DR. KATHY THOMPSON

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are often praised for their communal culture as a sector. As both individual campuses and sector members, HBCUs espouse a culture of belongingness in which students, faculty, staff, etc., feel and are regarded as "family." However, because HBCU data and information sharing has in the past been weaponized by institutions competing for a share of a limited higher education marketplace, HBCUs have an understandable history of being slow to trust and share. The HBCU cohort was cautious about building cross-institutional relationships, constructing learning communities, and sharing data, practices, and strategies to achieve transformation. The heightened scrutiny and perceived deficit-oriented approach caused these HBCUs to be guarded. This hesitancy to trust was a challenge for Dr. Thompson as she sought to create an environment of collaboration versus competition.

Dr. Thompson approached her work as an Intermediary with strategic intentionality. Avoiding the option of passive engagement by collecting reports and updates from participants remotely, Dr. Thompson

began to build a comprehensive expert team to support the cohort. Her goals for the team evolved into five primary areas:

- **Fostering inter-institutional partnerships**
- **Catalyzing lasting collaboration**
- **Serving as an Information Conduit**
- **Building sustainability**
- **Providing Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)**

These five areas came into focus organically based on the Foundation's vision, Dr. Thompson's observations, and expressions of participant goals. Dr. Thompson's vision for the team was to dynamically apply their talent, skill, and specialty areas to engage the institutions and become effective conduits of information between the cohort and the Foundation. Trust and transparency would prove central to achieving this goal. Dr. Thompson and her team built this trust and transparency in two parallel paths—between the team and the HBCU cohort and between the HBCU institutions themselves.

BUILDING TRUST: CREATING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Dr. Thompson and the Intermediary Team saw that their availability, communication, and feedback practices were critical trust-building element and key success factor. Several site leads mentioned how easy it was to reach Dr. Thompson and other key team members to address issues, concerns, frustrations, or ask questions. Dr. Thompson and her team deemed it a critical learning factor to intentionally construct spaces where the institutional teams would feel comfortable communicating transparently with the Intermediary Team and with each other. These were safe spaces where open feedback was encouraged and welcomed without judgment. In describing Dr. Thompson's "collaborate, don't compete" mantra, one participant shared that the intermediary team helped the HBCU site leads reframe how they viewed their sister institutions. **"It wasn't uncomfortable. It was a very normal feeling….the ability to really be at the table."**

Dr. Thompson's establishment of regular convenings brought the institutions, Intermediary Team, and other key actors, such as Technical Assistants and Evaluators, together and proved vital in helping reframe and remove barriers to data and information sharing between the institutions. The Intermediary Team was able to use these convenings to:

- **Intentionally create safe, non-competitive spaces**
- **Position the Intermediary Team as collaborators and not managers**
- **Reinforce HBCU family culture**
- **Empower participant voices**
- **Create space for institutional feedback and develop actionable support strategies for concerns and needs**

Across cohort institutions, whether site lead or team member, the convenings held and facilitated by the intermediary team were consistently recognized as places where trust was built, communication initiated, and feedback welcomed. Through these convenings, institutions could share successful transformation processes and initiatives. Further, institutions were empowered to share their challenges in achieving transformation at the institutional level and with the Foundation. Reaching this level of transparency, which took approximately two years, was not without hard work, laser-focused intention, and lessons learned.

"I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT:" NAVIGATING TENSIONS, SENSITIVITIES, AND DISTRUST

An integral part of the FS goals centered on information sharing. The HBCU Intermediary Team's relationship and capacity-building goals were directly related to the FS goals to improve student outcomes and continue progress toward closing success gaps at member campuses and systems, and share insights and resources with additional campuses and systems to set new standards and transform how institutions operate. Dr. Thompson intentionally devised strategies to navigate site leads' tensions, concerns, and distrust of sector outsiders to create an environment conducive to transparency. Two principal tactics were regular convenings and opportunities for direct

feedback. Over the six years, there would be five convenings for the HBCUs, Intermediary Team, and partners. These convenings allowed the HBCUs to come together to share their accomplishments and challenges. At first, site leads were hesitant to "show their hands" by announcing what had gone well for them and were particularly reticent to expose their vulnerabilities.

Though the first convening held in Atlanta, Georgia, in February 2018 was wrought with tension, Dr. Thompson created a safe space where site leads could drop their guard and realize the value of sharing information and challenges with their peers. Her strategy grew exponentially from a safe space offering the freedom to speak openly into a forum for collaboration between the sites, a phenomenon to be sure, as formerly suspicious and wary stakeholders formed relationships outside of the FS and thrive today. One site lead shared, **"Kathy and Lillian helped us realize the significance of sharing what has been successful… If there are successful efforts at our different institutions, why wouldn't we want to share that? Because, in the end, we're going to be helping our students and our families."** Dr. Thompson says, **"Most people want and need to be seen and heard. I give every person the opportunity and a platform to be seen and heard. We have proven that that is really the start of trust."** Creating this trust in the first convening created a platform to build future respect and confidence in Dr. Thompson's process. Convenings became anticipated gatherings of fellow transformative agents within the same learning community motivated and energized to carry on the work.

An explicit conversation regarding trust occurred at the first convening. Dr. Thompson felt that understanding the critical importance of building trust as the foundation of a learning community across this group of institutions was a priority. The three main revelations from that discussion were:

- **Each campus must identify its level of trust before moving transformation forward**
- **Most institutions must navigate distrust**
- **Trust-building takes time and tends to slow the implementation of transformation efforts**

Understanding learning and leadership styles gave participants insight into working and building trust with each other and within their institutional teams. This exercise would illuminate paths towards strengthening the site teams and, ultimately, the transformation process.

Institutions shared their successes in "brag reports," which allowed them to talk about their transformative work in an open forum. In addition to describing their accomplishments, they shared things they would do over if they could and their lessons learned. This transparent sharing commenced the trust and relationship-building process and empowered participants to share information about successful practices other institutions could emulate. The HBCU learning community was taking shape.

Convening two focused on the question "What is transformation?" and sought to produce a definition of institutional transformation by consensus. While these HBCUs were selected based on their existing transformative practices, their ability to formalize practices into processes was critical to sustaining their institutional transformation. The Intermediary Team invited the participants to develop a definition as it applied to their own culture. This was important because context and culture are pillars of the work of HBCUs yet are often absent from the discussion and evaluation of their processes and outcomes. The cohort worked together to develop a unified answer to answer the question, "What causes institutional transformation?" as "a multilevel, collaborative, institutional culture shift that implements best practices to fulfill the changing needs of [their] students."

Members of the cohort went on to say that transformation doesn't always demand a new direction; it can also be making improvements to existing practices while remaining centered on the HBCU mission. "Being true to who you are makes a difference."

The second convening in June 2018 in Point Clear, Alabama, was used to test and build upon the fragile trust between the institutions established in convening one. Dr. Thompson asked site leads and other institutional attendees to dismiss their preconceived notions about the dangers of information sharing. Unbeknownst to them, she had volunteered the cohort to be the first to share KPI and ITA data publicly. Her gentle yet confident leadership nudged attendees out of their comfort zones. Some group members resisted, with one site lead recalling, "I think Morehouse and Johnson C. Smith were probably the most vocal about the ITA initially.... the way it was worded because if you're having lots people engage, you've got to make sure everyone has the same lexicon...but one of the things we learned was that whether or not we agreed with the instrument's design, it did tell us something about our institutions."

An evaluator representing the American Institute of Research (AIR) presented an overview of solutions and capacities, their relationship to one another, and an overview of the ITA. The evaluator introduced Theories of Action (TOAs) for FS sites to identify what was working and what was not working to find solutions and resolutions to existing problems. Attendees pushed back because the HBCU community is traditionally wary of evaluative efforts without acknowledging the unique HBCU context. One participant stated the need for institutions to contextualize findings and responses. Another wholly disagreed with their institution's ITA results, citing skepticism of the report's validity and displeasure with the administration's ability to influence ratings over those "in the trenches." Dr. Thompson and the Intermediary Team were critical in navigating these tensions, listening to participants' concerns, and advocating for and responding to their concerns over resources. This was one of the ways the Intermediary Team prevented the tender trust forged at convening one from unraveling and turned the discourse into new trust-building opportunities.

The third convening held in February 2019 in Charlotte, North Carolina, built on the shared learning experiences from convenings one and two, developed solid action plans for improving student success, and introduced solution network processes and opportunities for each HBCU. At this convening, Dr. Thompson identified a common need among all six institutions in one solution area—Digital Learning/Digital Courseware. Dr. Thompson employed Connection Funds to organize an event for the institutions at the University of Central Florida in April 2019 to learn from their successful work in faculty engagement, professional development, and adaptive learning.

In addition, AIR partners worked with the six institutions to discuss equity issues. The discussion began with acknowledging the engines of equity that HBCUs have historically used to educate African Americans when most other institutions would not. After collecting data and listening to the conversations on equity, AIR partners composed a paper examining a theoretical understanding of equity in three key themes:

1. **Student-Centered Equity**
2. **Structural Equity**
3. **Broadening Equity**

Student-Centered Equity:
HBCUs engage a student-centered approach to supporting students requiring immediate service, including students of low-income backgrounds, those who reside in rural areas, and those who need additional academic preparation to support their enrollment, persistence, and degree completion.

Structural Equity:
HBCUs provide strategic support to students to ensure their return to campus for their sophomore year. Institutions strive to engage students early to capture and hold their interest in persistence.

Broadening Equity:
HBCUs are wholly committed to upholding their legacies and historical impact while marketing themselves as inclusive institutions that support all students. Senior leaders discussed the delicate balance of finding strategies and methods to increase financial stability and enrollment while increasing persistence and degree completion for a diverse population of students.

The convening's full schedule included discussions on creating and engaging in opportunities to generate buy-in from campus stakeholders and using the Loss and Momentum framework, as required for all FS institutions, to map what was going well with students and areas needing improvement. The Ada Center updated the cohort on the progress of the Technology Assessments for assisting the HBCUs in navigating their technology and business process decisions. Finally, the Solutions Network Intermediaries attended and delivered their first presentation on their services. The six HBCUs used their brag reports to discuss and update the cohort on their respective progress in the areas.

Convening four was held in February 2020 in New Orleans, LA, and launched a year-long study of how institutions implement continuous improvement that leads to transformation. Due to the evolving nature of the FS work, the intermediary team decided on each convention's topics. The discussions focused on the "hows," "whats," and FS "capacities" that drive continuous improvement and create transformation. The HBCU Intermediary introduced a transformation hypothesis to the institutions in this convening. Other agenda items included a Continuous Quality Improvement Spotlight (CQI), the introduction of the storytelling project, a discussion of how to understand transformation using KPIs and HBCU Dashboards, and institutional updates on the Ada Center's IT Gap Analysis recommendations. The cohort was updated on adaptive learning, process mapping, the Men of Color workshop, and closing equity gaps. Process mapping and storytelling initiatives provided the cohort institutions with the necessary tools to further the FS mission of increasing student success.

In sharing their CQI spotlights, institutions shared their existing problems, goals and challenges, actions to reach the goals, and the results of said actions. For example, Jackson State University presented its issues regarding the lack of the academic affairs office's involvement in the course scheduling process, adherence to the course schedule validation process, and ensuring adequate time for students to transition between classes campus-wide.

In response to these challenges, JSU made the following improvements:

- **Instituting workflow approval to improve accountability**
- **Transitioning the core scheduling validation process from a manual to an electronic process**
- **Developing a program through the Office of Information Technology (IT) developed a program to identify courses outside of approved times, leading to adherence to validation tables**
- **Rearranging course time offerings to allow for more professional growth and development**
- **Facilitating the increased engagement of Deans and Department Chairs**

These improvements found that 35% of course offerings were out of compliance. In response, 100% of the non-compliant courses were re-submitted, and all courses met the validating guidelines of spring 2020. Additionally, the Standard Operating Procedures were updated to include multiple validation steps during the scheduling process. This example reflects how the HBCUs used the convenings to be transparent about their transformation processes and learn from each other. Not only did institutions share their processes, but they reflected on Dr. Thompson's question, "What help do you need to keep moving forward?" Reflecting on this question as a cohort provided the opportunity to share successful strategies and approaches across the institutions.

Convening four introduced the storytelling project, designed to empower institutions to communicate their institutional transformation efforts toward student success to internal and external stakeholders. This initiative culminated in institutional playbooks that provided information and tips for institutions to communicate with their audiences to increase student success. In addition to the storytelling initiative, a conversation regarding HBCUs and equity was led by the TA from AIR. This conversation focused on the importance of equity, highlighting the current state of equity at HBCUs, characterizing individual institutions' equity efforts regarding sub-populations on campus, connecting equity and KPIs, and identifying equity in action. By connecting the work the cohort had already accomplished, the institutions learned how process mapping could be used to close equity gaps. This fourth convening created a space where the cohort continued to foster connections, share information, learn from each other, and further develop their skillsets regarding transformational processes.

The HBCU's Capstone Convening was conducted virtually in October of 2021 with the central theme of scaling, equity, and transformation (SET). This convening allowed the cohort, the intermediary, and senior BMFG leaders to reflect on the FS experience, their progress under the FS, and their next steps. Institutional leaders shared their reflections on leadership and learning from their respective strategic plans. This discussion continued focusing on implementing strategic plans and capacity development for transformation. On day two of the convening, the HBCU site leads shared their lessons learned. Cohort members reflected on the following questions:

- **What are the 1–2 factors that make institutional transformation processes at HBCUs unique?**
- **How do individuals and/or departments best contribute to transformation?**
- **What are the risks of transformation?**
- **What resources have been leveraged to accelerate transformation?**

Once reflecting on the lessons learned, participants discussed their overview of the FS experience and how lessons learned informed the path forward. The experience had a significant impact on the participants. When asked to describe the one thing they were most proud of from the FS experience, some of the reflections were:

- **"Breaking through a few silos on campus— realizing the importance of systematic thinking."**
- **"The open sharing of information and support by Frontier Set and HBCU members."**
- **"I appreciate the work of all stakeholders during our campus transformation. I love that we remained firmly committed to the goals."**

Across institutions, we saw the results of these individual impacts on the overall transformative work of the institutions. Some of the impacts on KPIs that occurred across institutions were:

- **Enrollment increases**
- **Completion rate increases**
- **Credit accumulation rate improvements**
- **Bachelor's degree conferral improvements**

Overall, the convenings enabled the cohort to build and strengthen their learning community and ultimately enhance these HBCUs' FS experience. Participants shared in their reflections that the convenings provided the environment and the tools to engage in information sharing and relationship building in ways they had not previously considered. Due to the foundation laid during these convenings, the institutions now have the knowledge and capacity to continue to foster, strengthen, and leverage the network created during their FS experience.

BEING THE BRIDGE: THE ROLE OF THE INTERMEDIARY

Dr. Thompson is a servant leader whose hallmark approach as HBCU Intermediary was to position the HBCUs at the project center and serve them as an advocate and interpreter for their participation in the Frontier Set. This leadership style also permeated throughout her team. Dr. Thompson and her team became the bridge that grew the HBCU cohort from six individual HBCUs into a synergetic cohort and learning community that used information sharing, data transparency, and relationship building to improve their practices and increase their capacity. Dr. Thompson established five pillars that would serve as the foundation of the bridge between institutions and the Foundation and guide the team's work. Those pillars were:

- Atmosphere Setting
- Navigating Tensions
- Intentional Listening
- Advocacy
- Resource Connection

Dr. Thompson and her team gained the trust of institutions in a sector often guarded and slow to demonstrate external data transparency. This approach empowered Dr. Thompson to serve as a connector in facilitating necessary resource flow to ensure institutions had what they needed to reach their goals and objectives. This section of the report highlights how the intermediary and her team specifically employed these pillars to become a bridge and masterfully facilitate the bonding and building of a learning community.

ATMOSPHERE SETTING

Dr. Thompson and the Intermediary Team intentionally created safe, non-competitive spaces. The team did not act as managers; instead, they functioned as collaborators to support institutions as they worked to achieve individual transformation and collective FS goals. The HBCUs' family culture was foundational in Dr. Thompson's strategic creation of safe spaces for sharing successes and exposing vulnerabilities. The environment also encouraged idea and strategy sharing and engaging in feedback loops to improve processes and impact outcomes. These spaces empowered participants to speak openly, collaborate, and facilitate intentional, strategic planning and implementation of transformative efforts.

NAVIGATING TENSIONS

The competitive HBCU marketplace limited previous cross-institutional conversation and collaboration. That, combined with being asked to work with HBCU outsiders, created tensions at the project's onset. Dr. Thompson and the Intermediary Team acknowledged the tensions and employed strategic communication exercises to dissolve them. Team members praised Dr. Thompson for her expertise in addressing their apprehensions and guiding the cohort closer to reaching positive outcomes. One site lead reflected, **"We were meeting at a resort in Alabama. I remember the site leads gathering in a "huddle" to ask each other really pointed questions, one being if any of us really bought into this need for transparency. There was some concern about whether or not our questions should be shared with Kathy. I remember a high level of tension between the site leads. Someone said, "but don't you think these are the kinds of**

questions we need to be forthcoming about?" And so, when we resumed, we brought our concerns to Kathy. I remember that she took our questions before the whole group, not just those who had participated in the huddle. Ramona and Kathy did an excellent job of helping us work through our concerns. They couldn't answer all of our questions nor resolve our concerns, but they committed to helping get us to a place where the Foundation could respond." The intentional acknowledgment of tension allowed for constant, consistent, and honest conversation and feedback. Through this feedback, the intermediary understood the institutions' barriers and challenges and effectively communicated to the Foundation what the institutions needed to reach project goals.

INTENTIONAL LISTENING

The third pillar, intentional listening, worked in concert with the other pillars to support the HBCU cohort throughout the project. Understanding that communication can make or break a team's progress, Dr. Thompson and her team established regular meetings and communication channels. Through convenings, monthly virtual team meetings, site visits, and one-on-one conversations, participants could be confident their voices, concerns, and perspectives were heard. This was reflected in how Dr. Thompson procured resources, restructured processes, and clarified miscommunications between partners and cohort members. Dr. Thompson, as the intermediary, did not simply go through the motions of listening but listened carefully to solve problems and provide feedback. This made an indelible impact on the cohort's trust in the Intermediary Team. This pillar translated into a more robust learning community confident in its ability to overcome challenges and barriers to achieving institutional transformation. The site leads overwhelmingly praised Dr. Thompson's intentional listening skills as one of her most critical strategies in assuring institutions had a successful experience with FS. One participant stated, **"They were open. I mean, they never tried to stop people from speaking. There wasn't a feeling of, 'you all shouldn't be saying that.' There was never [a] response or reaction out of the ordinary. There was no suppression. And just the fact that we were meeting every month also made a difference because we were able to even dig deeper into some things."**

ADVOCACY

Becoming an advocate for the institutions was an intentional element of Dr. Thompson's strategic approach. She empowered the cohort as they worked through their transformational processes and reinforced the trust between the cohort and the team. Dr. Thompson's advocacy centered on the success of the cohort institutions in the transformation process and gave institutions a platform to tell their stories of success. Knowing the Intermediary Team was there to advocate for them helped the institutions become transparent about challenges and needs, receive and apply feedback, and work collaboratively to reach goals and achieve desired outcomes.

RESOURCE CONNECTION

The fifth pillar in the team's strategic approach centered on obtaining additional resources for processes and capacity building. Dr. Thompson predicted that more resources would be needed for institutions to engage in sustainable transformation and build capacity. These required resources were not limited to financial needs but also technical assistance and knowledge resources. Dr. Thompson researched appropriate services/providers to access or procure the needed resources, allowing institutional teams to remain focused on their transformative processes and goals without being slowed down by research or bureaucratic processes.

In one such case, Dr. Thompson observed and identified a common need for digital learning/digital courseware among all six institutions. The six institutions expressed an interest in improving faculty engagement in technology and student learning support. Dr. Thompson accessed Foundation connection funds to support a connection fund event in April 2019 hosted by UCF's Center for Distributed Learning to gather information and learn about UCF's successful engagement of faculty members. Teams of three individuals from each HBCU (one faculty member, one teaching and learning representative, and an additional interested individual designated at each institution's discretion) traveled to UCF for this opportunity, which was invaluable in helping the institutions continue their transformation efforts.

Connection funds also created opportunities for the institutions to connect outside of convenings by visiting each other's campuses to engage in information and process sharing. In so doing, institutions were able to build a cross-institutional community and share information that could be applied to strengthen their institutional transformation processes. Through Dr. Thompson's ability to identify, tap into, and provide access to additional resources, the HBCU cohort could fully invest in creating sustainable transformation at their institutions.

The establishment of the learning community between the participating institutions proved instrumental in the HBCUs' ability to bolster their transformative, student-centered practices. This learning community also increased the collective capacity of the institutions to engage in crucial transformation processes. The work of the Intermediary Team directly impacted this exercise in future building, the role of the intermediary, and the process of fostering collaboration. The HBCU Cohort defined institutional transformation as a process that focuses on developing culturally relevant, student-centered, and collegial environments that evolve through data-informed decision-making to meet the needs of its students. The section of this report highlights how the Intermediary Team's 5-pillar approach translated to institutional progress in key transformation processes aligned with this definition. Also, critical lessons regarding fostering collaboration and key lessons in building a learning community are explored. Recommendations of how to apply these fundamental lessons are provided.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES AND KEY OUTCOMES

Institutions' work with the Intermediary Team allowed them to engage in impactful transformative work. The reflection exercises and transparent dialogue that occurred during the convenings and site lead meetings identified four pertinent levers of the transformation process that were integral in helping the institutions reach their goals and desired outcomes:

- Process Mapping
- Relationship Building
- Data Transparency/Governance
- Capacity Building

PROCESS MAPPING

Discussions at the yearly program reviews and 2019 Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) helped the HBCU cohort develop a collective goal of removing program and policy barriers preventing students from persisting to graduation that aligned with the FS's goals to 1) improve student outcomes and continue progress toward closing success gaps at member campuses and systems, and 2) share insights and resources with additional campuses and systems to set new standards and transform how institutions operate.

FUTURE BUILDING

Further, institutions also needed improved succession planning to manage leadership gaps caused by retirement and/or the transition of critical leaders to new roles outside the institution. Conversations at these forums resulted in the conceptualization of employing process mapping (PM) as a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) model/tool. Thus, Dr. Thompson introduced process mapping, enhancing the CQI process using process mapping as a tool. She facilitated each institution's engagement in process mapping exercises to assist institutions in closely examining their processes and evaluating opportunities to reorganize and strengthen their processes.

Delaware State University (DSU) and Jackson State University (JSU) saw the most team involvement and transformation by engaging in process mapping from the perspective of efficiency in their current- and future-state process maps. Additionally, DSU would expand its use of data and analytics by creating data dashboards accessible to various touchpoints contributing to student success (i.e., faculty and staff). This also allowed for refinement and the creation of phase II of the Individual Development Plans (IDP). While participating in the FS, DSU held its retention rate steady and saw a slight increase in its 6-year completion rate. Those intimately involved in the change process spoke to its impact. One student shared that the advising has become more hands-on and interactive. The student also reflected upon the institutional transformation through process changes. Faculty, students, and the Office of Engagement synchronized in ways they had never done before. The student stated, **"Communication across the whole college has changed. Everyone is on the same page. [There are] less people left in the dark."**

Jackson State University engaged in process mapping to advance its transformative efforts by changing to a centralized advising model to improve the academic advising experience for students In 2019-20. The changes in advising reduced wait times for in-person advising sessions with professional advisors, fostered collaboration across academic units and improved tracking progress to degree completion. The impact of these changes reflected improvements in their 15/30 credit accumulation rate and increases in credit completion ratio, gateway completion rate, and bachelor's degrees conferred. Process mapping allowed these institutions to understand how processes impact outcomes in both positive and negative ways.

The strategic approach of the Intermediary Team provided them with access to resources, referrals, and information to successfully engage in the process and learn from others in the cohort. Understanding the impact of processes assisted the HBCUs in revamping and investing in their processes and emboldening their transformative efforts.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Relationship building was instrumental in the HBCU cohort's transformative efforts. Institutions' willingness to build and maintain relationships with other cohort institutions enabled participants to contribute to their institution's transformational efforts and others in the sector. Thanks to Dr. Thompson's encouraging the use of connection funds, HBCUs visited each other's campuses and collaborate outside convenings or formal meetings. Due to the trust built early in the process, participants were given a close-up view of what was occurring on the ground at the other institutions, received immediate constructive feedback, and shared processes and approaches that could apply across institutions. Participants commented on the value of the cross-institutional visits and new relationships that contributed to their transformation and the transformation of their peer institutions. One institution team lead shared, **"It has been very rewarding. It has provided so many open opportunities for collaboration, for growing our knowledge and partnerships, and just really understanding that… you're not alone in this student success fight of trying to figure it out and transform student success on your campus. I think it was probably one of the best parts of this project."**

DATA TRANSPARENCY/ GOVERNANCE

The HBCUs quickly grasped the importance of data transparency and governance as a process that contributes to institutional transformation. Some conceded their institutions had weaknesses in both capacities. Knowing the difference between good and bad data and receiving insight into interpreting and using data to implement transformative processes would prove critical. Some participants were initially apprehensive about engaging in data transparency.

Dr. Thompson, the Intermediary Team, and AIR supported the institutions in understanding their data, identifying gaps, and applying it to their transformation processes. The team ensured that the evaluators understood the institutions' feedback and concerns, giving voice to their input and agency in the assessment process. This was important because HBCUs are often assessed inappropriately or in contextually insensitive methods.

Morehouse College engaged in increased data communication and transparency by requiring senior leaders to receive routine internal reports from the Office of Data Analytics, Institutional Research & Effectiveness (DIRE). These data reports supported and informed strategic planning and decision-making discussions. After audit findings of inconsistent graduation data and scheduling, Morehouse adopted the Appreciative Developmental Intrusive/Intentional Advising (ADISA) model to limit misadvising. Metric evaluation and campus community input have been vital in structure and process reform at the institution. Morehouse has expanded data activities because of its new appreciation for strong data and data governance processes, including data capabilities and reports to support decision-making and monitor institutional performance. These practices have shifted from simple processes to a culture of data and evidence-informed policy changes and new programs to push their data capabilities. Morehouse has published more extensive college fact books and is building to more self-service reports through Tableau dashboards. Since participating in the FS and engaging in this expansion of their data capabilities and use of data, there have been improvements in the 15/30 credit accumulation rate, 12/24 credit accumulation rate, credit completion ratio, and credentials conferred. By using the knowledge from engaging with AIR around understanding institutional data, institutions were able to make better informed and intentional decisions regarding their advising model, which helped improve their KPIs, specifically in credit accumulation and completion.

At the onset of the FS journey, Fayetteville State University (FSU) was already invested in using data in institutional structures, processes, and practices. This positioning well-suited the institution to further explore and make the value of data more dynamic, including predictive analytics among various functions and offices and institutional processes that play a role in student success, such as enrollment and advising.

FSU implemented a systematic data reporting process to supplement its student success efforts and ensure data-driven decision-making. The Offices of Institutional Research & Effectiveness created several reports, including survey data reports, the Operational Planning and Assessment Report, the Continuous Improvement Report, and annual report cards. FSU pushed forward data transparency by removing silos between colleges and departments and forming committees of key stakeholders to improve and increase efficiency and effectiveness. Likewise, high-impact and university-wide decision processes were structured with a collaborative, bottom-up approach. This restructuring and process change allowed for the contribution of various stakeholders and heightened data transparency among key persons across intersecting areas within the decision-making process. These initiatives included:

- **Linking Student Data Mart to FSU's Banner System**
- **Adopting self-service data exploration tool WebFOCUS**
- **Developing an Operation Planning and Assessment Report**
- **Developing a Continuous Improvement Report**

These initiatives allowed staff to easily access student data, individual departments to create their reports, academic units to measure their progress in several categories, and departments to assess their performance. FSU applied a theory of action through identifying the issue, taking the time to understand how students, staff, administrators, and faculty were experiencing the issue and what was and was not working, and then identifying how the various chains of action could be better coordinated and supported to engage in transformation. Through employing this theory of action, FSU saw bachelor's degree conferral rates improve by implementing these process changes. The institution's data transparency and governance approach matched with increased and more dynamic data reporting practices, allowing for more robust and transformative decision-making. The institution found that strengthening its data transparency and governance process could more acutely identify areas needing improvement and adjustment. This would ultimately lead to transformational change.
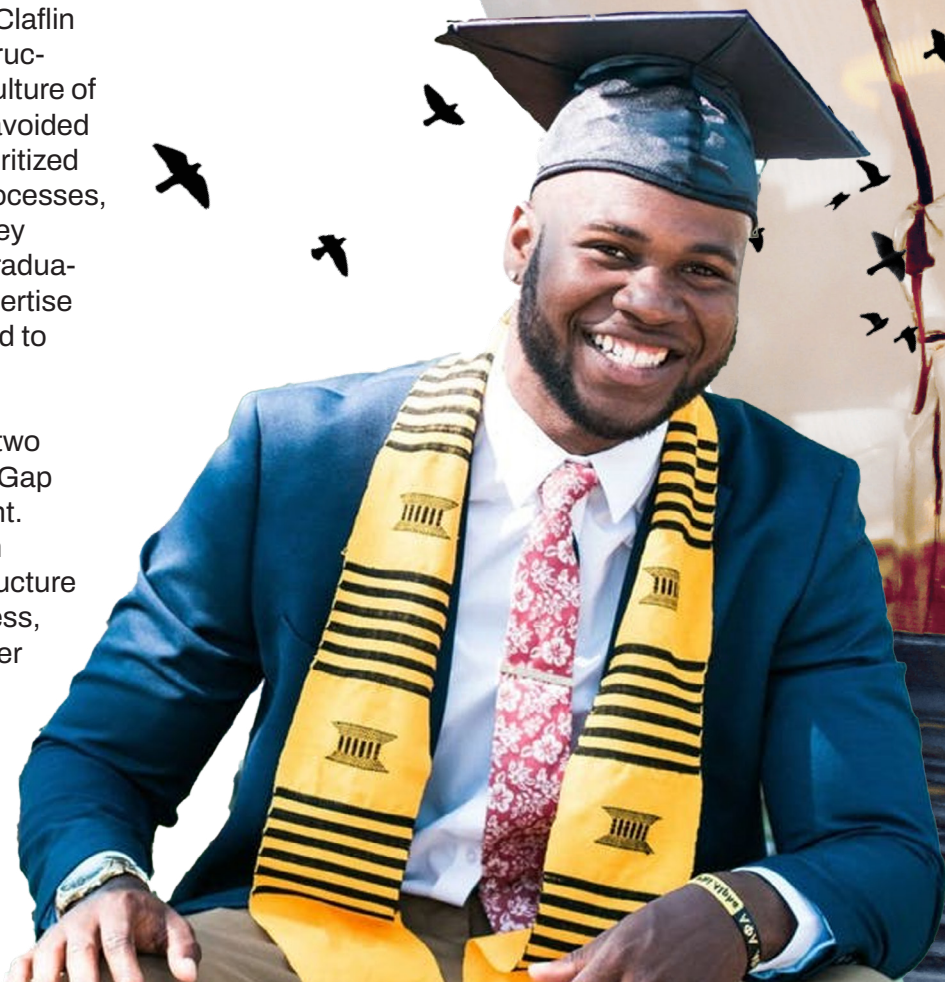
CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity Building examines how the intersections of various processes, offices, and resources can be strengthened and expanded to facilitate transformation. Areas such as institutional research, information technology, strategic finance, and human capital must support transformation and therefore must be interrogated. Institutions performed frank reviews of their current capacity for transformation and how their capacity could be improved by intercession from technical partners and the Intermediary Team. These discussions helped institutions identify capacity challenges and opportunities they may not have otherwise recognized. This practice helped institutions expand capacities to aid in their transformation.

Claflin University had been well-positioned for transformation for several years. Prior to participating in the FS, Claflin's leadership recognized the need to focus on various areas to shift outcomes and meet institutional growth and improvement goals. It began creating new positions to increase capacity, including a coordinator of instructional technology and a director of academic advising and student engagement to support advising initiatives. Claflin also established learning communities, restructured its advising model, and pushed for a culture of collaboration campus-wide. The university avoided hyper-focusing on one area and instead prioritized student success initiatives and improved processes, communication, and support by ensuring they worked together to increase retention and graduation rates. Claflin identified capacity and expertise gaps and attained outside support as needed to ensure successful implementation.

An example of this was their participation in two IT capacity services with the Ada Center: IT Gap Analysis and Advising Software Procurement. Participating in these services helped Claflin understand how strengthening its IT infrastructure and processes could improve student success, strengthening their student degree and career planning tools, digital learning technologies, and analytics and reporting tools. Though Claflin has been known as a leader in transformation, it used the lever of continuing to build capacity to push

forward a culture of institutional transformation that impacted student success. Since joining FS, the institution saw improvements in enrollment and bachelor's degrees conferred.

The four levers of process mapping, relationship building, capacity building, and data transparency and governance were how these institutions moved forward and contributed to their institutional transformations with support from the HBCU Intermediary team and partners.
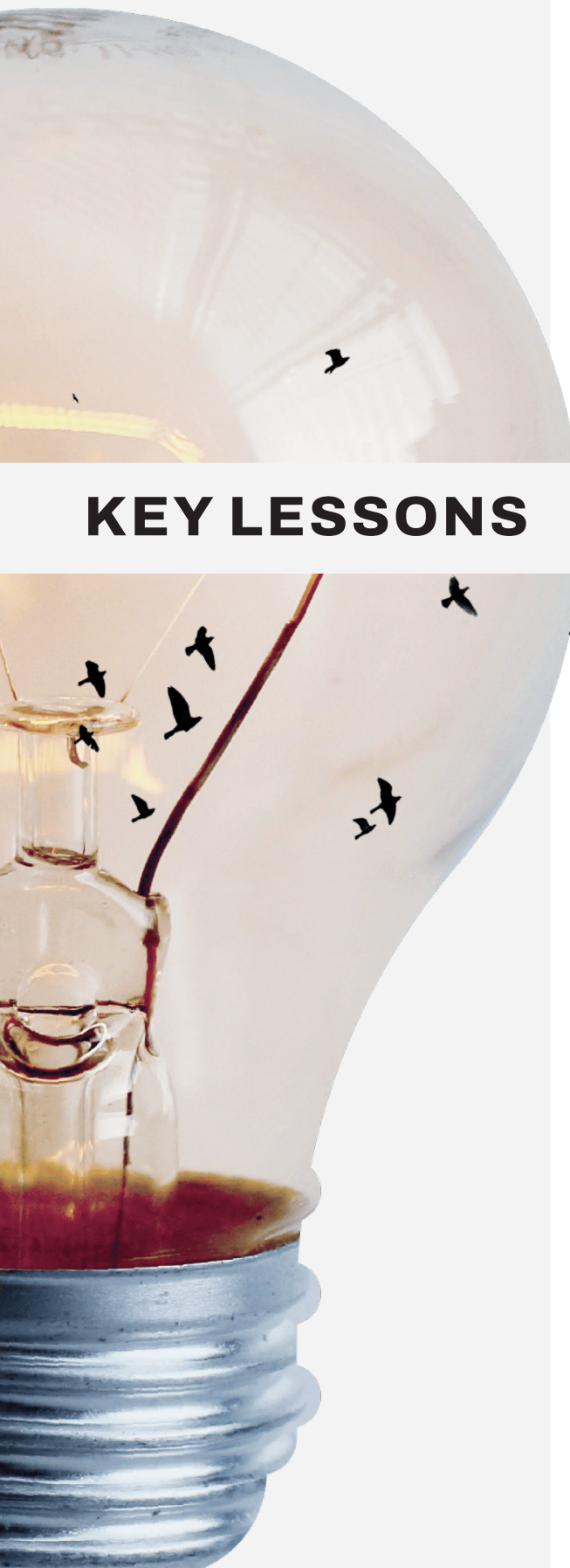
The HBCU cohort and the HBCU Intermediary Team have experienced an enlightening, empowering, and impactful journey as part of the Frontier Set and attained beneficial, evergreen knowledge regarding institutional transformation and transformative processes. These key lessons coalesced into three learning questions:

- **What causes transformation?**
- **What are the risks of transformation?**
- **How do people best contribute to transformation?**

Unearthing the answers to these learning questions provides insight into how this journey taught institutions about institutional transformation and how to bring it to their campuses.

WHAT CAUSES TRANSFORMATION?

The HBCU cohort learned that the catalysts to transformation could be internal, external, or a combination. Certain environmental changes such as funding models or market opportunities and demands forced some institutions to reevaluate their processes to ensure their outcomes positioned them well in the higher education marketplace. Other institutions closely examined their data or engaged in assessment to identify opportunities for transformation that would lead to increased student success. Some institutions experienced internal and external pressures, which motivated them to engage in institutional transformation. Though the initial spark may have been internal or external, further self-examination led institutions to understand that institutional transformation was caused by:

- **Assessing quantitative data while understanding underlying qualitative metrics and contributors**
- **Familiarity and direct connection to the challenges**
- **Use of consistent advising models throughout the campus**
- **Accountability**
- **Timely measurement and tracking of an initiative's success based on specific, student-related measures**
- **Responsiveness to ongoing changes in student population demographics**
- **Degree accumulation, job placement, and preparedness as collective measures of success**

KEY LESSONS

These catalysts would inspire the HBCUs to reevaluate their current outcomes and prompt them to engage in self-analysis that would aid in redefining goals and embarking upon a transformative process.

HOW DO PEOPLE BEST CONTRIBUTE TO TRANSFORMATION?

Dr. Thompson and the HBCU Intermediary Team began this learning process by building institutions' trust in their ability to build capacity and relationships. Dr. Thompson and her team supported the HBCUs by facilitating their access to needed service design and delivery. This lesson continued as Dr. Thompson positioned herself as a servant leader—a bridge between the HBCUs and the resources needed for their successful transformation. Her 5-pillar approach of atmosphere setting, navigating tensions, intentional listening, advocacy, and resource connection empowered the HBCU cohort to contribute in innovative yet authentic ways that promoted student success while staying true to the HBCU mission. Ultimately, the following are the key takeaways of how people best contribute to transformation:

- **Identifying and understanding individual strengths and skills**
- **Collectively understanding and supporting the enhancement of student success**
- **Communicating solution-based practices for adoption by others**
- **Ensuring departmental plans and individual roles connect to the overall strategic plan**
- **Ensuring transformation processes connect to the strategic plan and mission**
- **Establishing and assuring buy-in**
- **Embracing a common message**
- **Involving and empowering multiple stakeholders in the decision-making and implementation process**

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF TRANSFORMATION?

Some risks can stall or halt meaningful progress towards an institution's transformation goals in any transformation process. However, with such high stakes as student success, institutions need to identify these risks to mitigate them. Through this process, the institutions, as well as the HBCU Intermediary Team, identified the risks to transformation as:

- **Lack of adequate resources for sustainability (financial, infrastructure, etc.)**
- **Perceived risk to the historical preservation of unique student populations**
- **Individual burnout and capacity (time)**
- **The sacrifice of career advancement (i.e., spending summers teaching colleagues how to transition to online instruction instead of conducting research and publishing to advance personal career)**
- **Technological platforms' failure to integrate**
- **Relationship risk**
- **Institutional ability to address problems**
- **Fear of identity loss**
- **Resistance to change**
- **Changing too fast**
- **Lack of a plan to institutionalize transformation**
- **Lack of inclusion and diverse stakeholders**

In learning this lesson, the HBCUs acquired the skill set to engage in transformative processes that are unlikely to be unraveled or thwarted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In reflection on the key lessons learned and the accomplishments of the HBCU cohort, Dr. Thompson and the Intermediary Team suggest the following recommendations for future practice:

1. **Use the intermediary role as a key tool**

   The role of the intermediary was invaluable to the HBCU's success. Many participants shared praise and commendations for Dr. Thompson's support through the FS journey and her navigation through their transformative processes. It was not the role itself that made the impact. Instead, Dr. Thompson's specific approach to her role laid the foundation for the learning community. Dr. Thompson was technically an outsider to the HBCU community. However, her focus on atmosphere setting, navigating tensions, intentional listening, advocacy, and resource connection established trust between the intermediary and the institutions.

Dr. Thompson intentionally built a team of experts to support the cohort with specific needs. These team members were highly skilled and engaged In their work with the same approach to servant leadership as Dr. Thompson. Together, the HBCU intermediary and her team supported the institutional teams, advocated for their needs, and provided a platform and opportunity for them to voice concerns about the processes. The site leads all agreed Dr. Thompson was instrumental in their success. In future projects, the Foundation should consider intermediaries with a similar approach to servant leadership.

2. **Use the Intermediary team to facilitate collaboration and achieve continuous quality improvement**

   The HBCU cohort benefitted from the Intermediary Team, which possessed the skill sets to expertly facilitate relationship building, establish trust, and communicate effectively. Like the HBCU Intermediary, the Intermediary Team played a crucial role in fostering collaboration and aiding institutions to achieve Continuous Quality Improvement. The HBCU Intermediary Team consisted of highly skilled experts with complementary skill sets, which worked as a support system for both the intermediary and the institutions, modeled collaboration, and strategically and systematically fostered collaboration within the cohort.

3. **Creating space and allocating resources to support coming together**

   Site team leads noted that convening regularly and accessing resources to connect them between convenings was pivotal in their continued transformation processes. They valued being given the space and time to discuss their unique sector's mission, successes, and challenges in a safe and affirming environment. Several site leads mentioned how the convenings were the birthplace of many revelatory moments. These convenings were also spaces where participants could obtain support from the Technical Assistant and other team members. Aside from the convenings, the connection funds procured by Dr. Thompson were also lauded as instrumental in the cohort's ability to share information, build relationships, and learn from each other's processes. The space and resources for cohorts to meet and connect outside of larger convenings are important in creating collaborative spaces. This is especially important for institutional sectors and communities that have historically been marginalized and may be slow to build trust and exhibit transparency in larger, mixed sector groups.

4. **Engage in feedback processes**

   Constructive feedback throughout the FS process was an essential element to the success of the HBCU cohort and allowed participants to gain insight regarding their transformation processes, structures, and gaps in data. The site leads expressed the importance of being given the space and opportunity to provide reactions and feedback to assessments, data interpretation, and expectations. Institutional involvement in the feedback process was empowering and affirmed for the institutions they had a voice and support during this process. Regular feedback opportunities and processes should be built into the timeline activities in future projects. Additionally, these processes should allow for participation from grantees. This ensures that the work is collaborative, and grantees' concerns are being heard and addressed.

Trust would prove to be essential in the success of this HBCU cohort. This trust manifested in various ways. Trust needed to be established between the intermediary team and the cohort and between the individual institutions for the transparency and information sharing needed to advance transformation. Intermediaries, specifically those that work with institutional sectors that have been historically misrepresented and exploited, need to be equipped to facilitate trust and relationship building with and between the cohort. It is important to note that this will likely not be a linear process but rather circular and ongoing. However, it is the commitment to this process that aids institutions in sharing and embracing practices that accelerate transformation. This experience lays the foundation for more work regarding how intermediaries and institutional sector projects may be navigated to produce collaborative and individual institutional success.

CONCLUSION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are committed to a shared mission of empowerment as they uplift through the power of higher education. As societal and workforce development demands shift and higher education stakeholders increase their calls for accountability, higher education institutions must continue innovating and transforming. There is an imperative need for HBCUs to continue their legacy of transformative education. Through their engagement in the Frontier Set, these six HBCUs demonstrated the innovative and impactful ways this can be accomplished through relationship building, process mapping, and strategic planning.

A key component of this cohort's journey was that of Dr. Kathy Thompson as the HBCU Intermediary and the HBCU Intermediary Team. Through the 5-pillar approach of atmosphere setting, navigating tensions, intentional listening, advocacy, and resource connection, the team supported the HBCU cohort to achieve their goals. The FS HBCU cohort and the HBCU Intermediary journey point to how intentional approaches by intermediaries and deliberate commitment to processes and information sharing can produce transformative efforts with outcomes that move us closer to more equitable student success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TRANSFORMING
TOGETHER

THE HBCU FRONTIER SET EXPERIENCE