



**Lumina**<sup>™</sup>  
FOUNDATION

# Adult Learner Initiative External Report



JANUARY 2024



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UNCF Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute





# Adult Learner Initiative External Report

## November 2023

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## Introduction

Since 2000, the Lumina Foundation has worked arduously to change the educational and economic landscape of the United States of America. Lumina’s commitment to its values—honesty, spirit of collaboration, and connection building—has proven integral to its capacity to work alongside various national and local non-profits to ensure that students have access to and the option to attain a quality postsecondary education. To support and enhance educational attainment in the United States, the Lumina Foundation established a national goal of 60% of adults earning a high-quality credential by 2025. To achieve this goal, the Lumina Foundation expanded its funding to the adult learner population in 2017 by establishing the Adult Promise Initiative. The organization recognizes and values diversity, equity, and inclusion in its work and understands how minority-serving institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), are integral to the proliferation of Black adult learners. HBCUs are small yet mighty, as these institutions comprise just three percent of American colleges and universities. However, they conferred 13% of Black bachelor’s degrees and 5% of Black master’s degrees (NCES, n.d.). In recognition of the tremendous impact of HBCUs on the Black community, these institutions must be involved in helping Lumina meet its 2025 goal by investing in its programming and initiatives.

Recognizing the tremendous impact HBCUs have on the educational attainment of Black Adult Learners, we must identify their curricular and co-curricular best practices that are critical to the academic success of this population. This report will provide an overview of these best practices for faculty, staff, and students of the five HBCUs participating in the Lumina Adult Learner Initiative grant.

The organization of this report will include a brief review of the Adult Learner Initiative grant and its components, followed by the best practices frequently discussed among faculty, staff, and students participating in the grant and recommendations. We will then review Lumina’s philanthropic approach to the grant. Lastly, how staff and administrators define capacity-building for the adult learner population will be examined.



## Program Goals and Objectives

Lumina established the HBCU Adult Learner Initiative (ALI) to strengthen the institutional capacity of the following five HBCUs' ability to implement policies, programs, and initiatives for Black adult learners:

- Elizabeth City State University, Elizabeth City, North Carolina
- Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, North Carolina
- Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina
- Winston-Salem State University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

ALI, a two-year, \$2 million grant, focused on improving the educational experiences of Black adult learners at their respective institutions in one or more of the following areas:

- Strengthening Data Infrastructure
- Strengthen Onboarding Processes for Adult Learners
- Supporting Adult-Centered Student Services
- Deepening Institutional Actors Understanding of the Adult Learner Population

## Program Components

These selected institutions implemented various resources and support systems to meet the grant-related goals and objectives. During the two-year grant cycle, five institutions engaged former HBCU presidents, scholars, and advisory consultants to guide the project. The most notable feature of the Adult Learner Initiative was the institution's engagement with the Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education (CIPE), led by Dr. Kathy H. Thompson. The institutions maintained monthly in-person or virtual check-ins to facilitate capacity-building efforts for their Black adult learners, focusing on process mapping and strategic planning.



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## Philanthropic Approach

The Lumina Foundation’s Adult Learner Initiative in North Carolina is an intentional philanthropic effort due to its participatory approach to grantmaking. This process contrasts the grantmaking we have observed HBCUs participate in in the past, outside of UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative™. Rather than create the goals and objectives of an investment based solely on the foundation’s strategy and content knowledge of the grant makers, participatory grantmaking is when a funder, in this case, the Lumina Foundation, seeks to listen to the institutions first. After digesting their findings from “listening” the grant makers co-create an investment that is informed by both the strategy and needs of the population that will be served. This approach creates space in philanthropy to bring equity, and parity to funding, while building trust among HBCUs and foundations. This is particularly important when the aim of the foundation is to learn from an investment through assessment and evaluation. HBCUs are 1) more likely to apply to these opportunities and 2) welcome sharing their data with external partners because that investment is a partnership—lessening the perceived risk that funders or outsiders will use this information to handicap their prospect of future funding.

To achieve this, Lumina began the grantmaking process by speaking with multiple stakeholders prior to announcing this investment through a “listening tour.” This included the following:

- **Speaking extensively with all the current presidents of North Carolina HBCUs on the experiences of their adult learners**
- **Speaking to select former presidents of North Carolina HBCUs to gather their insight on the landscape of higher education in the state and their efforts during their tenures.**
- **Seeking the guidance of content experts and scholars on HBCUs about adult learners, capacity building, change management, and funding at HBCUs.**
- **Consulted with other funders and philanthropies in the field on their grantmaking, philanthropic strategies funding higher education and HBCUs, and best practices.**

After this “listening tour” Lumina distilled these learnings and shifted from a request for proposals (RFP) to a request for information (RFI) to make accessibility to this investment more open for institutions they were aware may not have the capacity to provide ten or more-page proposal. Instead, the RFI contained three short-form questions that the Lumina staff evaluated with added context from the listening tour. This approach created a high response rate, and Lumina received RFIs from all 10 of North Carolina’s accredited HBCUs.

The RFI process resulted in ten of the institutions being invited to submit full proposals and a proposal review process that included Lumina staff, two HBCU scholars, and external HBCU stakeholders. Ultimately, the five institutions described in the evaluation were funded with no institutions withdrawing from the funding. In the end Lumina funded half of the state’s HBCUs.



**This report provides an overview of best practices discussed across the campuses amongst faculty and staff. The student focus groups' candidness provided myriad ways institutions can further enhance their campus experience.**

## Adult Learner Best Practices

The faculty, staff, and student focus groups organized various best practices that assisted in improving Black adult learners' curricular and co-curricular educational experience. This report provides an overview of best practices discussed across the campuses amongst faculty and staff. The student focus groups' candidness provided myriad ways institutions can further enhance their campus experience.

### Faculty

- 1. Integrate technology literacy into the course curriculum.** Recognizing the diverse technological literacy of this population, faculty members integrated technology training into the classroom environment or provided them with information on resources to hone their skills.
- 2. Embed Black adult learners' experiences in classroom discussion.** Faculty encouraged and demonstrated greater value for Black adult learners by encouraging them to share their experiences to add depth to classroom discussions.
- 3. Embed more inclusive attendance and assignment submission policies in the syllabi.** The insight faculty gained from engaging with Black adult learners encouraged them to think differently about policies and practices, such as assignment submission deadlines and classroom attendance, ultimately leading to more flexible and inclusive practices that accommodate the needs of this demographic.
- 4. Incorporate a variety of evaluations.** The faculty used a combination of evaluations to measure the Black adult learners' comprehension skills.



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## Staff

- 1. Create a communal space for adult learners to participate in.** Staff and administrators implemented various policies and programming to address the barriers to the persistence and retention of Black adult learners. Across the landscape, a common theme was creating communal gatherings for this population. Each institution cultivated a distinct space for adult learners to engage with each other.
- 2. Assign dedicated personnel.** Across each institution, an individual at the Director, Associate Director, or higher level was available to provide support. Creating a liaison for Black adult learners created advocacy channels and support systems for this population.
- 3. Establish an adult learner orientation.** A standard best practice to streamline services for Black adult learners is the creation of a Black Adult Learner orientation, either virtual or in-person, to introduce this population to the variety of resources and support systems available.
- 4. Standardize an adult learner definition for data purposes.** This definition was embedded in admission applications and their institutions' systems to define and track this demographic and establish a data set for analysis.

## Students

- 1. Faculty flexibility and engagement are essential for Black adult learner's classroom success.** Students identified characteristics of a positive classroom experience, which consisted of faculty members who were engaged and available to assist virtually or in person. This more positive approach provided flexibility for classroom assignments, having and maintaining office hours, acknowledging and valuing their experiences in classroom discussions, and embedding multiple assessments to measure this population's knowledge comprehension.
- 2. Hire personnel whose purpose is to meet and advocate for the needs of Black Adult Learners.** Across all five institutions, Black adult learners described how critical having an advocate was in their educational experience. They found having a representative at the Director or Associate direction incredibly beneficial in creating programming, informing them of scholarship deadlines, and liaising between them and other offices.
- 3. Create more adult-learner-friendly student programming.** Across each student focus group, the Black adult learners provided various ways that their respective institutions can create an engaging experience outside of the classroom. For many students, their institution needed to make their current co-curricular programming more inclusive. Such an approach consists of establishing an adult learner-student organization, informing this population about events within an appropriate timeframe, and providing financial aid for this demographic.



**Across all five institutions, Black adult learners described how critical having an advocate was in their educational experience.**





## Recommendations

The five HBCUs in this grant initiative have compiled a comprehensive set of best practices for inclusion in other higher education institutions' curricular and co-curricular programs and policies. Drawing on their experience with Black adult learners, they have outlined a series of recommendations to enhance the educational journey for adult learners across the board.

- 1 Include adult learners in the strategic plan.** Colleges and universities should rethink their curricular and co-curricular policies and programming with the adult population in mind. This consists of reviewing their strategic plan to ensure this demographic is included in key strategic initiatives.
- 2 Fund positions and offices that center on the needs of Adult Learners.** The adult learner population's college experience is unique. Establishing an office and leadership team to advocate for this population's needs creates advocates who can prioritize adult learner programming. The expertise of this office and leadership team should be valued and included in critical strategic development initiatives.
- 3 Encourage cross-collaboration amongst departments.** Cross-collaboration is essential in meeting the unique needs of adult learners. For example, departments such as admissions, financial aid, and advising should work collaboratively to onboard this population successfully. Once onboarded, cross-collaboration amongst student and academic affairs is critical to ensure that student affairs services and courses are available outside of traditional campus hours.





Several best practices were observed in this investment. They include:

**Funding technical assistance to ‘walk hand and glove’ with the institutions.** This investment funding a technical assistance partner who supported the change management and thought processes of the institutions. Through professional development, community building meetings, process map exercises, and site visits, the technical assistance partner became a sounding board and translator for the institutions. With this act, Lumina decentralized its power as the grantor and depended on the technical assistance provider to guide its learning with the institutions.

**Engaging and funding multiple stakeholders throughout the investment timeline to ensure parity between the grantor and the grantee.** To provide additional parity in perspectives and hierarchy of power, scholars on HBCUs were hired to give their feedback through monthly engagements with the funder, technical assistance, and the evaluator. This ensured that no voice was louder than the other in the process of (1) learning how to support HBCUs best and (2) determining if adjustments needed to be made in engagement with or funding for these institutions. Funding these scholarly voices, often Black and Brown, helped support the purpose-driven labor and highlight underacknowledged scholarship on HBCUs.

**Continual engagement with the institutions to monitor the progress and impact of the investment.** Lumina had monthly meetings with the ALI investment team (technical assistance, evaluators, and HBCU scholars) and the HBCUs met with technical assistance quarterly with site teams the first year. The second year, to assist with support, the technical assistance met with all HBCU teams monthly as a cohort. This assisted with ensuring that Lumina had the tools to advocate for this investment throughout their organization and pivot support when needed. Most importantly, it helped to build trust with the ALI investment team and the HBCUs. Notwithstanding, continual feedback systems can be informative for growth, new investment approaches, and communication—this is a sensitive use of human capital due to the size of this investment and those similar to it. If you consider that fact that capacity building grants are being deployed to build human capital and institutional resources, meeting on a monthly and quarterly bases to update external stakeholders of progress, ideate on change management to improve student success, and satisfy the needs of the grantor can drain more resources from an institution than intended. Moreover, time spent in meetings can subtract from the resources staff and faculty must give to the student population being served.



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## Capacity-Building Through the Lens of HBCUs

In addition to the research questions that guide this initiative, FDPRI has collaborated closely with Lumina Foundation's strategy directors for student success and research and evaluation. This partnership focuses on developing a deep understanding of HBCUs' approaches to capacity-building, a core component of both UNCF's and Lumina's missions. Therefore, staff and administrators participating in the focus groups at all five HBCUs were asked to define capacity-building, its components, and its implementation. The HBCU staff and administrators' capacity-building definition centered on institutional infrastructure that provides resources and support in an efficient, effective, and supportive manner.

The staff and administrators identified various elements needed in the capacity-building process. Elements discussed frequently amongst the groups were:

- Establishing a data infrastructure to assist in policy and procedure design
- Competency development/professional development
- Internal and external collaboration
- Having an institutional shared vision
- Human capital

- 1 Data gained from strategic infrastructures provided insight into the educational experiences of Black adult learners.** The support institutions received through the HBCU ALI provided the funding and professional development necessary to assist institutions in administering the CAEL survey or a self-administered survey to understand their institutions' Black adult learner populations. Their engagement in this process resulted in the institutions standardizing an adult learner definition and creating a category within their system to identify this population for easy analysis and to design and implement policies and initiatives inclusive of adult learners.
- 2 Cross-collaboration is critical in capacity-building.** An essential component of this cross-collaboration is the need for campus executive-level administrators to assist in embedding adult learners in their institutions' strategic plans. This approach will reverberate across the campus and aid in building the necessary cross-collaborative network among various departments.
- 3 Faculty and staff participation in strategic professional development was viewed as critical in assisting these institutions in building their capacity to meet the educational needs of Black adult learners.** Staff and administrators viewed professional development as a catalyst for cross-collaboration amongst various departments. Strategic professional development geared towards adult learners is crucial for shifting the organizational culture and enhancing the competence of staff, administrators, and faculty in serving this demographic.
- 4 Increase student personnel to meet the holistic needs of Black adult learners.** Human capital was needed to assist the institutions in streamlining processes critical to the educational success of Black adult learners. Staff and faculty mentioned the need for more faculty, academic advisors, admission counselors, and advisors were critical to creating a supportive educational environment for this population.
- 5 Established a shared institutional vision that includes the recruitment, enrollment and matriculation of Black adult learners.** Administrators should establish a shared vision that prioritizes the needs of Black adult learners, which is manifested by institutions earmarking funding to meet this population's needs, including this population in their institutional strategic planning, and requiring each department to review and change their current policies and initiatives to be more inclusive of the Black adult learner population.



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