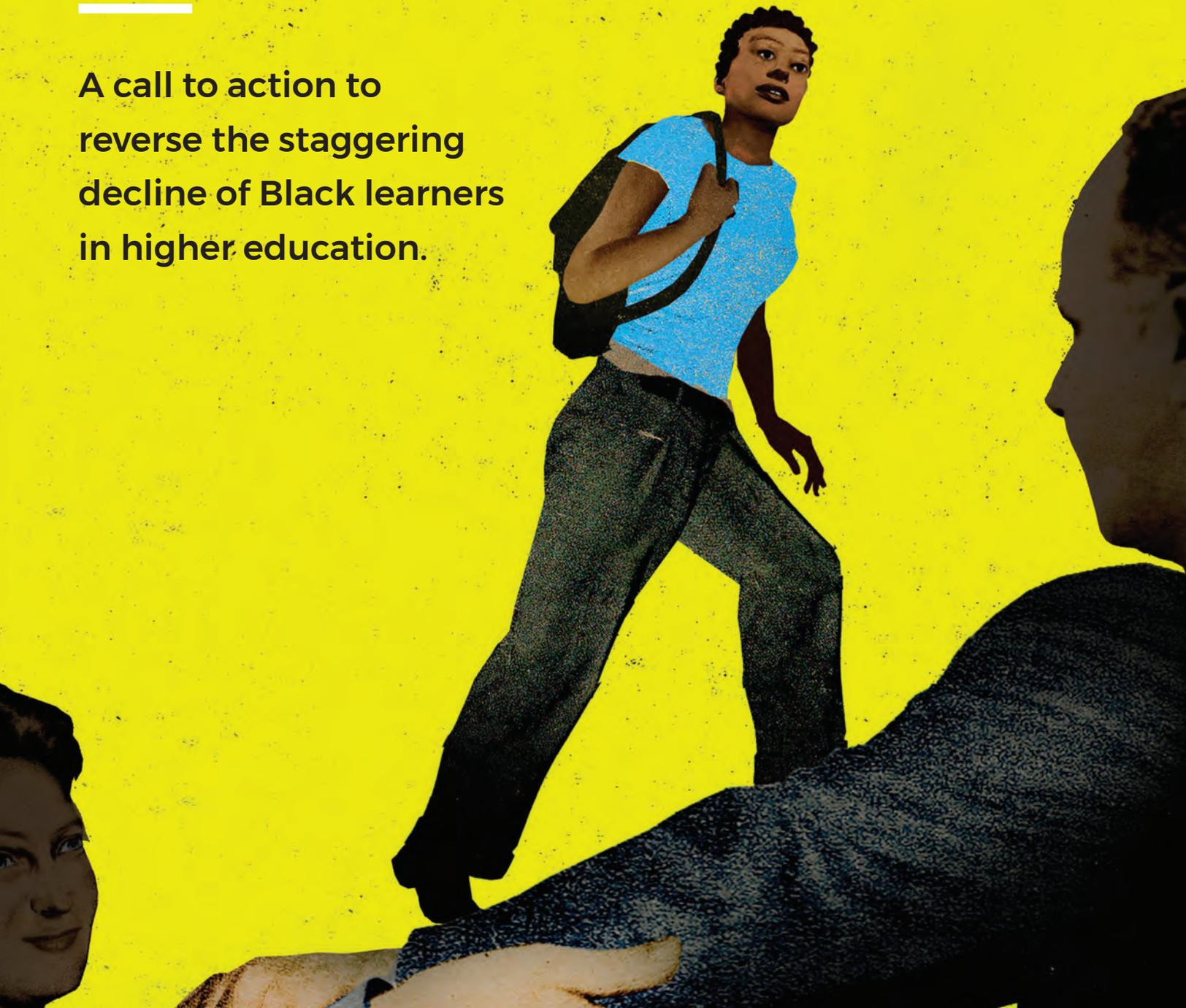


Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically

A call to action to
reverse the staggering
decline of Black learners
in higher education.





IN MARCH, A PARTNERSHIP OF leading higher education organizations including Achieving the Dream, Lumina Foundation, Education Counsel and HCM Strategists, released *Level Up: Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learning, Unapologetically*, a policy report and call to action for higher education leaders. ACCT President and CEO Jee Hang Lee

served on a national panel of advisers for the project, alongside National Panel Chair Keith Curry, Ph.D., president of Compton College.

The partners emphasize the importance of the use of “unapologetically” in the report’s title: “To be clear, the onus is not on Black learners. State and federal institutions and policymakers at all levels have a responsibility to ensure that places of higher education are accessible and welcoming to all, regardless of a student’s race or background. Delivering on this overdue right requires mobilizing core commitments with shared ownership among federal and state policymakers; local communities and their community colleges and other institutions of higher education; and philanthropic champions.”

Sobering Statistics

Black student college enrollments have been declining steadily since 2011, particularly at community colleges, which have historically represented a critical access point for Black learners as relatively affordable, open-access institutions. The 26 percent drop in Black community college enrollments between 2011 and 2019 represents a pre-pandemic loss of almost 300,000 students. The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students’ health, safety, and economic security has only accelerated these declines, with Black community college enrollment dropping by another 100,000 students in 2020 alone, returning enrollment to 2000-01 levels, according to the report.

The cumulative impact has been staggering: “Taking into account available public data since 2020, declines today are closer to a 44 percent drop nationally in Black community college enrollments,” the report states. “Decades of progress in educational opportunity and economic mobility have been erased.”

The report highlights other, equally sobering statistics, including:

- About 600,000 Black learners have disappeared from all American higher education institutions over the same period.
- These declines are not related to a reduced population of Black Americans; “in fact,” the report states, “the Black young adult population (18-34 years old) has steadily grown since 2000.”

“These data are not new,” the report states, “but our national response must be.”

Leveling Up by Getting REAL

The project’s primary recommendations assert that “in order to level up,” state and federal policymakers, institutions, and other educational organizations must address four “core commitment areas” to “truly improve the postsecondary value proposition for Black learners.” Dubbed “Get REAL,” the four areas are:

- **Real transparency and true affordability.** The vast majority — 80 percent — of Black Americans believe that college is unaffordable,

and too often Black learners leave postsecondary experiences with considerable debt. Among students earning an associate degree, only a third of Black learners graduated with no debt compared to 49% of white graduates, a trend not explained by parent income or education levels.

Along with ensuring transparency in tuition and fees, institutions must also ensure that Black learners see “the value of committing resources to higher education.” Only 50 percent of Black students in a 2022 poll believed their college loans were probably worthwhile, the report said.

- **Ensured success through shared ownership.** Institutions and policymakers must focus on “rebuilding confidence in a failed system and offering pathways leading to increased economic prosperity for Black families,” the report states.

Building shared ownership involves transparency in labor market outcomes, intentional partnerships that create postsecondary pathways and programs that meet national and local demand, better data practices, and investments in instruction and student services that meet the needs of Black learners. “States, institutions, and other entities committed to serving Black learners well must make value statements with their budgets by making direct investments in Black learners’ needs,” the report states.

- **Academic and social supports that create a sense of belonging.**

Colleges must commit to creating a sense of belonging for the varied experiences of Black learners, including academic and social supports, as well as services that address non-academic needs, including mental health, childcare, housing, transportation, and food — all challenges disproportionately faced by Black learners.

“To create this sense of belonging, a collaborative, coordinated effort is needed across academic departments, student affairs, and community organizations so Black learners are seen and holistically supported,” the report states.

- **Learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners.**

Too little attention is paid to the teaching and learning experiences of Black students and how these experiences contribute to their success, the report states. Faculty must be trained, retrained, and supported in culturally responsive pedagogy and creating inclusive environments.

“Centuries of lowered expectations and lack of cultural appreciation of Black students’ experiences must all be acknowledged and addressed,” the report states. “Black students deserve to be seen for the brilliant, unique individuals they are without having to constantly battle overt anti-Black bias, microaggressions, or non-inclusive practices which can all inhibit the learning process.”

Changing the Reality, not the Narrative

The report’s authors stress that these commitments must not just be about increasing “Black learners’ understanding of the inherent value of postsecondary education.” The work, they say, “is rooted in acknowledging that postsecondary education in its current and originally designed structures does not provide Black learners the access and opportunities that have led to economic and life success for others.”

“This reality must be changed — not just the narrative — through intentional investment and joint action delivering on these core commitments to ensure Black learner thrive,” the report states.

The report and call to action, as well as other information, are available at www.community4blacklearnerexcellence.com.