Design Insights:
Early Impact from UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative

January 2021
A publication series by the Education Design Lab
The Education Design Lab (Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners’ experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education and connecting learners to economic mobility. The Lab believes that human-centered design allows colleges and universities to map and galvanize their existing strengths to meet the needs of the students that they serve. The Lab’s process also shows higher education leaders how to consider the needs of employers, using the curriculum and program design as a gateway to make skills more visible to students and employers alike.

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from projects led and supported by the Lab as part of the Learner Revolution. This series offers a glimpse into the Lab’s human-centered design approach to make learning visible, portable, affordable, flexible, and relevant.

About UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative + the ACCELERATE Design Challenge

UNCF is missioned to build a robust and nationally-recognized pipeline of under-represented students who, because of UNCF support, become highly-qualified college graduates and to ensure that our network of member institutions is a respected model of best practice in moving students to and through college. UNCF launched the Career Pathways Initiative with the generous support of the Lilly Endowment back in 2015. The Initiative includes 24 historically and predominantly-Black colleges and universities; each serves as a pilot site for a myriad of scalable programs designed to prepare Black graduates to pursue meaningful careers.

The Career Pathways Initiative was developed on a three-pronged approach to addressing unemployment and underemployment fueled by systemic racism:

- **Guided Pathways** - maximize credit accumulation, progress towards completion, and pipelines into meaningful careers
- **Integrated Co-curricular Engagement** - academic and career activities to promote professional and personal development
- **Curricular Enhancement** - review and revision of the core curriculum to “equip students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet market demands”

Through this ground-breaking initiative, institutions have been working over the past 7 years to forge sustainable pathways into employment and building greater capacity for innovation and long-term transformation.

UNCF partnered with the Lab to launch the ACCELERATE Design Challenge, which worked with 14 of the 24 participating UNCF institutions over a two year period to accelerate the work of institutional teams through an accelerated design process to build out concepts, launch pilots, and integrate feedback into programs.
The ACCELERATE Cohort

Dillard University, Florida Memorial University, Huston-Tillotson University, Jarvis Christian College, Lemoyne-Owen College, Morehouse College, Norfolk State University, Oakwood University, Rust College, Talladega College, Tennessee State University, Tougaloo College, the University of West Alabama, and Xavier University of Louisiana
Contents

5  Foreword
   A Note by Ed Smith-Lewis

6  Introduction
   Why it Matters to Design with HBCUs + PBIs

7  Case Studies
   8  Norfolk State University
   10  Xavier University
   12  The Carolina Cluster
   14  Spelman College

16  Conclusion
    Building off of the Strengths of HBCUs + PBIs
A Note By Ed Smith-Lewis

Executive Director, Institute for Capacity Building, UNCF

Like most enterprises, higher education institutions are not immune to external forces that negatively or positively impact their business models.

Changes in student demographics, technology, and federal, state, and local policies are all pushing institutions to transform to meet the increasing expectations of students, the need for greater institutional efficiency, and the desire to articulate their return on investment. For HBCUs, these issues are compounded by student populations that are academically and financially challenged by over a century of public and private underinvestment in the education of Black people and other excluded populations.

UNCF has been working with our 37 member institutions for 76 years to support, sustain and advance their efforts to serve low-income students of color. Recognizing the need for specific attention to institutional effectiveness, UNCF formed the Institute for Capacity Building (ICB) in 2006 to provide technical support for institutions in discrete areas, including institutional advancement, enrollment management, strategic finance, and governance. Today, ICB seeks to build institutional resiliency, or the institutional ability to improve operations today, and future proof their operations for tomorrow.

To do this, we believe that UNCF, partnering institutions, and a host of mission-aligned organizations and supporters must collectively reimagine what the future of higher education must look like to meet the current and ever-changing student needs. In 2015, with support from Lilly Endowment, Inc., we launched the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) to support a cohort of 24 institutions (a mix of private and public HBCUs and a PBI) to do just that: dramatically improve academic and career outcomes for students by transforming institutional practices.

To effectively achieve institutional transformation, we knew we had to take an approach that respected the historical value and approach of HBCUs and met our current students where they are. UNCF asked our institutions a fundamental question: how do we make the best of what we’ve been doing and cultivate a campus culture and climate that represents all that we need to do? In essence, “How might our institutions provide intentional and sustainable pathways to build 21st-century competencies and help our students find meaningful employment in their desired career field?”

To help answer that question, we partnered with Education Design Lab to launch the ACCELERATE Design Challenge to empower our partnering institutions to leverage the power of human-centered design. Beyond the practical benefits of design thinking – a replicable, student-centered approach to problem-solving and innovation – our partnership with Ed Lab focused on building the human-centered design capabilities at our partnering institutions to remove historic and present barriers that keep under-resourced institutions, institutions that serve majority low-income and first-generation students, from being seen for their legacy of innovation.

Through this work and the work of our partnering institutions, UNCF seeks to continue to elevate the practices of HBCUs as higher education continues to contend with a business model that neglects the students who will benefit most from success from it.
Why it Matters to Design with HBCUs + PBIs

African-Americans experience unemployment and underemployment at disproportionately higher rates than White Americans. For far too long, Black institutions, like Black communities, have been marginalized, under-resourced, ignored for their successes, and blamed for their shortcomings. These disparities, which have been amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, were the impetus of UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative.

Introduction

African-Americans experience unemployment and underemployment at disproportionately higher rates than White Americans. For far too long, Black institutions, like Black communities, have been marginalized, under-resourced, ignored for their successes, and blamed for their shortcomings. These disparities, which have been amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, were the impetus of UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative.

To support this work aimed at increasing the career readiness of HBCU students, UNCF partnered with the Lab to launch the ACCELERATE Design Challenge. The Lab’s approach is to foster equity-based innovation by helping colleges develop a “human-centered design” muscle that rapidly tests and iterates solutions. The ideas for solutions come from insights about what learners need, want and feel. The process starts with a design question to anchor the stakeholders, in this case: “How might our institutions provide intentional and sustainable pathways to build 21st century competencies and help our students find meaningful employment in their desired career field?” The Lab facilitated sessions where institutional teams could build out concepts, launch pilots, and integrate feedback into their programs.

Teams also used design techniques to further expand their program ideas and test assumptions about how they are preparing students for the hiring market, while gaining valuable insight from each other that could inform their individual approaches. The Lab brought its expertise around how to intentionally teach and assess 21st century skills in ways that provide employers with searchable, digital evidence of students’ competencies.

This accelerated process, which stubbornly positions the student at the center of program design, pushed institutions to utilize their individual and collective strengths to design new solutions that better prepares students for an ever-changing labor market.

We know that exploring innovation and design at HBCUs will be critical to advance equity in education. By providing outlets for institutions to quickly leverage both their inherent strengths and their understanding about the demands of the market, UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative aims to position Black colleges to meet the needs of their students while they are enrolled, while setting them on a path to explore limitless futures beyond graduation.

In this brief, we share four examples for how human-centered design is helping colleges address their changing mandates as their students graduate into a rapidly changing employment ecosystem. With this lens, each of the participating institutions outlined plans to enhance the student experience and improve career outcomes by reimagining program delivery, strengthening institutional capacity, and embracing innovation.

First, we feature two institutions from the Lab’s ACCELERATE Cohort, Norfolk State University and Xavier University of Louisiana, where foundational education became a testing ground for creative approaches to expose students to career opportunities earlier, by integrating co-curricular programming into first-year student requirements. Next, we travel to South Carolina to discuss the work of the Carolina Cluster (Claflin University, Voorhees College, and Benedict College) and its effort to create intentional employer relationships to assist the three institutions in building stronger pathways to employment for graduates. Lastly, we highlight Spelman College and how faculty development drove the infusion of data science and design thinking into existing coursework to deepen students’ skills and prepare graduates for the world of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced system leaders to rapidly adapt, which, for the institutions participating in UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative, has meant a number of shifts. These include training faculty and staff on how to virtually support students and promote career planning, creating virtual career fairs, altering First year Seminar, and more.
Case Studies
Norfolk State University

Designing Student-Faculty Learning Communities to Build Social Capital and Improve Career Readiness

About Norfolk State University
Founded in 1935, Norfolk State University (Norfolk, VA) is an adolescent among HBCU peers and serves as an example of how learner needs can shape the creation of educational opportunities. This university was conceived to offer a college experience grounded in the liberal arts for black students in the area who were not able to travel to the other HBCUs in the Commonwealth. Nestled in the state’s Tidewater region, an area long known for its connections to military, shipbuilding, and fishing/seafood industries, the university confers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees and enrolled more than 5,600 students in Fall 2019.

The Need for Design
When considering how the university might better prepare their graduates to transition into meaningful careers, the core design team at Norfolk State wanted a solution that capitalized on the expertise of its greatest human capital resource – its faculty. That’s why the team developed a learning community structure that brought together students and faculty as a way for students to intimately explore a topic area of interest while assisting a faculty member to advance a research project in a given field. The result would be a win-win for everyone: Students would get early exposure to research opportunities within a community of scholars, and faculty would receive important hands-on support to produce scholarly work while teaching students about effective research practices.

Leveraging Design Tools
As a part of the ACCELERATE Cohort, Norfolk State used design tools to drive the development of student-faculty learning communities that could specifically enhance career preparation. To establish a strong foundation for their ideation, the team mapped the needs of learners, faculty, and employers. They then created a “Napkin Pitch” to develop success metrics, consider existing resources, and identify key evaluation criteria to understand how the program would impact learners. This tool provided a clear roadmap for team leads to delegate assignments, moving the program closer to implementation. Following the initial design session, the Lab also partnered with the campus-based coordinators, faculty and staff who curated and facilitated each experience, to connect in-demand 21st Century skills to the goals and activities of each learning community.

The Tool: Napkin Pitch
The Learning Communities idea came to life using the Lab’s Napkin Pitch tool to identify needs, benefits, success metrics, and resources needed to move the idea forward.

Download it
Designing and Piloting a Prototype

This work resulted in a redesigned prototype, which piloted in August 2019 as a part of Norfolk State's broader Career Pathways Initiative.

About 220 first-year students (over 20% of the new student population) participated in 13 learning communities, which varied in focus area from Chemistry to Spectrum (which focused on supporting LGBTQ students and allies) to LiveWell (which brought together pre-nursing, physical therapy, and exercise science majors to learn more about healthy living). A cohort of participating students, under the guidance of a faculty or administrative leader, participated in a shared course and other events to develop an in-depth holistic understanding of a topic area.

The program is designed to build a sense of community and belonging among students, faculty, and staff, while exposing students to high-impact practices that can further their growth and development.

Student-Faculty Learning Community Topics (2020-2021):

- Food Access and Advocacy
- Visual Arts
- Society of Spartan Sisters
- English and Foreign Languages and Cultures
- DNIMAS
- Chemistry
- FACE IT
- Model Spartans
- LIVE WELL
- SPECTRUM
- ARMY ROTC
- Navy ROTC
- C.H.A.M.P.I.O.N.S.

These learning communities have fostered an immersive foundational education experience that sets students on a trajectory to career readiness. The deep dive into a specific academic or thematic area allows first-years to explore their interests, learn about all of the campus resources at their fingertips, personalize their learning, and build a network of support that will benefit them throughout their college career and into their professional lives. By tapping into the interests and goals of their learners, the team at NSU built a program that meets students where they are and deepens connections to campus.

Early Insights from Design

As a result of participating in learning communities, the project team sees early signs that students are benefiting in three important ways: expanded social capital, deeper sense of belonging, and greater academic engagement.

Social capital: 80% of jobs are found through social capital, and African Americans are disproportionately less likely to have the social capital necessary to excel in the job market (Parks-Yancy, 2010). Through exposure to intimate relationships with faculty members, advisors, and other key university resources, students involved in learning communities are able to begin building social capital early in their college careers, which will assist them in successfully navigating college and life beyond graduation.

Sense of belonging: In addition, learning communities provide a critical pathway for students to build community with each other around their interest area. Students take a course together, live together, and develop a sense of belonging at the university, all while pursuing their passions.

Academic engagement: Learning communities have helped to redefine students’ relationships with their fields of study. As a result, academic departments have reported seeing greater interest in majors and also hope to see greater retention from the first to the second year. As of the 2020-2021 academic year, two new departments, music and education, have launched their own learning communities.

Designing for the Future

Iteration is a key component of design. Over the past year, the Learning Communities team built a program to engage second-year students in the administration of the program after their successful completion of the first year. The Chemistry learning community, for example, is piloting a second-year advisory board as an additional support system for the Chemistry learning community. The team is currently exploring how to infuse relevant badges and micro-credentials into the learning community experience to allow students to build their resume in their chosen career field as early as possible. In the wake of COVID-19, the learning community model was even considered as a vehicle to administer the university’s summer bridge program, since an in-person summer residential academy was not possible. This constant iteration of the program’s design improves the likelihood of its sustainability, while ensuring that the program will meet evolving student needs.

Learn more about Norfolk State's Career Pathways Initiative work here.
Xavier University

Integrating Career Development and Exploration into an Established First-Year Experience Program

About Xavier University

America’s only historically Black and Catholic university is also the top university in the nation in graduating Black students who continue on to medical school (AAMC, 2019). With a residential campus located in the heart of New Orleans, Xavier boasts a total student population of 3,300, which included 832 first year students in Fall 2019.

The Need for Design

Many students enter Xavier with aspirations to make meaningful contributions to the healthcare field as doctors, nurses, and other practitioners. After a semester or two of coursework, some may find that their skills would be best applied to other important roles within healthcare and other fields. The team at Xavier realized that awareness of these alternative career opportunities was low, and they looked to infuse career exploration within the first year as a way to allow students to explore their options as early as possible before they were locked into prescriptive curricula that prepared them for careers that they were not interested in.

Leveraging Design Tools

As a part of the Lab’s ACCELERATE Cohort, Xavier participated in an early design session to explore how to integrate career development and exploration into the university’s established first-year experience program. The design activities created deeper accountability for the jobs that needed to be done, while reminding program designers to think “aspirationally and realistically,” according to Dr. Marguerite Giguette, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. One such activity, journey mapping, pushed the project team to consider the problem of career decision-making solely from the student’s point of view, putting aside the silos of academics, career advising, student support services. Designers put themselves in a student’s shoes, outlining milestones, emotions, barriers and opportunities that shape the undergraduate experience. The insights from this exercise helped the team to focus on a strategy that effectively blended a shared vision of where they want students to be with how they could quickly and tangibly move as many students as possible in that direction.

The Tool: Journey Map

Journey maps offer an opportunity to understand a person’s experience as they move through programs, services, or anywhere along the learn-to-work spectrum more broadly.
Designing and Piloting a Prototype

Thanks to this new approach, students are now required to take the Strong Interest Inventory, schedule an appointment with a career advisor, and complete an academic/career plan as a part of their first-semester seminar course.

By integrating these elements into the course, students learn about the importance of being career-ready earlier, with built-in accountability and mentoring to prevent the red flag issue for students being undecided on majors or jumping from one to another. By focusing on career exploration within an academic course, this program has deepened relationships across silos on campus and fostered more collaborative partnerships. As a cross-functional team, representatives from the university’s faculty, Provost’s office, student support services, and career services met regularly to brainstorm and develop an approach to implementing the program that sincerely recognized barriers and opportunities across stakeholder groups. As a result, the responsibility of implementation was distributed across the team, rather than sitting within one department to develop. The transparency helped to solidify relationships between colleagues and has helped them build mutual respect for each other’s work and contributions.

In addition to building transformative campus partnerships across departments, the program also required a new strategy to communicate information across different stakeholders in order to best support students. Using a new student information system, the student deliverables produced within the academic course, namely the Strong Interest Inventory report and the academic and career plan, were both made accessible to key personnel to provide continuity to student advising, which is critical to the first year and beyond. True to human-centered design, this approach was designed with students at the center, which has validated the work of the team and allows students to build deeper, more organic relationships with advisors.

Early Insights from Design

The process helped Xavier build a collaborative and human-centered design approach to keep students at the center of the program from the very beginning. Though the cultural shift has been slow, the integration of academic and career outcomes are aligning, and more departments and faculty are thinking differently about how the two areas complement each other. With more faculty exposed to the resources available through Career Services, the program is better positioned to reach as many students as early as possible, which has resulted in an increase in career services visits and interactions. With the quick transition to online courses and experiences, Xavier is also exploring what it will take to shift more of the first-year career exploration effort online. Thus far, the move to online coursework has not stopped course planning for future semesters - faculty are highly committed to the academic and career integration moving forward.

The team from Xavier attributes their success to a few key lessons learned along the way.

- Start small with a pilot to pressure test before rolling something out full-scale, which is one of core tenets of human-centered design
- Be sure to surround the project with the right people who can speak to the needs and requirements of the stakeholders that they represent, including students.
- Plan, plan plan - bring the team together often to discuss strategy, roadblocks, and opportunities.
- Make sure that it is built into the fabric of the institution - by spreading core responsibilities across several different offices, the project has created a spirit of accountability and collaboration with it.

Designing for the Future

Ultimately, the program team would like to offer tailored career and academic advising to all students from the beginning of their Xavier experience through to the end. The focus on career development as a part of the first-year foundational course has also equipped faculty with the tools and resources available through Career Services to support students through career exploration. Increased faculty engagement has inspired new partnerships between Career Services and academic departments to better support students throughout their time at Xavier.

Learn more about Xavier University Career Pathways Initiative work here.
Carolina Cluster
Leveraging the Power + Proximity of Three South Carolina Universities to Bring More Employers to the Table to Better Serve Students

About the Carolina Cluster
The Carolina Cluster comprises of three HBCUs in the heart of South Carolina:

- **Voorhees College** was founded as Denmark Normal Institute in 1897, one of a few high schools in the area to serve Black students. Today, the College serves nearly 600 students, holistically developing students’ intellect and faith.

- As South Carolina’s oldest historically Black university, **Claflin University** has emerged as one of the preeminent national liberal arts colleges in the US. Founded in 1869, the university enrolls nearly 2,000 students and is located in Orangeburg SC.

- With a local annual economic impact of over $130 million, **Benedict College** serves 2,100 students and has been a community leader in South Carolina for nearly a century and a half.

- These three institutions are located within 55 miles of each other, which anchors their collaboration - Claflin university is the host site for the Cluster's activities.

Designing and Piloting a Prototype
While many colleges participating in UNCF’s Career Pathways Initiative have looked inward to make enhancements to curriculum to enhance career outcomes for graduates, The Carolina Cluster looked outward, reimagining how credits, programs, and experiences can translate into careers beyond the campus gates.

For three private historically Black colleges within a 45-mile radius of each other, the Career Pathways Initiative allowed them to leverage their collective power to bring more employers to the table. Together, Voorhees College, Claflin University, and Benedict College, formed the Carolina Cluster, an effort to collectively produce graduates that were prepared to enter high-demand careers and graduate study. The Cluster coordinates the Career Pathways Initiative work within the state and manages a steering committee of decision-makers that can advance Cluster initiatives on each campus. This approach is already paying off -- as a Cluster, the three HBCUs have shifted how employers engage with their institutions.

Rather than trying to build relationships with all three individually, employer representatives can now build a presence at all of the partner institutions at once. This led to the formation of a joint Employer Advisory Council, which has established a wider employer network for the colleges, while providing valuable feedback regarding how the institutions can supply student talent that meets employer demand. There are 40 employer partners involved in the Executive Advisory Council representing a myriad of employers, including Aflac, BlueCross BlueShield, BMW Manufacturing, Dominion Energy, GEICO, Peace Corps, TD Bank, Vanguard, Verizon, and many local government agencies. The Council has been particularly critical in serving as a thought partner to the Cluster as it developed and launched one of its most successful initiatives, the HBCU Talent Showcase. In its inaugural year, this career, grad school, and skills fair engaged over 770 students and connected them with nearly 120 employer partners and 32 graduate schools.
Early Insights from Design

Through designing the HBCU Talent Showcase with learners at the center, the HBCU Talent Showcase served as a one-stop shop for students, regardless of their positioning within the job search process. Students had the flexibility to participate in interviews and information sessions offered by employers, or they could shore up important skills through a host of workshops and seminars, designed to prepare them for the future of work.

The collaboration proved to be so successful that additional institutions outside of the cluster, including Allen University, Bennett College, Fayetteville State University, Paine College and others have been invited to participate, which speaks to its impact on the region beyond the three institutions.

"In order to engage the different parties to develop new models of student-centered career readiness, collaborative engagement, where everyone benefits, is key to developing trust and innovation," said Cathy S. Franklin from Claflin University and Executive Director of the Carolina Cluster. Franklin also shared that, "One of our greatest levers for change has been the institutional support and commitment to the CPI work, and the ability of the three institutions to work together and learn from each other. The establishment of the Carolina Cluster Steering Committee (CCSC) helps determine the priorities of the Carolina Cluster and maintains the commitment and support necessary for the Carolina Cluster to achieve its goals and objectives. Each Carolina Cluster Member institution appoints a chief academic officer, career services director, faculty member, and employer/community member to the CCSC. The CCSC keeps key institutional players involved in the CPI process and provides a forum for continual cross-institutional engagement."

The Carolina Cluster is a shining example of how a shared model around institutional capacity building can effectively manage stakeholder relationships, while creating tangible benefits for students, the institutions, the employer partners, and the surrounding region. As a result of their collaborative work, the three institutions have expanded access to career development opportunities for their institutions. They have leveraged their collective power to bring employer partners to the table to help them reimagine what student success looks like.

Designing for the Future

Given the success of the first session, the program team is leveraging the feedback that they have received from employer partners and student participants to iterate on the successful pilot. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program's in-person delivery has shifted to an online format, but given this shift, the team has realized the importance of training students in advance of the event regarding important job searching skills, such as professional communication, to give them enough time to practice and prepare for virtual recruiting.

In September 2020, over 200 students participated in the Carolina HBCU Professional Development Virtual Conference, which ensured that participants would have all of the tools that they need to convey their talents to potential employers in time for the 2nd annual Carolina HBCU Career Talent Showcase, which attracted 431 students and 125 employers virtually.

Together, the Cluster has formalized opportunities for colleagues across each institution to engage in learning opportunities with each other. And the state of South Carolina is also seeing the value of this approach as the Cluster has already secured some additional funding from the South Carolina state legislature to continue its work. The team is actively exploring opportunities to continue collaborating once the CPI grant funding has concluded.

Learn more about the Carolina Cluster's Career Pathways Initiative work here.
Spelman College
An Eye Toward Data + Design

About Spelman College
Founded in 1881, Spelman is the oldest private historically Black liberal arts college for women in the US. Nationally ranked in high-quality teaching and innovation, Spelman has been a long-standing powerhouse in producing African-American graduates who transition into graduate study and professional fields.

The Need for Design
As the Future of Work continues to evolve, colleges and universities must boldly review and revise the core curriculum to align the 21st Century skill development in coursework with the demands of the market. This requires faculty, administrators, employers, and students to collaborate to identify the learning outcomes necessary to evolve the curriculum, as well as what resources will need to be acquired to support curricular enhancements broadly. Spelman’s faculty have been highly engaged in the work of the Career Pathways Initiative, as they believe that any sustainable work that will achieve transformational impact will have to be anchored in the institution’s pedagogical framework. To explore ways to prepare students for the future of work, the team explored multiple pathways that included the creation of faculty career counselors and the addition of new courses that melded disciplinary content with career knowledge. They also focused on two growth areas: data science and design thinking.
Designing and Piloting a Prototype

**Data Science + The Liberal Arts** - While many colleges have created data science programs, the faculty wanted to develop an interdisciplinary approach, infusing data science principles into liberal arts and humanities courses. To do this, select faculty members participated in Google’s data science program to learn more about data science essentials and how they could be incorporated into select courses. This approach helped to “reskill” faculty members to create content that is more interdisciplinary and was more accessible to students majoring in social science and humanities, compared to creating exclusive data science courses. After completing the program, they were able to integrate those lessons into 2 new course pilots (economics and political science) that have served 20 students as of June 2020. These courses will be taught annually. Though data science cannot be seamlessly integrated into all courses, the initial pilot was successful in mapping ways in which modules could be inserted into some liberal arts and humanities courses, especially those with a deep grounding in data.

With the emergence of design thinking and its approaches to problem-solving, the faculty developed and piloted modules to challenge students to map career trajectories, as well as the concrete milestones to achieve success in college and beyond.

These “Design Your Life” modules were built so that they could be easily incorporated into courses, regardless of the course content. In its pilot year, nearly 20 faculty employed elements of these modules in their courses, which have served over 90 students through June 2020.

“Our project was designed with faculty at the heart of it. As we envisioned the grant, we did so with the understanding that our faculty are the ones who touch our students’ lives in the most immediate ways, and that they should hence be a more visible part of designing our students’ post-Spelman paths. A large percentage of our faculty was involved in workshops that imparted skills like data science, digital Humanities and design thinking, that they then infused into dozens of classes across disciplines. They designed new courses that melded career and discipline. Selected faculty have taken on the role of “Faculty Career Counselors,” and have made career and postgraduate information a meaningful part of advising. I would say that our faculty were undoubtedly the greatest levers for change,” said Tinaz Pavri, Professor of Political Science Division Chair, Social Sciences and Education and Founding Director, Asian Studies Program, Spelman College.

Early Insights from Design

**Anecdotal evidence from the initial Data Science + Liberal Arts pilot shows that some student participants have been able to transition into graduate study in data science.**

Professors involved in data science integration are satisfied with course structure and student response to it. The grant-funded work is expanding to other courses and will be included in the university’s Quality Enhancement Plan to codify it moving forward. "The grant taught us that Spelman comes together as one to meet the opportunities of the day. We had robust support from the President on down, and across faculty, students and staff. The grant was a wonderful case-study of achieving exactly what we said at the outset -- to break down any silos that we might be operating under on campus, and to learn from each other in opening cutting-edge avenues of career success and life-learning for our students,” said Pavri.

As a result of the “Designing Your Life” project, faculty and students alike have learned valuable lessons about what it takes to intentionally incorporate the development of in-demand skills into existing courses. This requires openness from faculty members to be reskilled in new areas, yet relies on their expertise to adequately align them with the course learning outcomes.

Given the culture of the campus, faculty, rather than administrators, played a leading role in identifying, developing, and piloting both programs. While the faculty voice has been critically important, the team has been intentional about keeping students at the center of design - they wanted approaches that not only designed for high-achieving and underperforming students on the extremes, but they also focused heavily on students “in the middle.”

Learn more about Spelman's Career Pathways Initiative work here.
Conclusion

Building off of the Strengths of HBCUs + PBIs

Elements of human-centered design are threaded through all four of these cases. Each campus used or adapted different parts of the process to explore the needs of their learners and quickly act on insights to test new programs.

This innovation muscle builds in two ways when applied at colleges with rich history and tradition: a broader take on student needs and a faster, less scary way to test the “new.” First, it helps us to see our learners differently, to think of their “lifecycle” as much broader than admit, enroll, retain, graduate. One of the most important outcomes of the Career Pathways Initiative is to help colleges and universities focus more on the world their students graduate into.

Second, colleges are surprised at how well they can work across the silos when the design question grounds them on cross-cutting students’ needs. We are all in this work for the students. Through the Initiative, we have seen institutions shift the ways that they approach problems and build capacity to sustain initiatives over time. We have seen cross-campus collaborations that have built buy-in on multiple levels to move initiatives forward. We have supported pilots that help us to test our approaches with students and other important stakeholders in order to be able to solve unanticipated issues before scaling to larger volumes. We have learned about what resources are necessary to allow us to build and continue these initiatives over time. And, along the way, we have been able to use existing tools and develop new tools to help HBCUs to develop their programs.

These programs, though in their initial stages, have fostered greater collaboration, deeper understanding of the connection between the university’s mission and student outcomes, and bolder creativity regarding how institutions can reimagine the undergraduate experience. When given the space, resources, and design framework to adequately focus on student success, HBCUs can deliver on their promises to today’s student while building and evolving for tomorrow.