

Tracking the Health of the Humanities at HBCUs

As part of the preparatory work for a survey of humanities departments in the United States, Humanities Indicators staff examined trends in humanities degree completion at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).¹ Among the findings are two particularly significant developments:

1. While bachelor's degree completions in the humanities continued to fall nationally, the decline was more gradual and appears to have largely plateaued at HBCUs (discounting a slight drop in 2022 that was also seen in several nonhumanities fields).
2. In the past, HBCUs awarded a relatively small share of their degrees in the humanities; as of 2022, though, HBCUs and all other institutions had converged in the share of bachelor's degrees awarded in the field.

Since the 19th century, HBCUs have played a vital role in opening pathways to higher education that would otherwise have been closed to Black students and have served as vital cultural centers and resources for their communities. However, these institutions have traditionally awarded most of their degrees in vocational subjects, with only a comparatively small share of their degrees going to the humanities.²

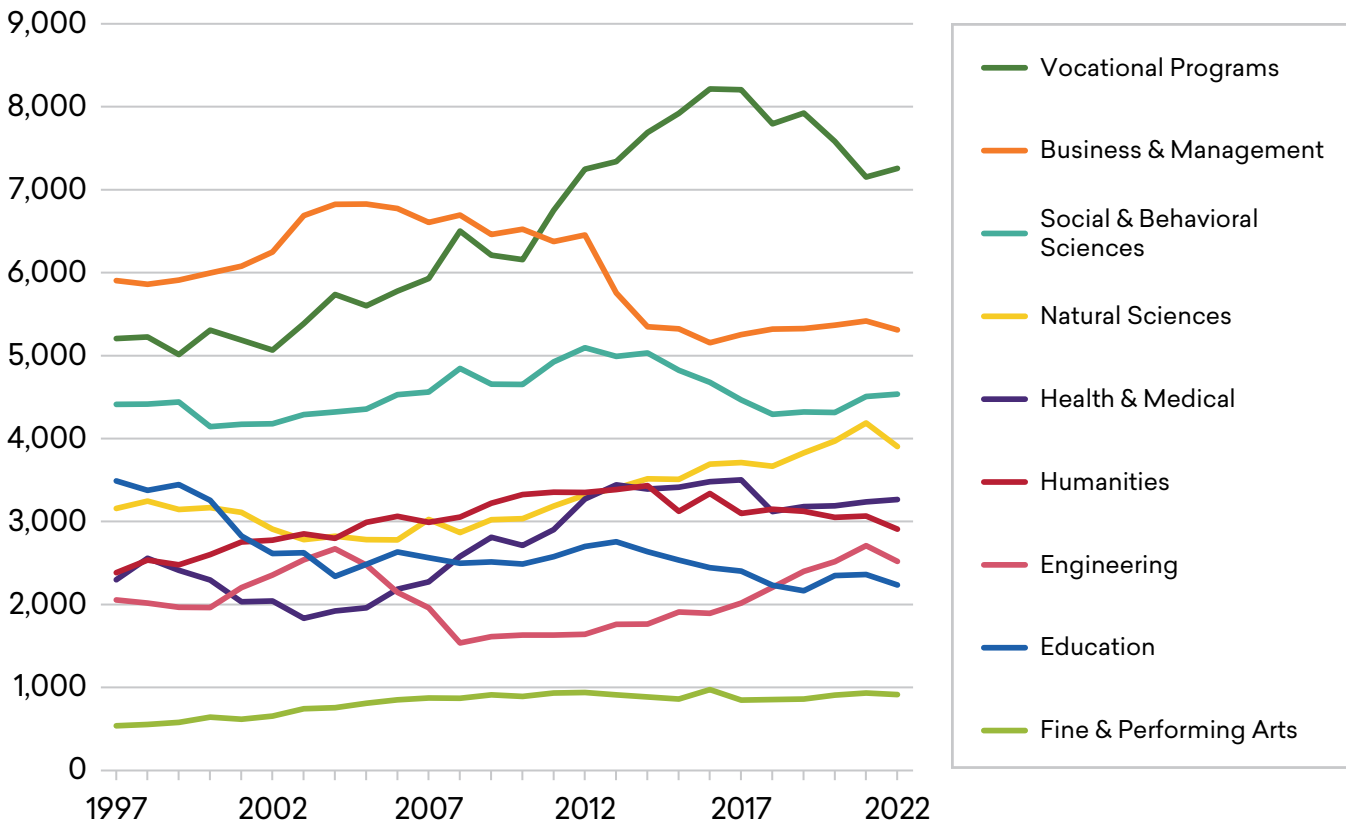
In 2022, HBCUs awarded 2,907 bachelor's degrees in the humanities (see figure 1). This was down 15% from the recent high of 3,434 degrees awarded in 2014. The total number of bachelor's degrees awarded by HBCUs also declined from 2014 to 2022, but by a comparatively modest 2.5%.

Much of the decline in humanities bachelor's completions at HBCUs occurred from 2014 to 2018, with completions then plateauing at around 3,000 through 2022. Prior to 2014, both HBCUs and non-HBCU institutions experienced a substantial increase in humanities degree completions: up 44% from 1997 at HBCUs and up 35% at other institutions. The post-2014 decline at HBCUs was substantial, but at other institutions it was all the more so, with completions dropping by more than a fifth.

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Among the 88 HBCUs awarding humanities bachelor's degrees, 36 awarded more degrees in 2022 than they did in 1997—in many cases, substantially more. North Carolina A&T State University had the largest increase, with the number of degrees rising from 85 in 1997 to 333 in 2022 (accounting for more than 11% of the humanities bachelor's degrees awarded by HBCUs that year). Most of the humanities degrees the school awarded were classified as “liberal studies” (with concentrations in African American studies, cultural studies, or prelaw). In an email to Indicators staff, Jeffrey

Figure 1: Bachelor's Degrees Awarded by HBCUs, by Field, 1997 to 2022

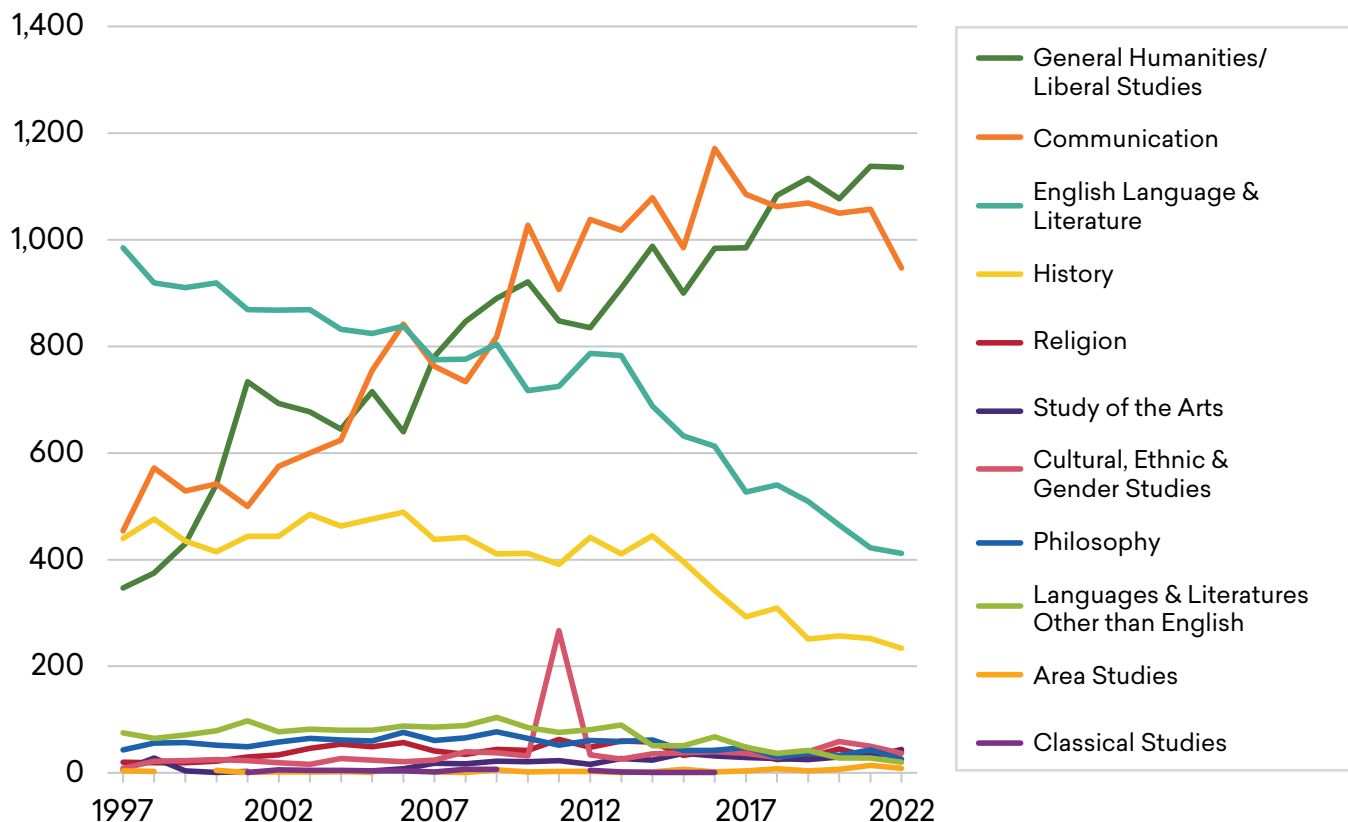


Dwayne Mack, chair of the program, reported that “Much of the interest we see in Liberal Studies is attributed to the online degree option we offer for our program.” He added, “Having some influence on constructing [their] concentration is very attractive to students, especially non-traditional students.” The latter may also be true on some other campuses, like Delaware State and Texas Southern, which saw substantial growth in the number of humanities bachelor’s degree completions after introducing similar interdisciplinary liberal studies/general humanities degrees, even though the programs are not online.

As these findings suggest, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in the category of liberal studies/general humanities more than tripled from 1997

to 2022, rising from 347 to 1,136 (see figure 2). The category grew dramatically from 14.6% of all humanities degrees granted by these institutions in 1997 to 39.1% of the degrees awarded in 2022, surpassing all other subjects. In comparison, at other colleges and universities, this subject area accounted for 21.0% of humanities degrees—essentially unchanged from 1997. The number of communication degrees also increased substantially at HBCUs, from 454 in 1997 to 947 in 2022. In the latter year, they accounted for the second-largest share of humanities bachelor’s degrees awarded by HBCUs (32.6%). This substantial growth was similar to the trend at other colleges and universities, where communication is the most popular type of humanities degree (albeit with only a 26.8% share of completions).

Figure 2: Humanities Bachelor's Degrees Awarded by HBCUs, by Discipline, 1997 to 2022

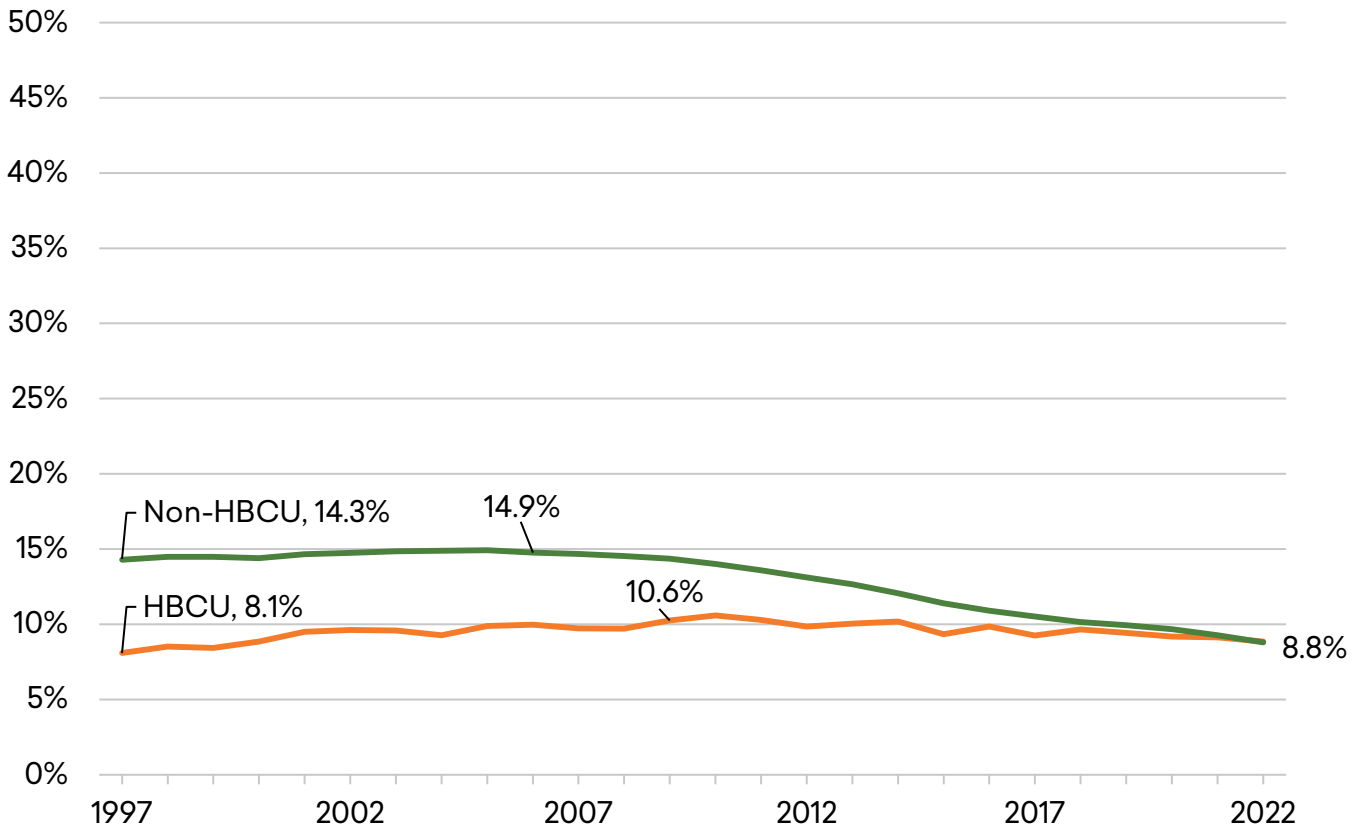


Conversely, HBCUs have seen a significant decline in the number of degrees completed in most of the other humanities disciplines. Bachelor's degrees in English language and literature had a particularly sharp decline, falling from 985 degrees in 1997 to 412 in 2022. (Their share of all humanities bachelor's degrees granted by HBCUs shrank from 41.3% to 14.2% over the same period.) Degrees in languages and literatures other than English fell by more than half (from 75 to 20 degrees). The number of history and philosophy degrees also fell substantially (from 440 to 234 for history and from 43 to 26 for philosophy).

HBCUs stand out from other colleges and universities for the relatively large number of vocational degrees they award (primarily in social work and

criminal justice). The number of degrees awarded in that category increased 39% from 1997 to 2022. Degree completions in health and medical sciences also increased substantially, rising 42% over the same period. But other vocationally oriented programs saw declines. Bachelor's degrees awarded in education declined 36% from 1997 to 2022, while business and management degree completions dropped 10%. All other fields awarded more bachelor's degrees in 2022 than they did in 1997, with the largest percentage increase occurring in the fine and performing arts (up 69.6%). For most fields, however, the more recent trend was downward, with only engineering and the natural sciences experiencing growth in degree completions over the past decade (rising by 54% and 18%, respectively, from 2012 to 2022).

Figure 3: Humanities Degrees as a Share of All Bachelor's Degrees Awarded, by Institution Type, 1997 to 2022

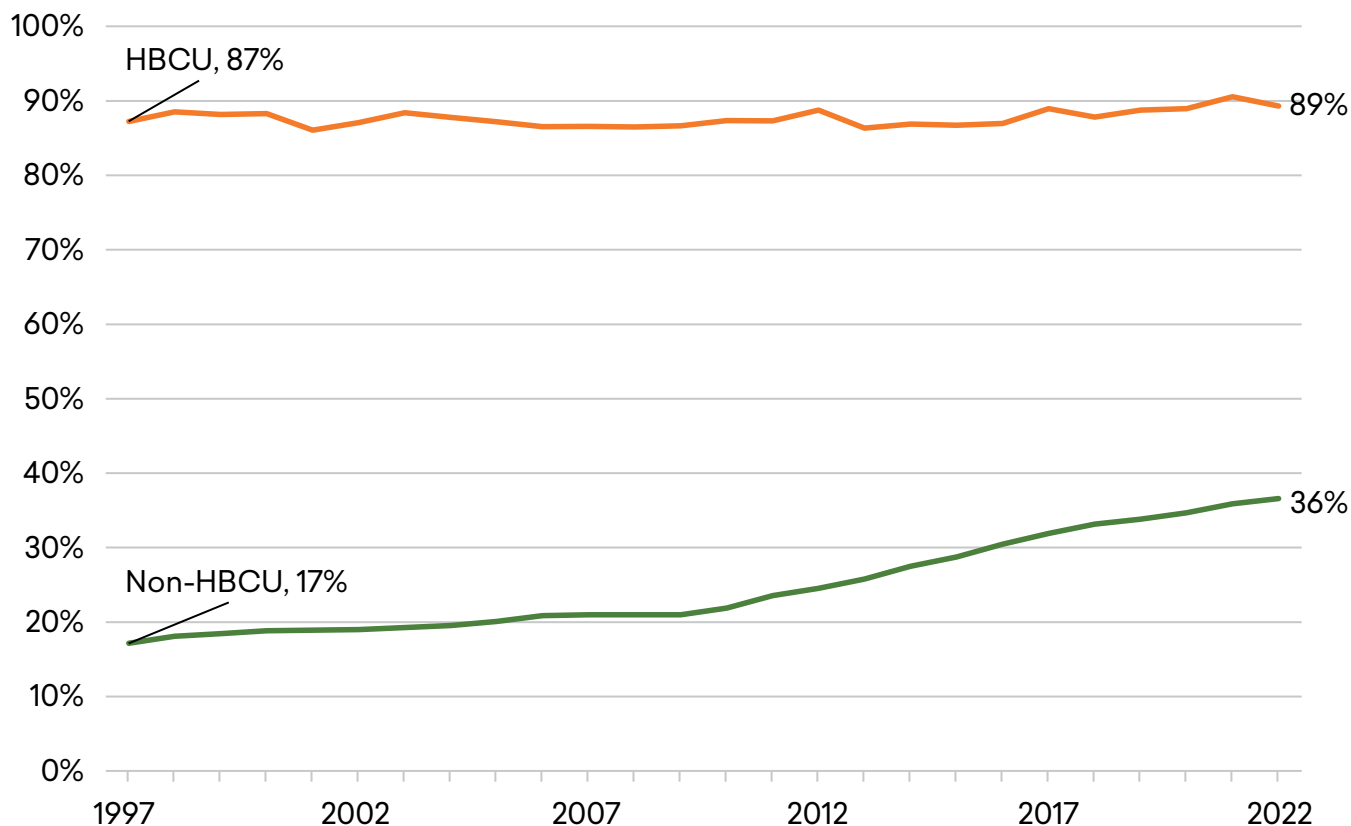


The effect of these trends is apparent when one looks at the field's "market share" at HBCUs relative to other colleges and universities (see figure 3). The shares of bachelor's degrees being awarded in the humanities has converged at both types of institutions. In 1997, the humanities accounted for just 8.1% of the bachelor's degrees awarded at HBCUs but then increased to 10.6% of the degrees conferred in 2010. In comparison, at all other colleges and universities in 1997, the humanities accounted for 14.3% of the bachelor's degrees awarded, with that share growing to 14.9% in 2005. But while the share of humanities bachelor's degrees awarded at non-HBCUs shrank by more than a third after the mid-2000s, the decline that began at HBCUs five years later was more gradual. As a result, the two trends

converged in 2022, with the humanities accounting for 8.8% of the bachelor's degrees awarded at both types of institutions.

HBCUs have played a vital role in helping to diversify the mix of students earning humanities degrees. In 2022, HBCUs accounted for 13.5% of the humanities degrees awarded to students identifying as Black or African American and 3.8% of the humanities degrees awarded to students from all historically minoritized racial and ethnic groups.³ However, both shares have decreased since 1997, when 17.3% of the humanities bachelor's degrees earned by Black/African American students and 6.8% of the degrees awarded to historically minoritized students were at HBCUs.

Figure 4: Share of Humanities Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded to Historically Minoritized Students, by Institution Type, 1997 to 2022



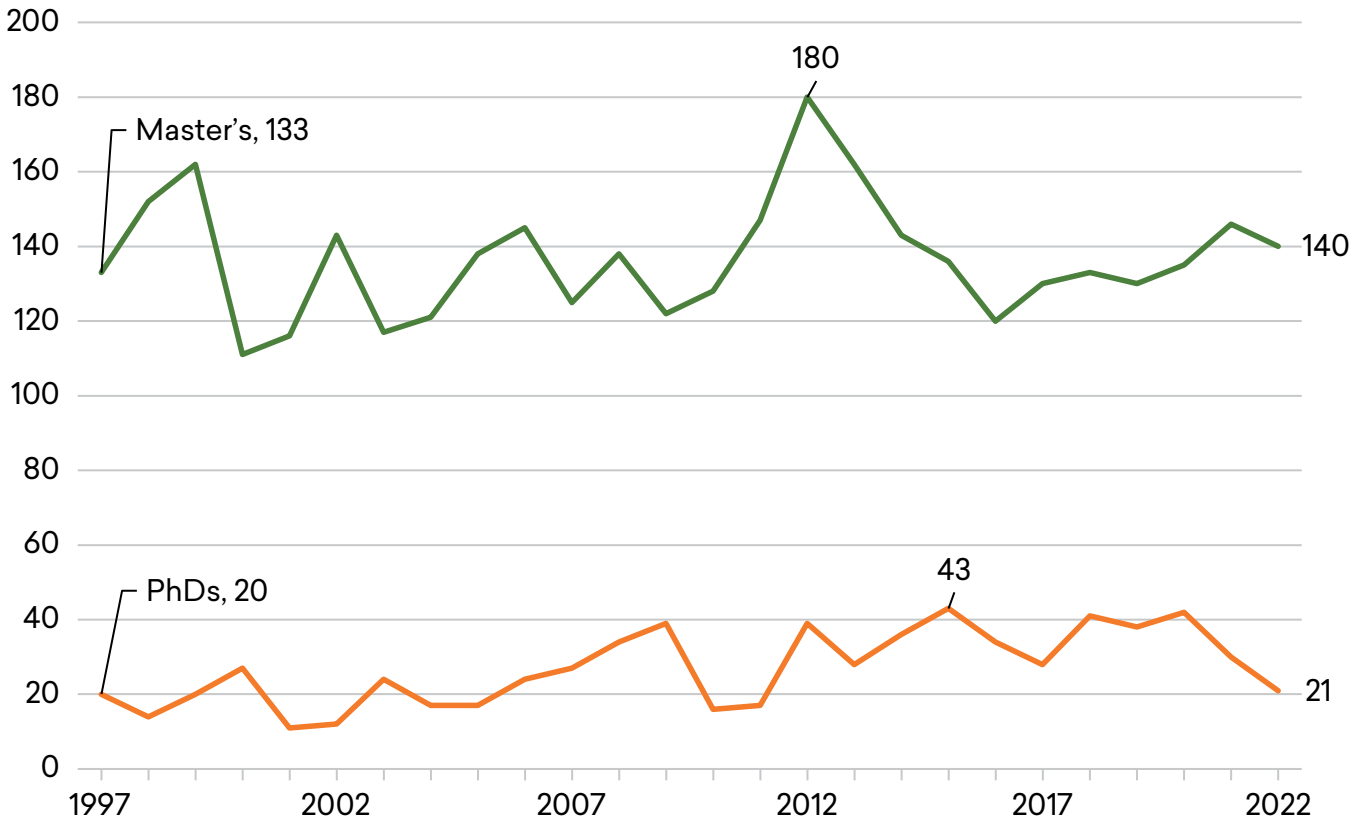
This decline is due primarily to recent growth in the share of humanities degrees awarded to traditionally minoritized students at non-HBCU institutions (see figure 4). From 1997 to 2022, the share of bachelor’s degrees awarded by HBCUs that went to such students increased slightly, from 87% to 89%. In comparison, the share of humanities degrees awarded to historically minoritized students at non-HBCU institutions grew modestly from 1997 to 2009 (increasing from 17% to 21%), but then increased more rapidly over the next 12 years (to 36% of all humanities degrees conferred).

While most of the students receiving humanities degrees at HBCUs are Black/African American, a growing number are members of other minoritized racial or ethnic groups. In 2022, humanities degree

completers at HBCUs included 153 students from those populations, up from fewer than 50 prior to 2009 and accounting for 5% of the students receiving humanities bachelor’s degrees at HBCUs.

Trends in Graduate Degrees

The small number of HBCUs awarding graduate degrees results in “spiky” data, which makes it difficult to discern trends in degree completions at this level (see figure 5). Nevertheless, the data reveal a modest increase in both master’s and doctoral degrees at HBCUs from the turn of the century into the 2010s. From a low of 111 master’s degrees in the humanities in 2000, the number spiked to a high of 180 in 2012. Completions then

Figure 5: Humanities Graduate Degrees Awarded by HBCUs, 1997 to 2022

fell to 120 degrees in 2016, followed by a partial recovery that brought the number up to 140 in 2022. Similarly, at the doctoral level, the number rose from a low of 11 humanities doctorates awarded in 2001 to a high of 43 in 2015, before a sharp decline after 2020 dropped PhDs awards to just 21 degrees. At both levels, the number of degree completions in 2022 was roughly the same as in 1997, but down substantially from the recent peak (a 22% decline in master's degrees and a 51% decline in doctorates).

The humanities also accounted for a much smaller share of the graduate degrees being awarded at HBCUs (0.5% of all master's and professional degrees awarded in 2022 and 0.6% of the doctoral degrees). Looking back to 1997 (the earliest data

point available), the shares of humanities degrees awarded in 2022 by HBCUs were slightly above the historical average for doctoral degrees and close to the average for master's and professional degrees.

The number of HBCUs awarding graduate degrees has varied from year to year throughout the 25 years for which data are available. From 1997 to 2022, the number HBCUs awarding master's and professional degrees in the humanities ranged from a low of 12 to a high of 19 (with 15 awarding such degrees in 2022). Only four HBCUs awarded doctoral degrees in the humanities during this time period (Clark Atlanta University, Howard University, Morgan State University, and Virginia University of Lynchburg), and the bulk of these degrees (60%) were awarded by Howard University.

Endnotes

1. For more on the Humanities Departmental Survey, visit <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/humanities-higher-education-surveys>. Findings from the most recent round of the survey will be available in April 2025.
2. For more on the history of HBCUs, see Roger L. Geiger, *The History of Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 467–78; and Jelani Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
3. The Humanities Indicators uses the phrase “historically minoritized students” for students who are citizens or permanent residents and self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native (non-Hispanic); Asian (non-Hispanic); Black or African American (non-Hispanic); Hispanic or Latino; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic); and two or more races (non-Hispanic).

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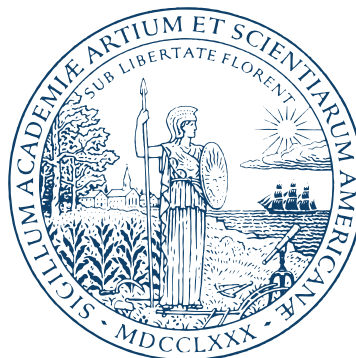
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