

# Black Student Borrowers: In Their Own Words

November 2021

The \$1.7 trillion student debt crisis impacts over 44 million families nationwide, and the burden of student loans falls particularly heavily on Black students. Further, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have also been underfunded throughout their histories, compounding the challenges for HBCU students who face financial challenges at both the familial and institutional levels.<sup>1</sup> These challenges often result in higher student debt burdens for students who attend HBCUs and relative difficulty in repayment for graduates.

This memo presents five key takeaways from a series of focus groups that was conducted online by Hart Research on behalf of the United Negro College Fund, the Center for Responsible Lending, and the Center for Community Capital at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>2</sup> The focus groups were conducted in December 2020 using “QualBoards,” an online multi-day, in-depth qualitative discussion platform. Three focus groups were conducted: One with Black current students with student debt (n=16), another with Black young alumni with student debt (n=16, ages 23–29), and a third with Black older alumni with student debt (n=14, ages 30–45). For each group, there was an equal distribution between participants who attended a HBCU and those who attended predominantly white institutions (PWIs). All quotes in this memo are taken from the focus group transcripts, and some have been lightly edited for clarity.

## Takeaways Include:

1. Borrowers are aware of the potential negative impacts of student loan debt and are worried about their future ability to repay, but need to take on debt in order to attend college.
2. Many student loan borrowers receive financial assistance from their families, and many also provide financial and other types of support to their families during college.
3. Student loan borrowers, especially current students, explained that they faced serious financial insecurity during college. Some reflected on the emergency financial support that their HBCUs provided to them.
4. Most respondents affiliated with HBCUs felt a profound sense of belonging at their schools, and many reflected upon mentors who cared about them and extracurriculars that helped them get connected on campus.
5. Student loan borrowers clearly expressed the negative impact that their student loans have on their lives, from mental health impacts to delays associated with savings, homeownership, and graduate school.

<sup>1</sup> Harris, A. 2021. *The State Must Provide: Why America's Colleges Have Always Been Unequal—and How to Set Them Right*. New York: Ecco Press.

<sup>2</sup> This memo is part of a project that includes a survey and focus groups that compare the financial experiences of current and former Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with their Black peers at predominately white institutions (PWIs) as well as with their white peers. The survey was completed by the African American Research Collaborative for the United Negro College Fund, the Center for Responsible Lending, and the Center for Community Capital at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Key takeaways are detailed in a topline memo, and include information related to food insecurity (many current student borrowers report skipping meals because there wasn't enough money for food), family resource sharing (many Black borrowers typically both receive and provide financial support from and to their families), differences based on the sex of the student borrower (Black women typically receive less from family, take on more student loan debt, and have more difficulty in repayment than their male peers), and strong support for policy solutions such as student debt cancellation.

## In Their Own Words: Takeaways from Student Borrowers

- 1. Students are aware of the potential negative impacts of student loan debt and are worried about future ability to repay.** Many participants displayed a good working understanding of the federal student loan system and made well-informed decisions about minimizing their debt burden while also expressing that student debt was “the only option” that could allow them to pay for college.



**What mostly worries me is being able to pay back my debt.** This was not something I had thought about until this year since I am a senior. However, I am worried that I will not be able to pay back my student loans. I am having trouble finding a job currently because of the pandemic, and I worry it will stay this way. I also just worry about the state of our economy in general; everything is so expensive. College has been a big investment for me both financially and timewise. My fear is leaving college and not knowing how to properly pay back loans and spend money on myself as well.

-23, Female, Public HBCU



I knew I would eventually have to rely on student loans to help cover my expenses, but I didn't necessarily want to take just any loans. **I didn't want to have too much money to pay back, so I relied on financial aid, grants, and my own money before actually taking a loan.** I decided I would take a subsidized loan before unsubsidized because of not being charged an interest rate while in school.

-22, Female, Public HBCU



**I took out my financial aid student loans because I was told I didn't have any other option,** and I was short for the school year that evolved into me taking out too much money and living off the funds. I come from a poor background, so I literally applied for federal private subsidized and unsubsidized loans; anything and everything I could get some money from to attend college, I was on board. I knew I had no other option but to take out loans.

-29, Male, Public HBCU



Initially I did not want to take out any loans for college, and I didn't for the first two years. It wasn't until I transferred to the school I'm at now, where the tuition is much more, that **I had no choice but to take out a loan.** I spoke to my academic advisor, and she broke down all of the loan options for me, and I decided to take out a subsidized loan.

-22, Female, For-Profit Institution



I was guided on how-to take-out student loans from my parents. I came to the decision to take these loans out because I needed them. At the time, I did not believe that I could pay for college upfront. I mean, who realistically could? I only took out federal loans, as that was what I was taught to take out. Both subsidized and unsubsidized. I took out both because I needed both to cover all of the costs and still have a small stipend to work with. **The thought to never take out student loans never occurred to me. It seemed like a pipe dream, to be honest.**

-26, Male, Private HBCU



The first time I had to take out loans, it was a Parent PLUS loan, so I had to get my mother involved. She wasn't too thrilled about me having to go from going to school for free to taking out loans, especially loans in her name, so it took me a while to convince her to agree to sign. I haven't needed a Parent PLUS loan since then; all of my loans are in my name. **I have always taken out the maximum amount in the loans because the extra money that's left over gets returned to me, and I use that money to pay bills.** I only have federal loans for two reasons: lower interest and bad credit.

-21, Female, PWI



**I have never taken a break but did consider doing so to avoid accumulating debt.** Those thoughts of taking a break to avoid debt did not last long, and by my sophomore year, I felt it was too late for that.

-21, Female, Public HBCU

**2. When asked to reflect on the flow of financial support during college, many participants reflected upon the help they both received and provided.** The survey associated with this project similarly revealed that almost one in three (30%) of student loan borrowers affiliated with HBCUs report providing financial support to family members when they were in college and just over one in three (36%) report receiving financial assistance from their families to pay for college.<sup>3</sup>



I had an expectation that I would have to take student loans out to afford college. My parents from before high school always emphasized the importance of attending college. For that reason, **they committed to financially supporting me and taking the bulk of the expenses for college.** Because of this and our financial state at the time, I was able to get federal subsidized and unsubsidized loans. We weren't focused on really "this loan option vs this;" it was more so whatever logical loan plan we could qualify for and made sense, then that's what we would choose for me to be able to afford college.

-23, Male, Private HBCU



Whatever my twin sister needed help with as far as lending her money, I was always more than willing because she would watch my son while I was in school and take him to his speech and occupational therapy sessions and really fostered a great learning environment for him at home. **I helped my mom pay rent monthly, as well as being the primary cook and the primary cleaner of the house.** And should I add in that I provided support to my own son? Even with working full-time and going to school full-time, I still made time to bond with my son and take care of his basic needs.

-28, Female, Public HBCU



**I would lend my parents money to pay for bills while I was at home.** For some reason, I was the only child that worked while in college. I did watch my younger brother when I could as well.

-25, Female, Public HBCU



My sister had a son [when she was] in nursing school, and I always had him at night while she was studying. **I also took my mom to radiation four days a week, chemotherapy twice a week, or to the ER when she didn't feel well.** I also stayed with her in the hospital when she got admitted. I also helped with my little sister, who was newly in high school when I stayed at college.

-27, Female, Public HBCU



**During undergrad, I had to help my father navigate his job search, as he is not digitally literate.** I also would support my sister who was in high school at the time. I also helped to process all the bills and pay them online for my family.

-23, Male, Public HBCU



I would help out here and there with the money I was receiving from work study once a month. If my family needed something like a water bill paid or oil for heat, **I would do what I could in order to help them with whatever they needed at that time.**

-45, Male, Private HBCU

<sup>3</sup> Center for Responsible Lending, United Negro College Fund, UNC Center for Community Capital, and African American Research Collaborative. October 2021. *National Survey Shows Strong Support for Student Loan Cancellation Among Black Students as Underfunding of HBCUs Compounds Students' Financial Challenges.*

**3. Many participants reflected on the financial precarity they experienced while in school, and some reported that they received emergency financial support from their institutions.** The survey associated with this project similarly revealed that more than two in five (44%) current Black students at HBCUs report skipping meals because there wasn't enough money for food.<sup>4</sup>



My personal financial situation is decent. It's always great to have more, but I am pretty great at budgeting and saving. I will say just a couple of weeks ago I had about a \$2,500 financial gap at my university after extending all of my loans. I was so worried as to what I was going to do. **I reached out to many alumni and one of the faculty members I knew, and I got a call within two weeks that my scholarship increased, and I was now covered.** I was ecstatic. With that being covered and being able to register for my last semester, it took a lot of weight off of my shoulders. At this moment, I continue to save and budget and look forward to being more stable when truly beginning my career. I still may worry about the future, but I trust myself to live below my means and not frivolously spend what I do have. As well as [having] faith and hope that I will always have more than enough.

-21, Female, Public HBCU



This past semester was the closest to a financial emergency I ever had. **I was working on trying to cover an unexpected medical cost when I realized I had a financial gap even after accepting my loans.** I tried creating a payment plan, but I had to pay \$1,105 every month until May 2021 because both semesters are calculated when creating a plan. That caused new stress and concern for me, especially because I needed to register for classes. I decided to reach out to alumni chapters asking for a hardship request or any other resources they could lead to me. I also spoke with a faculty member who I have known for quite some time, and he reached out to who he knew in the right places. I prayed and tried to give my stress and worries over to God. I eventually received a call that my scholarship was increased, and my balance is now covered.

-21, Female, Public HBCU



While I was a student at my previous university, **I ran out of food to eat.** Luckily, I was able to get essentials from the campus food pantry.

-21, Female, Public PWI

<sup>4</sup> Center for Responsible Lending et al., October 2021.

**4. Many respondents who attended HBCUs reflected on the positive educational experiences they had in college.** Many shared that they felt a strong sense of belonging on campus, had mentors who cared about them, and were involved in extracurricular activities.<sup>5</sup>



My college is a special place. A community of black men that celebrate our diversity as a group. **I felt a belonging from the minute I walked on campus.** This was a place designed for me because you could exist however you wanted there.

-37, Male, Private HBCU



Yes, I do have a professor that actually cares. He's real cool, too, and not like many professors who treat you like a student but **he actually wants to see me do something in this world.** He has helped me with my resume and applying for [an] internship.

-22, Male, Public HBCU



From my first day and ever since, I felt a sense of belonging and that I mattered there. There was a strong sense that you were seen, heard, and understood on levels of communication that were very subtle. A gesture as small [as] a certain nod or small vocal inflection carried information that everyone could recognize because of its familiarity as part of our shared culture. It was like being surrounded by extended family all the time. **It was so great not having to code-switch, which allowed for communication to be rich and for genuine and strong community to be created.** Clubs and interest groups were created for students to explore and connect with others that shared their interests. Many social clubs were on campus [and] specifically geared towards establishing bonds between upperclassmen and new students from various areas of study.

-29, Male, Private HBCU



I felt a total sense of belonging, perhaps because I went to an HBCU. Although I only knew a few people from my hometown at the school, being surrounded by all African American students made me feel welcome almost immediately. An example that comes to mind is during the first week when registration is taking place, which can be quite overwhelming for freshman. As I was sitting in the gym looking lost and confused, another student who was a senior came over and asked if I needed help. This made me feel like a sense of community, as a student whom I never met before approached me to offer help. The school also helped with this as they paired up roommates based on home geographical region, which helped you identify with a stranger that you would be sharing a room with. I never once felt out of place or that I did not belong at the school during my four years there. **It was a very welcoming atmosphere that embraced every student, and we all felt like it was one big family.**

-43, Male, Private HBCU



I had a professor that I believed was my mentor. She was one of my key professors as a health science major and ensuring I was on track for applying to graduate school. Additionally, office talks always somehow turned into checkups. **This professor had a passion for health-care and made sure that we knew our information, as well as having the knowledge to advocate for our health, especially African American health.**

-25, Female, Public HBCU

<sup>5</sup> For more information and examples of how positive educational experiences are defined and to see related results from the nationwide survey, see: Center for Responsible Lending, United Negro College Fund, UNC Center for Community Capital, and African American Research Collaborative. October 2021. *HBCUs Provide Unique and Positive Learning Environment for Black Student Loan Borrowers.*



Yes, one of the doctoral students in my lab who is also in the clinical health program has been helping me and just listening when I need it. I need to work on restructuring my beliefs and getting more perspective on what was really happening. One of my professors has noted a shift in my performance, and he [is] always there to chat. **He understands me and really believes in my potential to do great things.** Others have helped me realize that it will take time and that's ok.

Male, 22, Public HBCU



At the beginning of the pandemic, I suffered severe anxiety and depression for 90 days. I fell behind on assignments, moved into a new space, and started a new job within that same time. **My professors provided so much support with assisting me with completing my work;** I managed to pass all of my courses last semester and complete a summer class. Things are significantly better now.

Female, 22, Public HBCU



He was like a father to many of us in the theatre department. **He would take us under his wing and provide us with some of the most crucial advice for what we were going through in our lives at the time, challenging our beliefs and assumptions while reassuring us about our ability to do good in the world and affirming our value as people and artists.** He would ask questions that showed us where our thinking was flawed or limited, then listen to us patiently as we worked out the solution to our problem. I worked as his apprentice twice while completing my studies, and he helped groom me into the person I am today. His door was always open to us.

-29, Male, Private HBCU



My first day on campus felt like an episode of the old popular sitcom "A Different World." Everyone looked like me! It was a different experience than high school. Not only did the students look like me but the instructors and administrators did as well. I felt a sense of belonging meeting people who were also from my home state. It felt like a community because I quickly learned how to determine where everyone was from—accent, dialect, style, etc. **There were so many different clubs and campus activities that fit my interests.** Upperclassmen were all over campus helping new students who may have been lost. It felt like we are all in this together. I never felt, like, alone beginning my journey.

-35, Female, Public HBCU



For the most part, I wouldn't trade my college or experience. [W]ould've done a few things differently, but I had a beautiful experience. **At an HBCU, I felt like I could be my true, authentic self.** I met so many different types of black people. I felt like I belonged. There was a place for every kind of black person you could think of. Band, choir, student government, fraternities and sororities, nerds, anime, athletes, political and religious groups. There was literally a place for everyone to be themselves.

-29, Female, Private HBCU



**5. Finally, many respondents expressed that their student loan debt had a large and negative impact on their financial well-being.** Some borrowers reported feelings of anxiety and even hopelessness related to their loans. Others discussed the impact that their debt has had on their ability to buy homes, go back to school, and save for the future.



**My ability to pay back my student loans is always on my mind. Not paying them back or defaulting on them can affect job prospects, credit scores, and my ability to qualify for things in the future that require a credit check.** It's a source of stress and anxiety but more in a subconscious sense than being something at the forefront of my mind. People end up being old and gray before paying off their student loans, and while I don't want that to be my reality, I think it says a lot that many of us are in the mindset that we will be paying them off for a good while.

-28, Female, Public HBCU



It has been very difficult for me to make student loan payments because I now have a family that I support. **My student loans keep me from saving as much as I would like.**

-33, Male, Public HBCU



**I think the only way I'll be able to pay my loan in full is to get into a type of loan forgiveness program.** Realistically, I'm only paying on the interest and not even the principal. I'm not going to pay more per month so I can hopefully pay them off because I have other obligations. I have doubts because I know adults who are still paying their student loans. When you hear that someone is debt-free, it sounds almost unbelievable. You hear this so much you think, well I'll be paying forever just like them.

-24, Female, Public PWI



I would definitely have more money in savings right now [if I didn't have my student loans]! **Student loans drove my credit into the ground for a long time** because I had a lot of private loans which are VERY hard to restructure compared to federal loans. I would have also not stayed at some jobs as long as I did because I wouldn't have had that nagging burden hanging over my head.

-35, Male, Public PWI



**I would be preparing to buy a home and paying off debt a lot quicker without student loans.** I'd have lots more money saved for sure; they affect your credit and many decisions you make.

-29, Female, Private HBCU



I don't worry about them per se; I acknowledge that I have a ton of debt and that **I'll be paying forever it seems like.** At some point when I can get higher in my career then my payments will seem minuscule. Currently it is a stress because I had goals of moving out and owning my first home by 25. It's not looking too good since I'll be 25 this coming year. I have to just reevaluate and change my goal.... I know it will happen; just not now.

-24, Female, Public PWI





I worry that I will never get them paid off due to interest accruing and having to focus on other bills. **It is a debt that does give me anxiety thinking about them and how long they'll be around.**

-28, Female, Public HBCU



I pay for the majority of my education with student loans. **At least once a semester I worry about the amount of loans I'm accumulating,** and I wonder if school is really for me.

-21, Female, Public PWI



It certainly heightens my anxiety when looking such a large number. I am not a homeowner, but I would like to be. I feel so discouraged. **I want to go to law school, but I know there's no way I could ever afford it.** Overall, I just feel like I'll never be able to repay my loans and won't be able to achieve the things I had really hoped.

-35, Female, Public HBCU



The financial stress is very difficult at this time. I'm trying to pay down on my student loans, yet **I feel like I'm barely scratching the surface** with how much I pay monthly. I want to move out and get my own space again, yet it's difficult with my student loan debt. I struggle with balancing paying off debts, but still trying to save for my future, college (graduate school), and having a general emergency fund.

-25, Female, Public HBCU



Well, I'm stuck paying them back!!! But it's ok because without them I wouldn't have survived the worst years of my life!!! **But if I didn't have the loans, I would feel much better about grad school and the loans I may have to take out for that.** I DO know that in the future my son won't make the same mistakes I did.

-27, Female, Public HBCU



**The student loan repayment is a huge priority in my life.** I've had family members default on their loans and had their wages garnished due to failure to pay their loans on time or at all. I would try my best to pay the loan. Potentially work out an arrangement to pay half one week and the rest the other. I get creative when trying to ensure my bills are paid on time.

-25, Female, Public HBCU



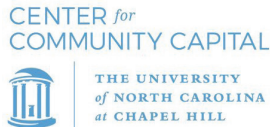
**They do present a significant financial burden on my life.** I think [one] of the biggest things is when they are determining what your monthly payment will be, there is no consideration for other factors in your life such as other bills. There have been times where I opted to put my loans in general forbearance in the event that I was in a position where I may not be able to make the payment and to avoid going into default.

-28, Female, Public HBCU



**The United Negro College Fund** mission is to build a robust and nationally-recognized pipeline of African American students who, because of UNCF support, become highly-qualified college graduates and to ensure that our network of 37 HBCUs is a respected model of best practice in moving students to and through college. UNCF served as the project lead.

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