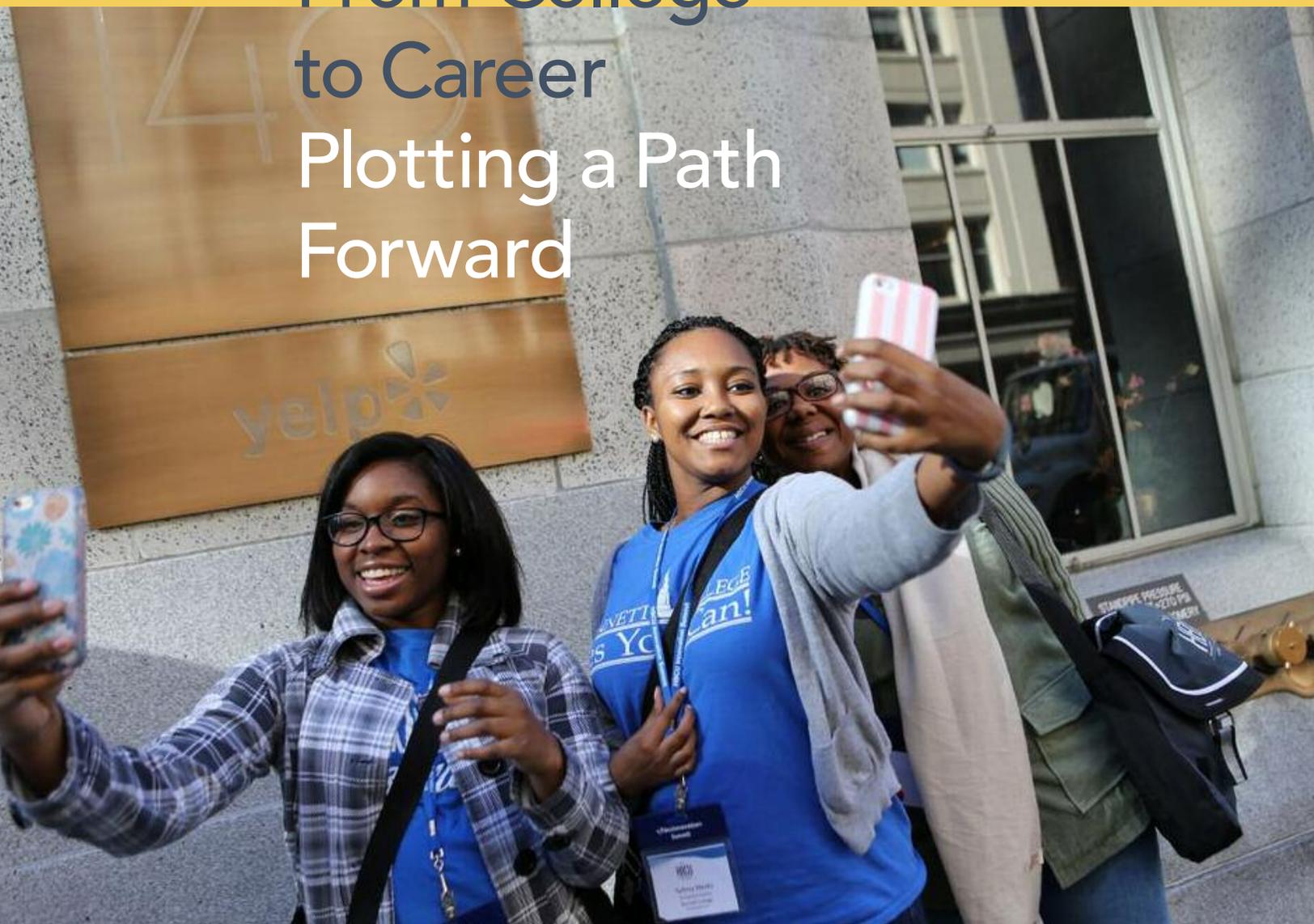


# From College to Career Plotting a Path Forward



**Brian Bridges vividly recalls the day a university** admissions officer came to his grandmother's house in rural South Carolina to walk him through the baffling college application process. His SAT scores – the highest for an African American student in his high school graduating class – had touched off a flurry of interest from top-tier colleges and universities across the country. "I had never heard of some of them," he admits. "I was the first in my family to attend college. I didn't have anyone to guide me. I didn't know the possibilities."

He opted for Francis Marion University, a state school within a two-hour drive from home and with a predominantly

black enrollment. The experience was positive, his grades were excellent, but "no one told me I should do an internship or apply for a co-op program," he says. Unfamiliar with the career-planning services on campus, he graduated in 1990 with a degree in English and ended up working as a bill collector. Not until Bridges returned to his alma mater and sought the advice of a career guidance counselor did he plot a path that led him to graduate school, a doctorate and a distinguished career in research. "Too many first-generation college kids assume that if they just persist and earn a degree, they're guaranteed a good job," he says.

Statistics confirm that it doesn't work that way, especially for those students of color who need help in navigating the unfamiliar territory of higher education.

Young African American graduates face formidable employment challenges. As recently as 2013, the unemployment rate for African American college graduates, ages 22-27, was 12.4 percent, more than twice the rate of their white counterparts. In 2014, the percentage of underemployed black graduates soared to 56 percent.

"A lot of these students come from low-income backgrounds," explains Michael Lomax, president and chief executive officer of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). "They attend college to change their economic status and that of their families. It's a perverse outcome when they borrow significantly, go to school, work hard, and then can't get good jobs after they graduate."

### Improving the statistics

Supported by a \$50 million Lilly Endowment grant, UNCF has launched a comprehensive initiative to expand professional opportunities for graduates of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly black institutions (PBIs). The Career Pathways Initiative "will encourage campuses to design structured experiences that will prepare students for a seamless transition to the world of work," says



Bridges, now vice president for research and member engagement at UNCF and overseer of the multiyear project.

Of the 87 HBCUs and PBIs eligible to apply for funding, up to 30 will receive planning grants and will compete for up to 24 implementation awards. Lomax and Bridges say schools participating in the initiative first will gather data about the professional status of their recent graduates. That information will serve as baselines to measure success as the schools develop, test and model programs aimed at improving alumni job statistics.

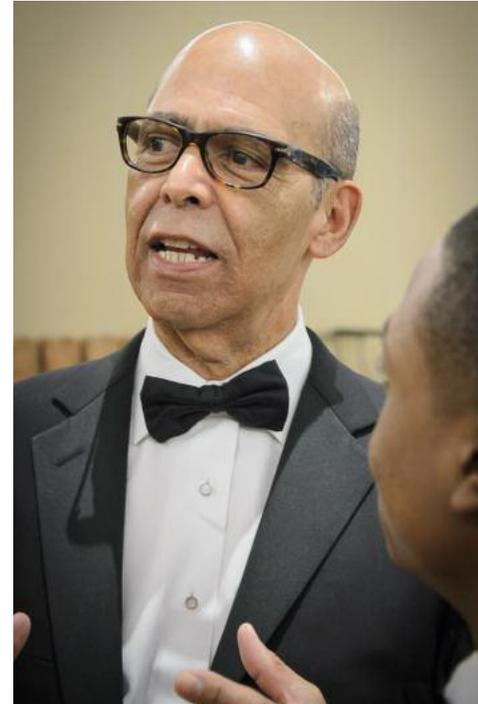
"This initiative will help us understand what is and isn't happening to our graduates in terms of meeting employment expectations," says Lomax. "Then we'll ask, 'What do we need to do to strengthen career outcomes? What technical skills are in demand?

How do we teach the soft skills that help graduates build networks and fit into corporate cultures that are very different from what they've experienced at home or on campus?" He believes the answers to these questions will benefit not only minority-serving colleges and universities but any post-secondary institution interested in improving its graduates' employment prospects.

"Our goal is to work with students, faculty, colleges, alumni and employers to better connect the student experience with the jobs of the future," he says.

### Overcoming obstacles to success

Lomax and his UNCF team are well aware of the challenges they face. "The situation is complicated," explains Charlie Nelms, retired chancellor of North Carolina Central University, professor emeritus at Indiana University and a consultant to the Career Pathways project. He points out that many students enter HBCUs and PBIs underprepared for college work. "Often they come to campus disproportionately educated in urban and rural districts where the achievement levels are far lower than they



Students visit Yelp headquarters in San Francisco as part of a UNCF-sponsored tour of Silicon Valley (opposite). UNCF Vice President Brian Bridges (above left) and UNCF President Michael Lomax (above top). Stronger advising and mentoring (above bottom) are part of the new campus efforts.



“The third reason I’m optimistic is that this is not a one-year project,” says Nelms. “In order to create strong, sustainable opportunities for students, you have to change the culture of an institution, and you can’t change a culture in a year.”

**Building on the Hoosier model**

The Career Pathways Initiative is loosely fashioned after the Endowment’s Initiative to Promote Opportunities Through Educational Collaborations for Indiana Colleges and Universities. The

should be,” he explains. “So they have a lot of catching up to do in a relatively short period of time.”

The idea of choosing and pursuing a course of study that leads to a career is new to these students, and the temptation is to spend a year or two sampling random classes and ruling out various majors. This can deplete a family’s budget and yield neither a diploma nor a job. “The solution can begin with familiarizing students with the campus career center during freshman orientation week,” says Bridges. “Research shows that students who utilize career centers get jobs, but they can’t wait until their senior year to do it.”

Other problems aren’t as easily addressed. Some HBCU campuses are located in less-populated areas that offer limited opportunities for business partnerships, mentoring programs and internships. Faculty members carry heavy academic loads and haven’t always updated their curricula to meet the evolving needs of a global economy. At a time when corporate recruiters are looking for graduates with degrees in the STEM disciplines – science, technology, engineering and math – many minority-serving institutions tend to focus on the humanities. “A lot of these degrees don’t have a vocational aspect to them,” says Nelms.

In spite of these obstacles, Nelms describes himself as “unequivocally optimistic” that the UNCF initiative will have a positive and lasting impact on black college graduates. He cites three reasons for his confidence. “First, no one is dictating what the institutions must do,” he says. “They’re not taking a cookie-cutter approach. Each school has the opportunity to identify its areas of deficiency and address them.” Second, he applauds the requirement that faculty and administrators must support and be actively engaged in executing the plans that they’ve designed. The responsibility for making their program a success isn’t limited to the staff of the campus career planning office.

two projects share a goal of improving the job prospects of recent college graduates. The Indiana initiative, launched in 2003, reaches out to 39 Hoosier institutions, whereas the UNCF initiative reaches beyond – to schools in 19 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands.

“The Indiana initiative served as a model for us,” says Angela Van Croft, director of foundation and corporate relations for UNCF, who worked with Brian Bridges to craft the Career Pathways Initiative. “But we took the idea and developed a program that is unique to us. We wanted to meet the needs of our schools and address the issues that our students face.”

Both Van Croft and Bridges attended the 2015 meeting of participants in the Indiana initiative. They heard business executives discuss the skills that 21st century employers value. They sat in on workshops and learned about programs that certify students as “internship ready.” They spoke with directors of career centers that have established advisory boards of off-campus experts to ensure that curricula are aligned with the needs of the marketplace. Bridges traded business cards with Jim McAtee, director of the Ball State University Career Center, and anticipates learning more about Ball State’s “externship” program. It places faculty in business and other workplace settings to help them keep current within their academic disciplines.



Brianna Mills (above), Howard University graduate, says strong internships and advising helped her land meaningful work. Students from around the U.S. (opposite) take part in a UNCF career event in Silicon Valley.

Van Croft snaps her fingers to emphasize how quickly changes occur within careers that depend heavily on technology innovations. "Some of our schools are diamonds in the rough when it comes to the STEM disciplines," she says. "But others haven't always kept pace." She views participants in the Hoosier initiative as valuable resources for ideas to address this problem. "I hope to broker several conversations between Indiana schools and HBCU schools."

### Checking all the boxes

Many graduates of minority-serving institutions have already proven that the kind of programs that the Indiana initiative and the Career Pathways Initiative endorse yield outstanding results. In short, they work. Students who choose schools based on the majors they want and the professional development opportunities they need are highly competitive in the marketplace. Case in point: Brianna Mills, a 2009 graduate of Cathedral High School in Indianapolis and a 2013 honors graduate from Howard University, an HBCU campus located in Washington, D.C.

By the time Mills was a junior at Cathedral, she had applied to six universities, been accepted at five, and had drafted a wish list to help her choose her future alma mater. She knew she wanted a rigorous academic program at an affordable price, an urban location with a range of internship opportunities, and a campus population "where I would be surrounded by people who look like me." A road trip she took with her parents during spring break in 2008 convinced her that Howard University checked all the boxes. It had a strong business school, offered a favorable financial aid package, was close to scores of businesses and nonprofit organizations, and had a minority enrollment exceeding 90 percent. "Students call Howard 'the mecca' because it's like arriving home after a long journey," she says. "It's the place where you feel connected with your peers."

Her journey toward a meaningful career began on day one of freshman orientation week when she was introduced to the business school's expectations. Faculty encouraged her to do internships during the school year in the Washington, D.C., area and during summer breaks in Indianapolis. She took advantage of every opportunity that came her way. She managed social media activities at a start-up marketing firm in Maryland, coordinated community outreach programs at United Water in Indianapolis, analyzed statistical data for the Howard School of Business and served as a research intern

for the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. She attended professional development meetings on campus, always wearing the required business suit and high-heeled shoes.

"It became second nature to me," she says of the dress code. "Speakers would come in for information sessions, conduct mock interviews, and host dinners and luncheons. I had to create business plans and present them in class.



As I look back, it was a lot like boot camp. But in the end it helped a lot. I've seen it all, and I know how to navigate whatever might come up."

In November 2015, she returned to Howard University for a brief visit. "I was there by myself; it wasn't homecoming or any other special time," says Mills, who was recently promoted to senior associate content editor at a software company in California. "As I walked around campus, all sorts of memories came back. I felt so grateful. This was the school that shaped me for my adult life. It prepared me for all the challenges ahead." Although she now lives a continent away from her alma mater, she says, "It still feels like home."