

The Power of Black Women Student Voters



Foreword



My introduction to organizing came on the heels of Amadou Diallo's murder in February 1999. As a Caribbean immigrant living in New York, his death was an all too fresh reminder that Black lives in America were not valued as

much as others and it became a motivating catalyst for my entrance into the realm of civic engagement.

As someone who has been active in the movement for most of my adult life, I learned pretty quickly that Black women like me were frequently called on to "save democracy" by doing the heavy labor of organizing and moving our communities to action. But too often, our efforts went unacknowledged or underappreciated, and rarely were we regarded as strategists, leaders, and innovators in our own right.

The beauty of this report - **The Power of Black Women Student Voters** - is that it turns conventional wisdom on its head, demonstrating that young Black women are not just laborers for justice. By providing data-based evidence about the ways young Black women engage, this report shows just how creative and visionary we are and can be.

I was honored when the team at Rutgers University's [Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice](#) asked me to consider writing a foreword for this report because it took me back to my own organizing roots. It reminded me of what it felt like knowing that, though I was a young woman, I had the ability - working alongside

and with the support of more senior Black women community advocates and organizers - to change things in my community, and maybe even this world.

I deem it one of the highest privileges and responsibilities of my career to help create new and innovative ways for Black women and women of color to remain at the forefront of change. I believe deeply, not only in supporting and resourcing the work of Black women organizers, but I also see great power in centering the needs of Black women as integral parts of forward-looking political agendas - agendas that, if fulfilled, ultimately uplift entire communities.

This report gives much-needed space and visibility to the efforts of Black women, especially young Black women, proving once again that we are not only the backbone of a well-functioning democracy, but the brains and brawn behind it as well. Organizations, schools, and members of the interested public can benefit from the report's recommendations to enhance the diversity of their civic and political leaders in their communities - doing so is not only a recipe for success, it's essential to setting this country on the right track for greater, more inclusive democratic participation.

To the young Black women profiled in this report - we see you, we support you, and we're excited to see you thrive!

In solidarity,

Tamieka Atkins

COMMUNITY ACTIVIST AND LEADER

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INTRODUCTION

Black women played an essential role in the 2020 presidential election (Connley, 2020). They participated at high rates, encouraged others to vote, and ensured that everyone had the right to vote in a climate of voter suppression. Black women have historically exemplified engaged citizenship in the U.S. and continue to do so today. In this report, we explore the voting habits of Black women college students, the most democratically engaged group since at least 2012 when the systematic study of college student voting rates began. We also shine a light on their activism and motivations for being engaged in individual voting as well as social movements that promote voting.¹ Lastly, we provide concrete recommendations across various stakeholder groups to better support Black women and Black women's activism both on and off college campuses.

Key Findings

- Black women college students have been the highest voting race-by-sex group from 2012-2018 according to student voting data from the Institute for Democracy in Higher Education (IDHE).
- Black women have high turnout rates across academic disciplines, but are particularly likely to be voters compared to their peers in business and education.
- Black students – regardless of gender—attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) vote at a slightly higher rate than their counterparts at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
- Black women bring to college an inherited legacy of contending with multi-generational systemic racism and a history of resilience through political organizing and leadership.



HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT



Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells was born an enslaved woman in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Wells was the oldest daughter of James and Izzie Wells. In May 1844, Wells became passionate about social justice after she was discriminated against on a train. Wells was ordered to move to the back of the train, despite having bought a first-class train ticket. As she was being escorted to the back, she bit the hand of the man carrying her and refused to be silent after the encounter. She was successful in winning a \$500 settlement in a circuit court, suing the railroad. Wells was known for advocating against lynching – an issue that became highly important to her after the lynching of three Black men in Memphis (these men included her friend Thomas Moss and his business partners Will Stewart and Calvin McDowell). In 1893, Wells published “A Red Record” which was a personal examination of lynching in the United States.

Wells was incredibly active in her community and was a founding member of the NAACP. It was in Chicago that Wells shifted her focus toward the Women’s Suffrage Movement and in 1913, she established the Alpha Suffrage Club (the first Black women suffrage club in Chicago). In March 1913, Wells traveled to the first suffrage march on Pennsylvania Avenue, where she was told to march in the back. Wells refused and is quoted to have said, “Either I go with you or not at all. I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race.” Her refusal to march in the back was a powerful moment symbolizing the way Black women are constantly silenced, even in situations that concern and target them. Her continued community work allowed for many vast changes to occur during her lifetime, including the passing of the Presidential and Municipal Bill in Illinois, which gave women over the age of 21 partial suffrage, giving Black women the right to vote in presidential and municipal but not state elections.

UNDERSTANDING BLACK WOMEN’S POLITICAL EXPERIENCES IN THE U.S. SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

By participating in grassroots causes and leading social movements, Black women students protest police brutality, gun violence, and voter suppression through political participation that focuses on voter registration and voter turnout on their campuses. Although neither Blackness nor womanhood are unitary experiences, this group of student voters has a common inheritance forged in the struggle for basic human rights and a seat at the table of democratic self-governance.

Our research was informed by the theoretical perspectives of Black Feminist Thought (BFT), intersectionality, and the politics of empowerment used as a tool to examine oppression and resistance (Alinia, 2015; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Together, these perspectives comprised a theoretical framework aimed at understanding the motivations of intergenerational Black women voters, including first-time college voters. Furthermore, we seek to build upon scholarship that has employed Black feminist theories as these are the most applicable to the needs and experiences of Black women on collegiate campuses (Commodore et al., 2018; Howard-Hamilton 2003; Patton & Croom, 2017).

Anna Julia Cooper, an author, educator, sociologist, activist, and scholar introduced the notion that racism and sexism were systemic oppressions that transcend time and space (May, 2012). Drawing on Cooper’s work and rooted in Afrocentric feminism, Collins’ (1990) BFT framework integrates both Afrocentric and woman-centered standpoints. BFT is useful in understanding the experiences of Black undergraduate women voters, as the ideas of this framework were created by Black women to amplify the point of view of and for Black women. Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) intersectionality framework describes the multiple oppressions experienced by Black women due to their having multiple intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, and class). Collins (2000) expanded upon intersectionality, arguing that these multiple forms of oppression form a matrix of domination that reinforces patriarchal, bureaucratic systems of power (Alinia, 2015). The ideology of intersectionality does more than provide a description of a lived experience or a counter-narrative (May, 2012). Instead, it is an analytical tool used to unveil the oppression experienced by Black women as well as present opportunities to share Black women’s experiences (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; May, 2012). Black feminism, or what author Alice Walker, in 1983, referred to as womanism, encapsulates the experiences, struggles, activism, and resiliency of the enslaved foremothers. Despite experiencing myriad forms of oppression, Black women continue to serve as a formidable force within the American political system. Herein, we explore how Black undergraduate women’s voting and civic engagement serve as acts of resistance and resilience to empower not only themselves, but also their communities.



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Channing Hill

Channing Hill is a future lawyer pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Strategic, Legal, and Management Communication at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Channing lived what she described as a somewhat sheltered life in Euless, Texas, a suburb of Dallas and Fort Worth. She credits her mother for cultivating her love of reading and exposing her to Black contemporary artists at an early age. “My mom had me reading Sister Souljah when I was in the sixth grade,” she laughed. From there, her love of Black writers blossomed. She immersed herself in Black radical tradition by reading Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, and W. E. B. Du Bois — writers who influenced her social and political identity. At the age of 15, Channing participated in voter registrations with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Arlington, Texas Chapter.

As a high-school junior, Channing witnessed a friend getting arrested, who served two months of jail time, and received probation by age 18. This series of events started his cycle of recidivism. This experience prompted Channing's interest in the disparate treatment of Black men and women within the criminal justice system. She paid attention to the frequency of Black students, particularly Black girls, disproportionately being sent to the assistant principal's office for disciplinary offenses in contrast to White peers. “If you are a Black girl in the suburbs, you are constantly told to make yourself smaller than who you are. In high school, you experience so many microaggressions that make you hate who you are.” Despite the efforts of her parents who instilled ancestral and cultural pride, Channing internalized those negative experiences. “When you get tired of being the angry Black girl in class at a predominantly White high school, you go to an HBCU,” she stated. “Howard provides a safe space for students who look like me” to feel affirmed and celebrated.

Asking “why” and ensuring her “voice is heard” were lessons from her mother. A self-described history buff, Channing admires Du Bois's “arrogance” and “audacity.” She channels that same level of confidence when advocating for justice, policing, police abolition, criminal justice and reform, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's issues. During the 2020 presidential election, voting for her was personal. Although she would have preferred voting for Harris as the first woman U.S. president, voting for Biden-Harris provided her “mental comfort.” Her freedom, along with that of her little sister, brother, and mother, is what drove her to the polls. She added three additional reasons for voting as well. “One, because our ancestors died for us to vote. Two, if I do not vote, then my right to vote may be taken away. Three, if I do not vote, how can I have any say?” In her opinion, voter participation is the “bare minimum” any one citizen can do. Remaining politically and socially engaged are mandatory for securing voter rights for future generations.

After participating in protests for Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, Channing is focused on being “effective and strategic” in her advocacy and draws inspiration by studying past social movements. She is publicity chair of the Howard NAACP and a member of Revolt Inc., a femme-identifying service organization. In January 2021, she co-hosted a panel on civic engagement. Her latest project includes designing a legislative tool kit composed of information on key issues, candidates, and bills. Acknowledging her privilege, pedigree, and familial ancestry, Channing understands “with great privilege comes great responsibility” and “approaches that privilege with gratitude” as she “continues to pay it forward.”

“I believe that voter suppression exists because whether or not they outwardly acknowledge or even consciously acknowledge it, ‘the other’ understands the influence that Black people have. They know what it looks like when we band together and actually forge community. We saw it when Georgia turned blue in November. That was a great example of what it looks like when Black people get together and band together.”

—Danaé Reid

BLACK WOMEN & U.S. VOTING RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Twenty-first-century Black women stand on the shoulders of pioneering ancestors, suffragettes, and activists. Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Dorothy Height, Carol Moseley Braun, and Opal Lee paved the way for political social engagement and social action in the face of slavery, oppression, voter suppression, racism, White supremacy, and economic hardship.

Racist repressions of Black citizens and sexist repressions of women have historically conspired to restrict Black women from accessing the polls. Facing exclusion from male-centric abolitionists, Black rights progress of the latter 1800s, and White suffragette opposition to the inclusion of Black women in the early 1900s, Black women including Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Dorothy Cotton, were critical in ensuring democratic participation for Black people in the South (hooks, 1999). Ella Baker helped to organize Black women college students around voting rights, while Clark, Cotton, and others helped teach literacy in an effort to circumvent the clauses, taxes, and tests required for Black people to register to vote (Barnett, 1993). Many Black women also created educational materials such as pamphlets and newspapers and held sessions at churches, beauty salons, and bus stops in an effort to educate Black people on voting rights (Waxman, 2021). Since the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black women continue to be on the frontlines of activism that center on improving voting access, eliminating voter suppression, and increasing voting rights education (Abrams, 2020; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses were the sites of some of the earliest organizing² in the form of Greek-lettered sororities. For example, Black women founded Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated (AKA) in 1908 for Black women on the campus of Howard University. As the oldest Black Greek-lettered sorority, in its more than 100-year history, AKA has empowered and amplified the voices of Black college women with chapters across the nation's colleges and universities. During the 2020 presidential election season, members of the Divine 9 (Black Greek-lettered sororities and fraternities) united to bring their combined network of more than 1.3 million members to support the history-making election campaign of AKA alumna Vice President Kamala Harris. Members knocked on doors, hosted virtual fundraisers, and strolled to the polls in “chucks and pearls.”

The inheritors of this political legacy are approximately 15 million Black women of voting age, representing the largest share of the women of color electorate in the U.S. and accounting for more than one-third of voting-eligible women in Georgia and Mississippi, and nearly one-third in Maryland (31%) and Alabama (27%) (Solomon & Maxwell, 2019). Black women are, indeed, a powerful force in America's democracy.

² Other organizations founded and led by Black women with political clout and influence include: **Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.**: founded in 1913, the national organization sponsors voter registration and voter education programs with a goal of combating voter suppression; **National Council of Negro Women**: founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune, the organization's national convention serves as the official legislative assembly Social activism and continued progress. In 1957, Dorothy Height was president for 40 years. Promoting civic engagement, its members advocate for public policy and social justice; **National Coalition of 100 Black Women**: founded in 1970, advocacy is central to their political action that supports policy on gender equity in health, education, and economic empowerment.

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT



Mary Church Terrell

Mary Church Terrell was born in Memphis, Tennessee to formerly enslaved parents. Her father, Robert Reed Church, was one of the South's first African American millionaires and his great success in business allowed Terrell to afford a college education and become one of the first African American women to earn a college degree. Terrell earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Oberlin College in Ohio. Her advocacy focused on the idea of "racial uplift," believing that racial discrimination can come to an end when Black communities uplift themselves and others by advancing in education, work, and creativity. Considering Terrell's success in education, it makes sense that she emphasized education and uplifting Black communities.

Terrell entered the Women's Suffrage Movement in February 1891 at the first National Council of Women Convention in Washington D.C. She became very active in her community and co-founded the College Alumnae Club. The organization worked to encourage young women to attain educational excellence and participate in movements that would uplift communities. According to Terrell, who understood intersectionality, "A White woman has only one handicap to overcome - that of sex. I have two - both sex and race. ... Colored men have only one - that of race. Colored women are the only group in this country who have two heavy handicaps to overcome, that of race as well as that of sex."

Terrell worked as a teacher and caretaker, especially for children of working mothers. In 1940, she published her autobiography: "A Colored Woman in a White World." Terrell continued to organize alongside women such as Ida B. Wells. Even as she grew old and into retirement, Terrell continued fighting for women's rights and, despite being in her later years, joined the fight against restaurant segregation and lived to see the success of the campaign.

THE BLACK WOMEN COLLEGE STUDENT ELECTORATE

The U.S. has a troubled history of abuse and misuse of quantitative research data to study racial differences. One reason is the nature of quantitative inference. Some adherents of Critical Race Theory have argued that quantitative methods are categorically flawed because by definition they seek to reduce complexity to draw inferences about the general trends of populations, rather than embracing complexity to examine the nuances of lived experiences.³ Another way that quantitative studies of voting, in particular, have fallen short is by failing to embrace "empirical intersectionality" (Hancock, 2013, p. 277). Hancock (2013) suggests that by factoring social differences like race, sex, and gender into social scientific research, the resulting statistical models more accurately reflect differences in fundamental social phenomenology. Whereas studies of voting regularly consider race and sex as factors, they are rarely considered as interacting variables resulting in inferences about racial differences or sex differences that are not only inaccurate but also misleading (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2011). These considerations were core concerns as we developed this report.

In this next section, we review voting data on Black women attending college. We hope that by centering theory at the forefront in this report and including student and historical narratives, the data will be more properly contextualized as a supporting narrative, and not the lead story. What these data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)⁴ offer are insights about how the legacy of Black women's political leadership manifests in the present-day Black women electorate.

In this report, we highlight Black women college students as a politically formidable group as they participate in elections at higher rates than other race-by-gender groups, they participate at a younger age, and they participate at high rates irrespective of field of study. We also highlight a discrepancy between voter turnout at HBCUs and at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). While voting is, of course, only one act of citizenship, it is, however, the most fundamental way to engage in democracy. Thus, these analyses give an empirical view of one way in which Black women are an American electorate that exemplifies participation in democracy.

³ For an excellent treatment of this topic, see the 2018 special issue "QuantCrit: Rectifying Quantitative Methods Through Critical Race Theory" in *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2).

⁴ The data for this analysis come from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) database. NSLVE is the nation's largest study of college and university student voting. The NSLVE database consists of merged data from three sources: (1) enrollment records submitted by more than 1,100 participating campuses to the National Student Clearinghouse ("Clearinghouse"), a nonprofit organization that compiles student enrollment records from nearly all accredited, degree-granting U.S. colleges and universities, (2) publicly available voter files managed by L2 Political, and (3) selected fields from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a database of institution-level data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education by all U.S. colleges and universities. Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) purchases access to the voter files. To protect student confidentiality, the Clearinghouse oversees the process of matching student and voting records. The Clearinghouse then de-identifies the matched records and sends them to IDHE. IDHE uses the data to produce tailored voting reports for each participating campus and to study student political behavior. These analyses are based on a subset of student records that contain race/ethnicity data. Not all institutions report these fields in their voter files. Enrollment files only contain a binary male/female indicator; the full spectrum of gender identities is not captured in this variable. The race groupings are likewise broad; we report only race-group classifications that are reliably large.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Emily Thomas

Emily Thomas is a third-year student at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) majoring in Public Policy. On her campus, Emily is the Civic Engagement Director of the Associated Students of UCR. Emily shared that a chief motivation for wanting to champion voting rights was when she realized in high school that there was widespread student ignorance on voting. She felt that her school ill-equipped her and her classmates to become democratically engaged, and felt that it was important to offer information on voting rights. Emily's mother and her maternal grandparents have also influenced her voting patterns and advocacy. Her mother is the leader at a non-profit with a civic engagement mission, her grandmother worked as a staffer for a congressman, and her grandfather was a sergeant major in the Marine Corps. These family members constantly remind

Emily that voting is a privilege that her ancestors fought and died for. Emily carries that sentiment with her as she works on her campus to ensure other students are aware of the power of voting. In her role as the Civic Engagement Director, she believes it's important for students to understand how local and state politics have an influence on their experiences as students, and believes knowledge about voting rights help students make informed decisions that can positively impact their lives both on-campus and off-campus. She shared, "I feel like it's such a critical part of caring about your community, about caring about others, and the resources that we get, that's part of why I vote."

In addition to her family having an impact on Emily's voting advocacy, she is also encouraged to remain civically and socially engaged by historical and community figures in California. She shared that both Latina women and Black women activists have affected her interest in social justice and social change. These women, including Congresswoman Karen Bass, local activist Rose Maze of the Riverside County Fair Housing Council, and Stacey Abrams, Founder of the Fair Fight, have all represented resilience and have demonstrated the true power of organizing to make sustainable change within their communities and across the nation. Not only has Emily been motivated to continue her advocacy work by these prominent women, but also by youth who continue to stand up against injustices and fight for equity. More specifically, Emily shared that high school students in her school district, Corona-Norco, who have protested to increase ethnic studies within their curricula have inspired her to champion democratic engagement as a pathway to eradicating social disparities. All in all, Emily draws her inspiration from various members of her family and her local community; those who are passionate and unapologetic about rethinking what could be.

For Emily, the Biden-Harris Administration represented precisely what she was looking for in a presidential campaign. She felt confident that Biden would provide opportunities for diverse perspectives and people to get a seat at the table. She wanted a candidate who would provide resources to people of color and low-income communities who were most in need, someone who would take climate change seriously and make strides to reverse the effects of global warming, and someone who was truly going to care for her and people who looked like her. Biden and Harris embodied those beliefs.

Following graduation from UCR, Emily hopes to continue her advocacy for voting rights work and pursue a graduate degree in public policy. She is interested in doing research around how secondary education can better integrate civic engagement into their curricula and hopes to one day hold a position in office. Until then, she plans to continue to play a role in her campus advocacy efforts, collaborate with institutional partners to make lasting change at UCR, "work with the community more, and serve constituents."

“Everybody in a position of power has the ability to be oppressive, so just making sure that we’re continuing to hold these politicians to the fire is really important to me.”

—Danaé Reid

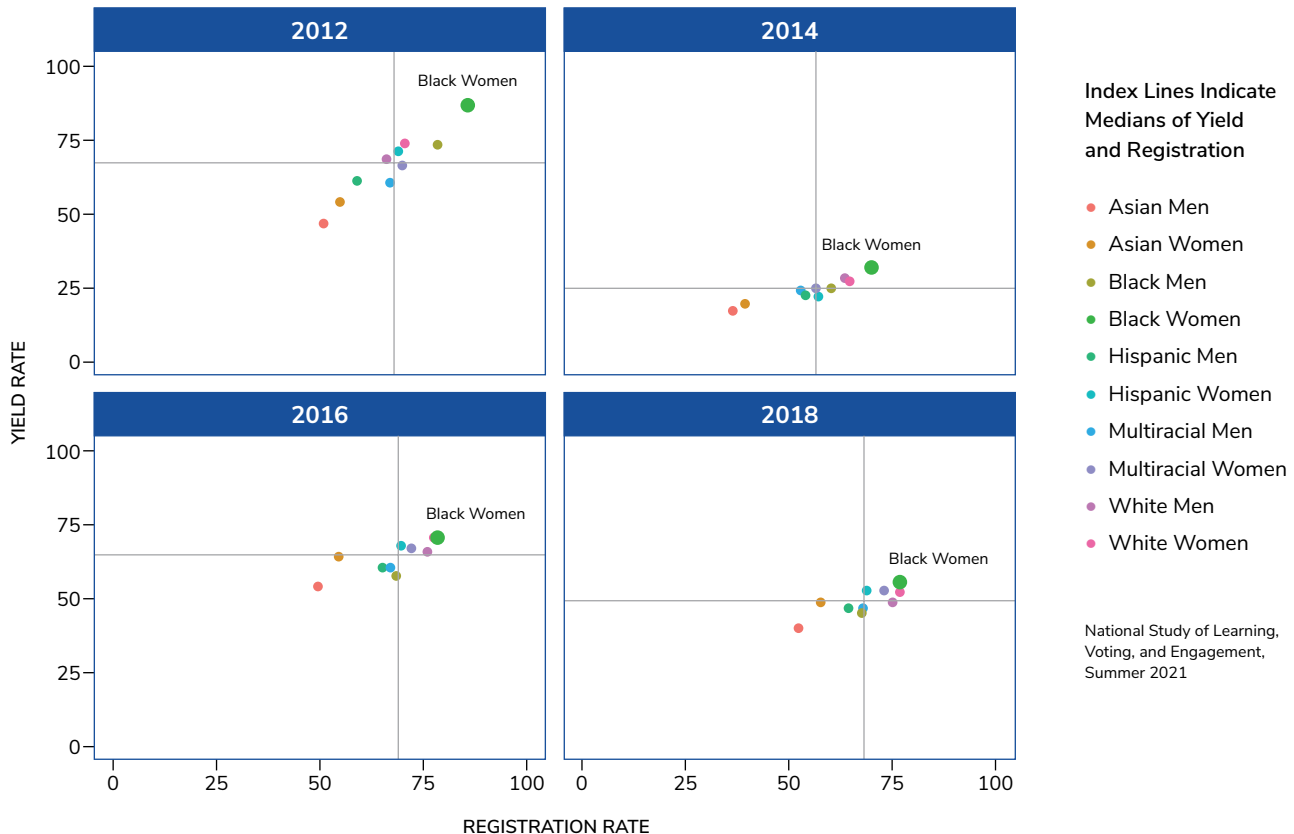
ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

According to NSLVE data, undergraduate Black women were the highest voting demographic group in all four election years for which NSLVE data are available (IDHE, 2020). This is also true of the general voting population (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2011; Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012). Voting, however, is a two-step process; citizens must first register (except in North Dakota), and then cast a ballot. Both steps have their own processes, and citizens face obstacles to both registering and voting. For that reason, we report three electoral participation rates. The registration rate is the percent of eligible students who registered to vote. The yield rate is the percent of registered students who voted in the election. The voting rate is the product of the registration and yield rates – the percentage of eligible students who voted in the election. When we look at these three rates together, we see a portrait of a highly engaged electorate of Black women attending college in the U.S.

In 2012 and 2014, Black women college students were more likely to be registered to vote and more likely to turn out to vote than other demographic groups (See Figure 1). In 2016 and 2018, the registration difference was less pronounced and roughly comparable to White women college students (See Figure 1). Despite this, registered Black women continued to go to the polls at proportionally higher rates, resulting in higher voting rates.

FIGURE 1

Yield and Registration Rates of Demographic Groups



HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT



Mary McLeod Bethune

Mary McLeod Bethune was born in 1875 on a cotton farm near Mayesville, South Carolina. Bethune was heavily inspired by Lucy Craft Laney who believed education to be the key component to justice and citizenship. Bethune established her own school, Daytona Educational and Industrial School, “despite being faced with the inequity of the state of Florida spending \$11.50/year for White children and a mere \$2.64/year for Black children.” The university started off as a boarding school for young Black girls, which later transformed into Bethune-Cookman University, a four-year institution. Bethune realized that the education system did not cater to the needs of African American children or women and wanted her university to fulfill those needs. It differed from the traditional education that women at the time received. Women at Daytona were taught literature, math, business, and sciences, in contrast to only the domestic skills women were commonly taught during that time.

Bethune was a community organizer who worked alongside other Black women such as Eartha M.M. White in the Florida State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. She joined the mission for universal suffrage and stated: “Eat your bread without butter but pay your poll tax! Nobody ever told me to pay my poll tax. My dollar is always there on time. Do not be afraid of the Klan. Quit running. Hold your head up high. Look every man straight in the eye and make no apology to anyone because of race or color. When you see a burning cross remember the Son of God who bore the heaviest.” In 1912, Bethune delivered an address at the National Association of Colored Women meeting in Hampton, Virginia. At this time, only nine states allowed women to vote. Bethune addressed multiple issues of serious systemic racism at the meeting from police systems to income inequality and discriminatory education systems.

Bethune led Black women to polls, despite them having to wait outside all day, and she ensured women used their right to vote from the moment it was given to them. Bethune started writing as a way to advocate and in 1952, wrote an article titled, “Women Should Vote in Tribute to Those Who Fought for the Ballot.”

The data suggest that while Black women have consistently turned out in high numbers, the gap between Black women and other groups is narrowing. While increasingly equal turnout rates are normatively desirable, this pattern could portend a depression in Black women’s participation. To the extent that registration and voter support activities primarily benefit White students, they inadvertently perpetuate “business as usual.” This crawl toward the status quo of unequal representation is not inevitable; colleges and universities can not only support Black women directly but they can also recognize the civic lessons to be found in the historical and contemporary ways that Black women as a historically oppressed group have nevertheless maintained a strong collective commitment to democracy.

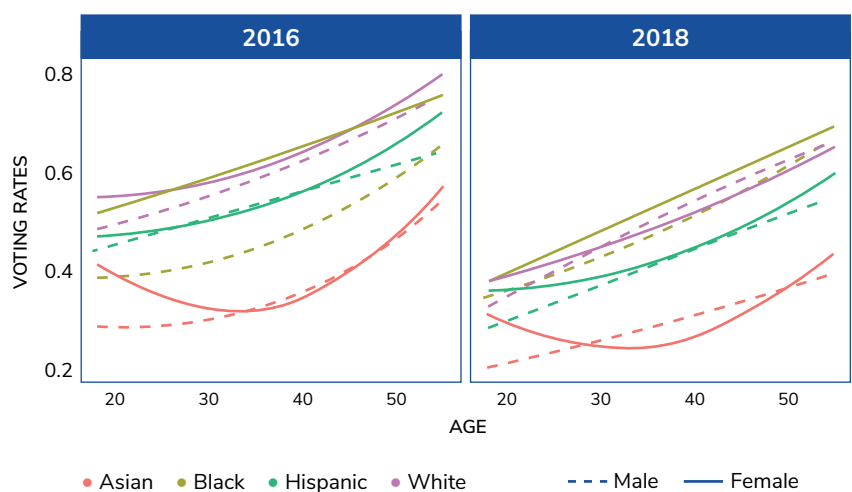
YOUNGER STUDENTS

NSLVE data show that Black women students of all ages participate in elections at high rates. Compared to other demographic groups, younger Black women are more engaged than any other groups of women of color or groups of men (See Figure 2). The voting rate of Black women increases at a more consistent rate across age groups compared to other race-by-gender groups. The fact that more Black women engage in the voting process from a young age and continue to do so through middle age appears to pay a dividend to democracy over time.

Indeed, the difference between Black and White women and other demographic groups is striking. White men, thought to dominate political culture as a group, only participate at rates as high as Black women among students over 45 years old. Among students ages 30-50, Black women’s and White men’s rates are similar, diverging slightly for students over 50. The crossover for White men’s and White women’s rates is around 30.

FIGURE 2

Turnout by Race/Sex Group and Age



National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, Summer 2021



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Danaé Reid

Journalist & Talk Show Host for the Philadelphia Sunday Sun. Professional Model. Activist. Youth Mentor. Social Media Marketer. Entrepreneur. These are just some of the titles held by Danaé Reid, a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., an alumna of West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Danaé graduated from her undergraduate studies in 2018 with a major in Communication Studies and a minor in Black Studies. Identifying as a liberal, she shared some of her personal voting experiences during the 2016 and 2020 presidential election: "I ended up voting for Joe Biden. I was actually a Bernie supporter, but it was important for me to at least get Trump out of office. The 2016 election was the first election that I was old enough to vote in and that was the beginning of my third year of college.

I remember coming to West Chester and seeing how the campus was just so disrupted by that and his politics. Unfortunately, I was really upset and disappointed, as a lot of other people were when he did get elected and so in 2020, I was like, I can't let the same thing happen, so I voted for Biden."

When asked why exercising her right to vote was important to her, Danaé shared "It was important for me to vote, just because that was what I was taught. I was taught that once you're old enough to vote, you vote... and as a Black woman, it was important to me and being able to see a Black woman in the office was really powerful for me, because of course, that's just something that we haven't seen. Not only is [Madam Vice President Harris] the first Black [Vice President] ...she's Black and she's a woman."

While Danaé acknowledged how important this representation was to her, she admitted that representation alone was not enough. She said "we really have to push people regardless of their race or their politics or their gender or whatever. We must continue to push them to do what's right. Just because you have Black skin or you identify as a Black person or somebody who's liberal, it doesn't mean that you're committed to doing the right thing."

When asked about what three major social issues drove her to the polls during the 2020 election, Danaé talked about race, the mismanagement of the COVID pandemic, and affordable housing/equitable pay as being some of the most salient issues for her. Specifically, on being Black, Danaé shared: "So race was really important to me. Because for me, I feel like before anything I'm Black... I'm a Black woman because being Black is the most important thing to me and it's the most important thing I'm tied to, so race was very important." As someone who gets the work done, Danaé's passion for racial justice and equitable policies fueled her interest in participating in civic engagement advocacy and political activism by educating members of her network and community about the voting process. Danaé shared that social media and her professional platforms were critical in organizing and sharing resources:

Danaé Reid's Spotlight continued onto the next page...



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Danaé Reid's Spotlight continued from previous page...

Being part of a community that continues to facilitate safe spaces to have conversations and learn and really be able to do the work, in a way that doesn't feel so trite and uninspired and kind of lackluster, has been how I've been able to continue to push the importance of being involved. I hosted drives and I've also spoken out at protests as well. I like to speak and I'm really good at speaking off the cuff. I like to speak at protests and teach people what I know. Ever since I was a kid, I just have always been super outspoken, and I thank my parents for allowing me to be that way. Thankfully I have a platform, but even still I'm like this really short, squeaky-voiced Black girl from a suburb and so in a lot of ways, I feel like that's given me a privilege, because it's made me unfortunately palatable to White people, but also relatable to Black people, so I like fit in that nice in between, where I feel like it's just important for me to use my space and my voice to share what I know.

Finally, Danaé pays tribute to activists, politicians, and scholars who have inspired her to engage in this work: Tamika Mallory, Noname, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, and Stacey Abrams. She also emphasized the importance of educating oneself and then disseminating that education to better society. As she so eloquently states, "Again, our biggest problem really is ignorance and so for me to be able to have this space that I do, it's really important for me that I'm able to put that information out there, because I do genuinely care about making the world better, specifically for Black people, but just people in general. I feel like if we make the world better for Black and Brown people and that, it's going to kind of trickle-down in general."



“Black women can change the world and we can change election outcomes, too. Since the conception of this country, we have been at the cornerstone of every milestone. The strength of a nation has been on our endurance without acknowledgment of our aptitude. It’s time for us to live in the fullness of our power.”

—Nia Weeks, Founder & Executive Director, Citizen She United

BLACK WOMEN ARE MORE ENGAGED ACROSS ACADEMIC FIELDS OF STUDY

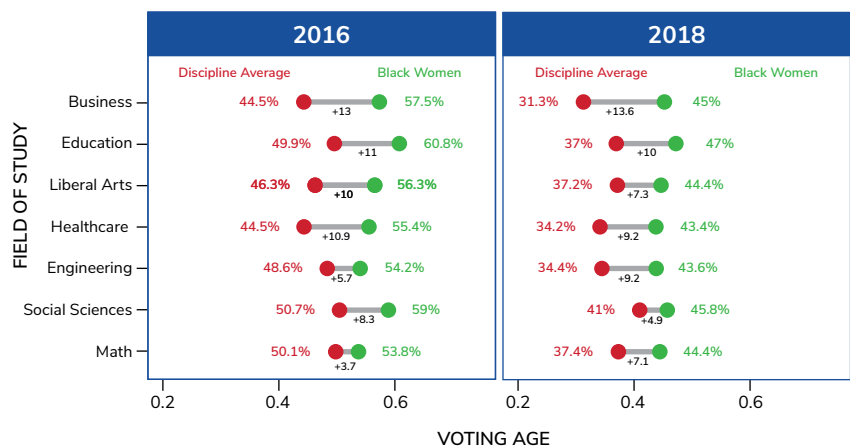
NSLVE data show two ways in which Black women are unique among their academic peer groups. First, Black women vote at more consistent rates across different fields of study than students in other groups. Second, they vote at higher rates than their academic peers across fields of study. Figure 3 visualizes the turnout of Black women across academic fields of study, compared to the median turnout of all race-by-sex groups.

Although there are many reasons voting rates may differ across academic disciplines, the similarity in voting rates of Black women across fields of study shows the unique way that high social cohesion among Black women, galvanized by resistance to systems of oppression, strengthens shared identity to transcend other group differences (in this case, academic disciplines). The social cohesion of Black women is manifest in the field of study voting rates; they exceed the median voting rate of all measured disciplines and vote at high rates. From increased social cohesion, it follows that group values will be strengthened and independent from other contexts (such as field of study). In this case, the shared experience of Black women may create a superordinate identity connection with their peers, transcending identity fragmentation due to other academic traits like field of study.

One striking field of study group is Black women studying business. As a demographic frequently left behind by the specter of the American dream, their embrace of business and voting captures the attitude of a group still striving toward an equal share in the economy and at the ballot box. This disproportionately high turnout shows one way in which Black women in college embrace the values of academia and the American dream: hard work, education, and ownership. Black women face intense workplace discrimination; high and consistent voter participation among business students (a low-turnout field among their peers) suggests that they are meeting this challenge by building resilient human capital. Black women across fields of study carry into college their inherited history of exceptional civic leadership. In doing so, they show persistence, leadership, and community — traits prized in higher education, and likewise essential features of democratic citizenship.

FIGURE 3

Turnout by Field of Study (Comparing Black Women to Discipline Turnout Averages)



National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, Summer 2021

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Janet Asante

Janet Asante is a senior at Scripps College majoring in Environment, Economics, and Politics. She is a legal intern at the Texas Innocence Network. Previously, Janet worked at Deeds, Not Words as a policy and communications intern. She was very involved in Deeds' recent campaign, Get Out the Youth Vote. Janet recognizes that engaging in voter registration work is essential and understands that talking about voting is not enough. The emphasis on turnout and ensuring people have the information they need to feel empowered to engage in civic duty at the ballot box is important work. Having the correct information about how and where to vote as well as possessing qualifying photo-ID documentation and materials needed to make an informed decision is an effective way to combat voter suppression, a responsibility that Janet is passionate about. Never has there been a more

consequential time for young people to confront the challenges facing our democracy, engage with diverse perspectives, and consider solutions to our country's complex issues.

Fittingly, Janet's engagement is well received among members of her Houston, Texas community. At Scripps College, which is roughly 4% Black, Janet believes that the university's political activism has little influence on her civic engagement and instead credits the Houston community for providing opportunities to champion causes she cares about such as voting rights.

Janet describes herself as left-leaning rather than liberal. She voted in the 2020 presidential election voting for the Biden-Harris ticket. Back in 2016, Janet voted for the first time as a senior in high school. While she voted for Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders was her preference. The outcome of the 2016 election motivated many to become more civic-minded and vote in 2020. For Black women voters, the ticket's composition mattered and the consequences of the last four years, rallied more Americans than ever before to vote. Janet, who is dedicated to increasing civic engagement and voter participation in Black and underserved communities, has come face to face with voter apathy, a lack of interest in participating in elections by certain groups of voters. In Janet's experience, voter apathy leads to low voter turnout on election day, alienation, and the sense that voters feel like the political system does not work for them. While the Biden-Harris ticket inspired voters like Janet, cynicism towards the administration's commitment to meeting the needs of the Black electorate remains frustrating; however, representation with Vice President Harris gives hope.

For Janet, the Biden and Harris administration will reverse the actions taken by the Trump administration. She is confident that President Biden will provide diverse perspectives with the selection of a cabinet that looks like America. She believes that providing resources to people of color and vulnerable low-income communities, climate change, and a different immigration approach are issues Biden and Harris are both committed to.

Janet Asante's Spotlight continued onto the next page...



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Janet Asante's Spotlight continued from previous page...

Janet recalls being 10 years old when Barack Obama was first elected President of the United States. Standing in line with her mother — an attorney at the time now a law school assistant dean — to vote, was a monumental moment for her mother, grandmother, and millions of Americans. Her grandmother, who lived during the 1950s and 1960s, recalls a different landscape for Black Americans. Stories of segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, voter suppression, and clashes with the police mobilized Black people to move and think differently to overcome the apparent distractions to stop Americans from carrying out their civic duty. Advocacy, justice, and allyship remain valuable principles taught to Janet by her mother, which is why the Black Lives Matter Movement also resonates with her. Human dignity and equality, bedrock principles of social justice are what the founders of Black Lives Matter Movement remain committed to seeing actualized in America. Janet was about Tamir Rice's age when he was murdered, and if he was alive today, he would be a young adult, perhaps in college. Consciousness around issues that affect the Black community are reasons why she is studying environment, economics, and politics to engage in grassroots movements and, in time, engage in legislative changes. Participating in legislative impact is not new to Janet, given her current policy and communications role at Deeds, Not Words. She recently participated in a legislative session where she testified regarding redistricting. Minority voters have frequently faced discrimination in voting during the redistricting process. Young women like Janet have taken the baton and are continuing the work of early Latina women and Black women activists who have sparked her interest in social justice and social change, speaking out publicly regarding the egregious acts that deny opportunities for minority voters.

In addition to her family having an impact on Janet's voting advocacy, she is also encouraged to remain civically and socially engaged by Texas community figures, where she attends college. If 2020 has done anything, it serves as a reminder that communities of color suffer worse when society suffers. Even during times of national stress — whether that is COVID-19 infection rates, police brutality, voter suppression, or unemployment numbers — America's structural shortcomings have a disproportionate impact on populations of color. Janet is inspired by Black activism and finds the works of James Baldwin applicable to America's equality. Janet has accepted an internship with the Texas Innocence Network, which presents a unique opportunity for her to learn more about the criminal justice system and combat the racial bias evidenced in the system.





COMPARISON OF HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

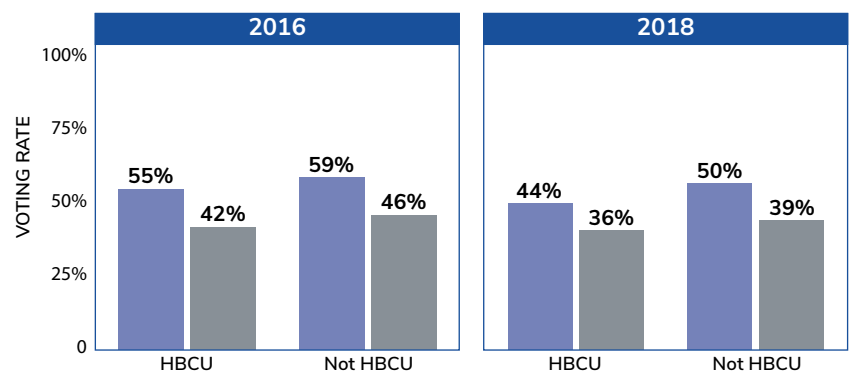
Figure 4 depicts a comparison of the voting rates of Black students at 14 HBCUs and 56 PWIs. The HBCUs and PWI comparison schools participate in NSLVE and report sex and race data in their enrollment reporting to the National Student Clearinghouse. We used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to define “comparable” institutions that were: A) in the same state, B) in the same sector (e.g., private vs public), and C) in a similar urbanization setting (e.g., city, suburb, rural).

In general, the HBCU-attending Black student population – women and men – votes at lower rates than Black students attending PWIs. Prior research shows that HBCUs are less likely to be located near polling sites, and that communities with large percentages of African Americans are often targeted by voter suppression efforts (Hallmark & Martinez, 2017; Martinez & Hallmark, 2018). For example, students at Prairie View A&M University in Waller County, TX faced systemic voter discrimination for decades. The county was the only one in the state that would not allow students to register and vote (Server, 2008). Through lawsuits, protests, marches and by putting pressure on the city to place an early voting site on campus, the students at Prairie View created opportunities for future students and gained representation in the local city council (Martinez & Hallmark, 2018).

These data offer a snapshot of voter engagement among Black women attending college. Colleges and universities typically aspire to cultivate bodies of students who go beyond their academic work to lead in the public sphere. Despite representing a relatively small proportion of enrolled college students, Black women play an outsized role in influencing civic life. This is but one way in which the college-enrolled segment of American Black women continue a legacy of Black women leading both academically and civically. Black women exemplify the ideal of college students leveraging their educational opportunities beyond employment to garner both economic and political mobility that together empower citizens to elevate themselves and the communities they come from. Considering this, institutions should not be neutral to this moment. They should look to populations of Black women on campus as exemplars in the pursuit of a more equitable future.

FIGURE 4

Black Student Turnout by Gender and HBCU Enrollment



National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, Summer 2021

■ Women ■ Men

Recommendations

For colleges and universities

1. Create opportunities for students – Black women in particular – to be involved in voting-related organizations to increase student voting.
2. Ensure that colleges and universities have classes and curricula on civic engagement and the history of voting rights that tell the story of Black women and their many roles.
3. Invite Black women students to the table and engage them in voting initiatives and programs.
4. Ensure Black women student leaders are supported on campus by allocating resources and avenues for support for their organizational ideas.

For voting organizations

1. Involve and listen to Black women to ensure that voting strategies are inclusive and that Black women's voices are centered.
2. Ensure that leadership in your organization is diverse and that Black women are given opportunities to lead.

For researchers

1. Involve Black women in research related to voting to increase validity and amplify their voices across research platforms.
2. Engage Black women in telling their voter activism stories as these will empower more Black women to be civically engaged.

For college students

1. Get involved in student voting organizations on campus as a way to make change. And, if these voting organizations don't represent your voice, start your own organizations.
2. Champion a cause and remain vigilant in seeing it through to completion.
3. Study the strategies and tactics used by Black women — those aimed at increasing voter participation and enhancing justice — in order to make change today.

For Campus Coalitions

Utilize the recommendations in IDHE's Election Imperatives series, based on campus climate studies and student voting data, which give specific guidance on how to:

1. Support student activism and leadership. The activist legacy of Black women is a model for student political learning.
2. Examine inclusivity issues related to access to voting and voter engagement practices.
3. Design interventions that are embedded, not short-term add-ons, yet act in ways that reflect an urgency to address long-standing political inequalities.
4. Reflect on past elections and reimagine political learning and participation, year-round. Study equity gaps in your institution's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement ("N-Solve") report, and work across co-curricular and cross-disciplinary curricular spaces to reach all students.





CONCLUSION

Given the prevalence of Black women in the political arena, the nomination and subsequent appointment of Kamala Harris as the first Black and Southeast Asian Vice President of the United States, and the community and advocacy efforts spearheaded by Black women changemakers, this report gives prominence to Black women innovators on college campuses and pioneers throughout history and present day. By offering a glimpse into the storied past and present of Black women activists and organizers, we are better able to understand the motivations that have historically propelled Black women to advocate for the dismantlement of oppression, the eradication of systemic inequities, and the actualization of social change through democratic involvement. For Black women, the roots of social and political engagement live in the legacies of Black families, Black communities, and Black households. This responsibility to voting and voting advocacy is deeply connected to ancestral ties and to the many Black pioneers who fought for equity in an inequitable society.

For many Black women student leaders, organizing and advocating for their voting rights is a privilege and an honor; one not bestowed upon their predecessors. With familial, historical, and communal influences, these women are organizing for social restoration and reshaping their experiences into activism. Using the Black women who came before them as models, many are unapologetically leading their campuses towards justice. The increase in Black women running and winning elections has inspired a generation of young women and has invigorated those who are recognizing their political power and realizing their potential. As Black women continue to progress in politics, the time is now to change the course of our country.

Voting Organizations Launched by Black Women

NEW GEORGIA PROJECT: an organization founded in 2013 by Stacey Abrams with a singular focus on increasing voter registration.

FAIR FIGHT: founded in 2014 with Lauren Groh-Wargo as CEO and Stacey Abrams as Chairperson, the organization focuses on voter participation and voter education of the elections and voter rights. To date, 800,000 new people have registered to vote in Georgia since 2018, with 45% of these new voters being under the age of 30 and 49% belong to racially and ethnically diverse groups (Connley, 2020).

BLACK VOTERS MATTER FUND: co-founded in 2016 by activist LaTosha Brown, the organization focuses on increasing voter registration and turnout and expanding voting rights policies in Alabama. It has expanded its geographical footprint to Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Mississippi.

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¹ To develop questions for each spotlight, the research team worked together to crowdsource questions that we intended to ask study participants. These questions aimed to better understand the impetus and motivations that propelled Black women students to become politically and socially engaged on their campuses. We sought to uncover the inspiration of their advocacy and activism and wanted to offer a comprehensive portrait of the motives that incited their civic engagement. In addition to collecting relevant demographic information using a demographic survey about each of the women interviewed, the questions that we developed focused on four specific categories: political view and affiliation, political and social engagement, freedom of expression and influence, and political outlook. The political view and affiliation category was intended to capture the political perspectives of each interviewee. For this particular category, we crafted questions that inquired about the political interests, the basis for political perspective, and factors that influenced each participant to vote for a particular candidate in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. The political and social engagement category sought to better understand the social and political issues that resonated most with each interviewee, how they believed their social identities influenced their political engagement, and the importance of voting rights advocacy for students. We also asked about their freedom of expression and influence including the social movements and figures that encouraged them to be politically involved, their communal and familial influences to their voting patterns, and how their campuses have fostered a culture of political activism. Finally, in the political outlook category, we asked each interviewee how they see their activism playing a role in their future career goals and what their advocacy will look like following graduation. Each interview lasted 30 - 45 minutes per student and was held either on the phone or via Zoom. Transcripts developed from each interview were used to create spotlights for each interviewee.