



## “Building Intergenerational Prosperity at HBCUs and TCUs”

What does college success look like for Black and Native student parents? Dr. Deana Around Him and Julian Thompson shed light on student parents’ and administrators’ experiences at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs, and Tribal Colleges and Universities, or TCUs. In conversation with David Croom, Associate Director for the Postsecondary Success for Parents initiative at Ascend, they discuss how

Ascend’s new Black and Native Family Futures Fund is advancing student parent success on these campuses and what other colleges can learn from HBCUs’ and TCUs’ institutional cultures.

Julian Thompson is Director of Strategy at UNCF’s Institute for Capacity Building, and Dr. Deana Around Him is a 2022 Aspen Institute Ascend Fellow and senior research scholar at Child Trends.

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David Croom: Welcome to season two of 1 in 5, which takes its name from the one in five college students in the US who are also parents. I'm David Croom from [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#). I have the pleasure of leading Ascend's Post-Secondary Success for Parents Initiative and share a personal connection to the work as a son of a student parent. This season of 1 in 5, we've heard remarkable student parents, past and present, share their educational and professional achievements, and the pitfalls they've encountered along the way.

A majority of student parents are women of color with Black and Native students more likely to be balancing school and parenting than other groups of students. In this bonus episode, we're doing a deep dive into their experiences. I'm joined by our guests, Dr. Deana Around Him and Julian Thompson to shed more light on student parents' and administrators' experiences at historically Black colleges and universities or HBCUs and Tribal colleges and universities or TCUs as well as how Ascend's Black and Native Family Futures Fund is advancing student parent success on these campuses. [Dr. Around Him](#), Mr. Thompson, thank you both for being here.

Dr. Deana Around Him:

Thank you for inviting me, David. It's a pleasure to see the representation of Native peoples and Native student parents, in a sense, work, and I'm really excited for the conversation today.

Julian Thompson:

Me too. Thank you so much, David, and great to meet you Dr. Around Him.

Croom: [Ascend's Black and Native Family Futures Fund](#) is a new capacity-building fund that provides financial support and expert technical assistance to selected HBCUs and TCUs committed to improving the success of student parents. I'm excited to have you both here to talk about the student parent experiences at these institutions as well as insights from students and administrators at Grambling State University and Stone Child College, two fund recipients. Julian, I'm going to go with you first. You're the director of strategy at [UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building](#). Could you briefly tell us about your work with historical Black colleges and universities?

Thompson: Sure thing, David, and thank you so much for the opportunity to be on this podcast. I work at the [United Negro College Fund](#), which is an organization dedicated to the improvement and sustainability of our country's historically Black colleges and universities. I work for a unit called the Institute for Capacity Building, which is essentially trying to do two things. Number one, we're partnering with HBCUs on the types of strategies that can improve the success of their students, their faculty, and their institutions. Number two, we're creating networks where HBCUs can learn from each other and from other practices in higher education. It's with that framework that we think a lot about the work that HBCUs do to support student parents.

Croom: Thank you, Julian. Dr. Around Him, you're a [2022 Ascend Fellow](#), which I have to say first and foremost, and a senior research scholar at Child Trends. Can you tell us a bit more about your research focus?

Around Him: Of course. I'm a research scholar at [Child Trends](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan company dedicated to rigorous research and evaluation that ensures all children thrive. I have the pleasure of leading our Child Trends initiative focused on developing a policy and practice relevant research agenda to advance the wellbeing of Indigenous children and families. I'm a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, a mother, and a citizen of Indian Country, so to speak. The term "parenting students" was not familiar to me until a couple of years ago, but like you, David, the experience exists within my own family, and I know that it is common among my personal networks as well. I wanted to learn more, and my colleagues and I were able to recently conduct an analysis of public data from the National Center for Education Statistics with partners at the Urban Institute where we found that 27% or more than one in four Indigenous undergraduate students are parenting. So while the specific topics and areas of emphasis in my research are varied, Native children and families are always at the center, and my research focus is ensuring they have what they need to thrive.

Croom: Thank you, Dr. Around Him. I'm so excited to have you both, and really, I think what's going to be great is bringing that two-gen perspective of having expertise in both children and families, but also the post-secondary pathway and adults will be really, I think, formative and helpful for this conversation. So I'm going to move on to our next question, which is... I like to start with how student parent and child experiences are unique at HBCUs and Tribal colleges. These colleges and universities have been leading the way in supporting student parents, their families, and their communities. So, Julian, I want to go with you first. Can you speak a little bit to what I mentioned just now? In your experience working with

HBCUs, why do you think they're particularly well-positioned to support the student parent population as compared to other kinds of colleges and universities?

Thompson: Yeah. It's a great question, David. It's a privilege at UNCF to be able to work with historically Black colleges and universities because HBCUs are a unique institution in the context of our country's history and indeed in world history. The fact that HBCUs were created in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War and a couple of them actually beforehand was a miracle, and the fact that today, in 2023, we have a group of 102 accredited historically Black colleges and universities whose mission is to service Black people in the Black community is literally unprecedented across the Western hemisphere, and so it's, really, a group of institutions that America can be proud of.

Really, when you take a deeper dive, there's a lot to be proud of in terms of their current implementation of their work. Our [Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute](#) actually just released a study on economic mobility for students that attend HBCUs and compared it to predominantly white institutions and other institutions in American higher education. What it found was that 90% of HBCUs rank in the top 10% of institutions across the country when it comes to the question of, number one, providing access to students who are from the lowest income quartiles in our country, and then number two, creating the conditions for those students to leave that bottom quartile after they graduate.

In my view, HBCUs have achieved that success by building real cultures, processes, and systems that focus on access, inclusion, and belonging. While those practices may not be documented in ways that others might expect, they're an embedded part of the culture, and that creates conditions where students who aren't thriving in the PWI context are finding ways to be supported, to persist, to graduate, and to find fulfilling careers because of their experience at HBCUs. So, in my view, it's that real historic grounding that HBCUs have had as places of inclusion and how that is woven through the leadership styles, the approaches of faculty, the nature of the systems that are embraced at HBCUs that create the conditions, I think, for them to be true leaders in engagement of student parent populations.

Croom: Awesome. Thank you, and hits on so many notes, considering that those student parents feel a real sense of stigma and a lack of belonging because of their parenting status. So, again, that sense of community and purpose at HBCUs really potentially speaks to that population. Deana, moving on to Tribal context. So I'm going to play a clip in a moment. We talked to a student parent named Clarissa who attends a Tribal college in Montana, Stone Child College, one of our Family Future Fund institutions, but she did more than just attend. She describes a college as a second family to her, and I should also note that [61% of students at Stone Child College are student parents](#), so it's a significant population. Now, we're going to play you a clip from Clarissa's interview, and I would love for you to share your thoughts on the kind of culture Tribal colleges create like Stone Child and that encourage student parents to succeed and to live and thrive. So I'm going to play that clip now.

Clarissa: Stone Child has always been a second family to me. My mom, she used to work there. She worked there for, I think, over 10 years in different positions with different grants and stuff. So I got to know a lot of the staff there, and they got to know me. I got to work there in the summer when I was in high school. It's just a community on its own, Stone Child. So, my dream, honestly, I want to stay on my reservation. The world is a big and beautiful place, and I love that, and I want to travel and see it, and I want my kids to see it too, but I always want them to know where their home is and know where they belong, and we belong here. This is our home. Us as Native people, we're really a tight-knit culture in general. Even, you could really see that during the pandemic. Our reservation really takes care of its people, and not just that, but it's home. I don't want to leave home, a place where I belong. I know who I am. I know I'm learning more about my religion, and it's just been great.

Around Him: There's so many wonderful things that I heard in that clip. Oftentimes, in Native communities, educational institutions like K-12 schools and TCUs are the heart of community events and activities. In Clarissa's remarks, we heard just how powerful this can be for promoting academic success and making those places safe and affirming learning environments for community members. This can be especially true for Indigenous parenting students given that TCUs are more likely to offer parenting students on campus childcare support compared to other degree-granting institutions. For example, it's estimated that [43% of TCUs offer parenting students on campus childcare compared to just 21% of other institutions](#). TCUs take care of the whole family and often go beyond what we see in non-Tribal higher ed settings. I think the experiences Clarissa described are likely common among Indigenous parenting students at TCUs and more recent pushes to generate data to help us understand these experiences are really exciting.

David, you noted that an estimated 61% of Stone Child College students are student parents. I'm not surprised by that number at all. Our TCUs across the country are an immense resource for Tribal communities, and there are over 35 accredited TCUs that operate 90 campuses in 15 states covering the majority of what we think of as Indian Country places where a large proportion of Native people live. These colleges and institutions serve Native students from over 200 federally recognized Indian Tribes, and their student populations include young people right out of high school and adults who are returning to school after a break in their educational journey. These include people who have young children as well as older students with teenagers, and so I think it's really exciting to hear Clarissa's experience be one that is so affirming for her and allowed her to see her setting roots and making a path for her children to remain in their community and feel connected to their identity there as well.

Croom: Thank you, Deana. Yeah, I love that clip. It was just a great opportunity to hear from a student parent perspective and how this college has been such a place for them to be and to belong, which is what we hear from talking to Tribal students and others as well. I want to move to talking about one of the HBCUs in our Family Futures fund, Grambling University. They're working on reopening their Campus Child Development Center, which closed in 2009 due to a lack of sufficient funding, which is a common theme throughout post-secondary. Taking a strong two-generation approach, the university will provide early

literacy and developmentally appropriate science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics curriculum to children enrolled at the center while also providing wraparound support services to their parents who are enrolled at the university. Grambling is a good example of the programming that HBCUs and Tribal colleges are investing in to support student parents. I'll play a clip from President Gallo of Grambling State University, and then I'll turn to both of you for your reflections on the facility he describes.

Pres. Gallot: I attended nursery school through college on this very campus. In addition to the nursery school, we had a laboratory school that was first through 12th grade. So, yeah, all of my education up through college was all on the campus of [Grambling State University](#). It was closed two presidents before me, but there is now a charter school, Lincoln Preparatory School, and they're in the final stages of a new \$45 million campus that is still here in Grambling. So we will definitely have an amazingly great school complex for our local kids to attend, much better than the facilities we had at the lab school.

From the very beginning of my presidency, I can recall several students asking if we would be reopening the Childcare Center because they were student parents. We have to... and one of the things I always say when I'm out recruiting prospective students is that we will meet you where you are. Let's face it. If you are a parent who's interested in going to college, then I think that's something you're going to look for as you're shopping what school you may go to, and so I think there's certainly a competitive advantage to having these types of services for students who may or may not otherwise consider coming here. This may be that thing that they need that will put them over the top in terms of choosing Grambling. So I think there's certainly an advantage there. Just as I was blessed in the Grambling community to interact with and know Black PhDs throughout the entire community, it gives these children the visible representation of what Black excellence looks like, and what they see is what they will be.

Croom: So, Julian, I'll go with you first. How does a program like the one at Grambling actually improve the experience of student parents, but also the resilience and sustainability of the college? In other words, strategically, how is supporting a student parent population and their kids beneficial to the college itself?

Thompson: It's critically important, I think, particularly as our higher education system seeks to embrace more and larger diversity of the types of students that it serves, that we build a more holistic approach to what it means to serve a student and ensure that a student is prepared for success. So many of our higher education institutions have built real systems and structures around academics and academic preparation, but a holistic approach to student success and a holistic approach to student wellbeing has to interface with that student-school community, consider all of the factors that impact their commitment to completion, support them in the managing the commitments that they have outside of their lives that will impact their ability to succeed, and that doesn't even begin to get to the questions of finances, of making sure that they are physically and mentally healthy and supported, ensuring that they have career opportunities that enable them to stay in school and graduate, and so I'm really finding that we're just at the cusp of higher education

taking on the full project of embracing a student in all of their three-dimensionality and ensuring that they have what they need to be successful.

If you use the perspective of holistic student engagement as your framework, then you have to deal with the fact that one in five college students is a student parent. That means that you have to help that student manage commitments, think about the resources that they have to manage, ensure that not only the student themselves, but their families are fully healthy and supported, and so it's exciting to see that in a place like Grambling, but really, across the HBCU space, we're seeing examples of them putting that spirit into practice through new and innovative programs and through the types of policies that can help underserved and excluded student populations succeed.

Croom: Deana, how does support, like what we see at Stone Child, but also Grambling was just mentioned that we'll be establishing, help meet the needs of children and help them thrive based on your research and knowledge? What could be better considered from the child's perspective, and how could your research be better applied toward post-secondary spaces?

Around Him: I'm really excited to see things like the two-gen approach that Ascend has talked about quite a bit being discussed in the TCU and parenting student space. There are real opportunities to bridge what we're doing in Tribal early childhood research with what we're learning about parenting students experiences. We've done a lot of work to show that engagement in culture and language learning opportunities promote a positive identity and a strong identity for Native children. If we can do that as early as possible and encourage them to pursue education at home, then that sets them up for the future where they can become our doctors, our lawyers, and contribute to our communities in new and exciting ways.

So I'm really inspired by the growing emphasis on two-gen approaches, and I think in our Tribal context, we often think of it as a multi-gen approach. Many of our families exist with extended family networks. We have grandparents who may also be in college and learning alongside their children and grandchildren. I think that's a nice way for us to learn about what works for our communities and extend some of those lessons to other settings like HBCUs and other institutions where we may have large proportions of Native students that are not attending school in a Tribally operated educational institution.

Croom: Thank you. So I'd like to play you both a clip of Dr. Suzanne Mayo at Grambling State where she notes some issues around partnerships, and in particular, she's talking about it from her context with HBCUs, including at the state level where Grambling is based in, Louisiana, to team up and tackle issues together. This sort of team up can be a bit of a challenge, so we'll play that clip.

Dr. Suzanne Mayo:

I have not found any. I've been looking since we applied since the grant was announced, and I've been trying to see if there is. I have not found a support group. I think that's something that could come out of the grant as it builds and move possibly in the future. I

hope so, that there will be a group of Ascenders, if you will, of Aspen Institute, Ascenders at HBCUs around children and families, even by state. I can't even find it in the state of Louisiana, and we have three or four campuses that have the [CCAMPIS](#). Now, they're meeting about CCAMPIS and trying to see if there should be a statewide effort to apply so that everybody has the same thing, but I haven't found that they've reached out to us to say, "Hey, let's get together and talk about how we do it." So that's probably a void that needs to happen in our ed, and it certainly would be beneficial for everyone, not just at HBCUs, but you could have one at HBCUs, and then you could have one by state, so you'd have two vehicles of individuals getting cohesive work, and sharing strategies, and looking at best practices between all of us.

Croom: Awesome. Just for listeners, CCAMPIS is a federal grant program that provides subsidized childcare slots at college campuses. As we know, HBCUs and Tribal colleges have institutional cultures rooted in family, community and holistic supports that make them uniquely positioned to identify and address the needs of Black and Native student parents, but they're also historically underfunded institutions and resources. Question for Julian. This is something you would uniquely know. How are HBCUs partnering together to solve these problems more efficiently and widely? What are some of the barriers that exist, and how can we overcome them in this work?

Thompson: Yeah. It's a great question, David. I think, first, we need broader acknowledgement that HBCUs are doing incredible work in the context of a two-part challenge in terms of them really being able to serve their students with the types of supports that they deserve. The first is that they're engaging a student group that has a need for more supports than what you typically find in the PWI context. Most HBCU students are first generation. Overwhelming majority of HBCU students are Pell-eligible. They're, of course, coming from a space of being a racial minority and coming from systems and communities that are not well-supported, and the HBCU as an institution has to be able to respond to that and respond to the unique challenges or dynamics that come up with that community in order to support them on their academic journey.

HBCUs are doing that, as you've mentioned, David, in the context of their historic exclusion, which means they have smaller endowments than their PWI counterparts. It means that they oftentimes are operating on fewer operational dollars, that they're not getting the types of research and federal grants that you can expect from their counterparts, and so that resource scarcity leads to, I think, a real challenge around being able to innovate with new programs and opportunities that can help them really propel their missions into the future.

Oftentimes, in our work, we talk about HBCU leaders just wearing a lot of hats. So when you oftentimes find an HBCU leader who's elevated up the ranks, they end up having four, or five, or six, or seven major responsibilities on their campus, and that being stretched thin oftentimes precludes the opportunity to thoughtfully innovate on the types of strategies that can support their learners with student parent strategies being key amongst them. So, from the UNCF and the Institute for Capacity Building perspective, of course,

we're looking to make the case for HBCU supports in the federal government and major philanthropy among other industry and corporate leaders.

Of course, we've got to continue to make sure that those entities know... the key decision-makers in our country know that HBCUs are deserving of the types of supports and engagement that's found in the rest of higher education. But in the meantime, what we're doing and what our institutions have found tremendous value in is being in network and in collaboration with each other. You heard that a little bit from Dr. Mayo. I mean, so she was interested in the question of finding resources from state and federal governments, et cetera, but what she wanted most in that opening part of her remarks was an opportunity to connect, an opportunity to learn from other institutions that are embracing common practices.

If you can imagine being in a space where you're looking for new strategies on supporting student learners, you don't want to have to go through the process of finding out which partners are actually dedicated to your student population, which resources are available at local, state, or federal level, right? If that kind of information sharing can happen across networks, it speeds up the opportunity to fail fast and get to the solutions that work for your population. So in the Institute for Capacity Building, we are building those networks focused on student success, on mental health, on executive leadership, on strategy because we're trying to build in the context of at least the HBCU and predominantly Black institution space the momentum to be able to embrace the types of solutions that will work for all campuses that are situated in the same way that HBCUs are. We hope that that type of strategy will help HBCUs as they seek to embrace all of the learners that come into their gates.

Croom: Thank you, Julian. For Deana, a challenge that's come up in our conversations with student parents is, what's next? What happens after we leave this supportive space that exists within an HBCU or Tribal context? So I would be interested in how, from your perspective, parents could prepare themselves and better advocate for their kids once they leave the supportive environments.

Around Him: That's a great question, and I think the experience that Indigenous students have at TCUs is very supportive. We know that, but we also know that many Indigenous students live and exist in communities that have been historically under-resourced. So the workforce and job opportunities that are available to them once they leave a TCU may be quite limited. So I think I would frame that question more in the sense of what can TCUs do to help prepare parenting students to advocate for themselves and their children once they leave that environment. I think it's important for the systems that support students to make sure that they're meeting their needs in ways that can prepare them for leaving the communities that they're in if they need to.

We know that [from data in 2021](#), Native children under the age of 18 and the overall Native population disproportionately experienced poverty when compared to several other racial and ethnic population groups. The [estimated percentage](#) of children living in poverty was 8.4% for Hispanic children, 8.1% for Black children, and 7.4% for Native children. Although



we know that there are so many data concerns and challenges when we look at statistics for Native communities, that this is likely a significant underestimate of the experience of poverty. Again, this reflects a broader context of historical disinvestment in Native communities. So if we know that, we need to prepare people to be able to think about different types of workforce opportunities that they can pursue within their community or make sure that they're prepared if they must leave their community to continue having a job and an income to support their families.

I think it's really important to make sure that students get set up with those types of supports long before they reach graduation. We don't want parents to experience a sudden loss of benefits like childcare offered through a Tribal college, for example. So it's important to make sure that they're connected to Tribal services that might be open and available to them, like childcare, when they lose access to those things at the TCU. I think it's important to also think about other programs and services that exist within Tribal communities like Tribal home visiting, other outreach programs that the Tribes may offer, and create that warm handoff that parenting students may need to make those connections that will help them continue to thrive as they pursue professional and job opportunities. I think one other resource to tap into are parenting student alums who have had to navigate that space in the past, and there may be lessons that we can learn there about how they've successfully navigated that transition or the particular pitfalls that they've experienced so that we can develop programming within our TCU systems to support students going forward.

Croom: Awesome. Thank you. So I know we're getting close to the end of our time of roundtable, so I have a couple more questions. The next question I have is going to be focused on... and I maybe ask Deana to start us off. If you could create a wishlist, what are some of the top maybe two or three resources that you think HBCUs and Tribals need to better support student parents?

Around Him: I'm a researcher, so one of the biggest things that I can think of is data. I know that measuring things like the number of parenting students doesn't sound super exciting to most people, but in this case, I think documenting our experiences in both qualitative and quantitative ways using stories, those things are really powerful for changing our narratives about ourselves and creating the space for us to dream about what's possible and what can exist for our children. Those things also help us change the narrative for others, and I think that's an important thing when we think about the number of resources and dollars that we need to have flowing into Tribal communities to support children and families. We also want to make sure that we're investing our dollars to support them in the right places.

Thank you. Julian?

Croom: Oh, a wishlist, huh? I mean, I really agree with Dr. Around Him. In my role in particular, I'm also just really keen on thinking about partnership dynamics and creating the conditions for our institutions to be able to partner better across the nonprofit space, across the corporate space with federal and state governments. Our HBCUs, our higher education

Thompson:

systems can't do their work in silos, and the process of identifying partners, of coming into agreement with how those partners operate, of trying to determine which partners are transactional versus which ones are transformational, it takes a lot of energy, and a lot of time, and a lot of consideration, and you've got to zig and zag your way through that process. So my wishlist, I think, is that there's an opportunity for either an intermediary like the one I work with, or a funder group, or other stakeholder to help institutions weave their way through that partnership process because it will really help accelerate the types of strategies that I think institutions need to embrace.

Croom: So, final question. President Gallo shared some powerful words earlier about students generally and student parent families, "What they see is what they will be." For both of you, what is the vision that you see for the future of student parents? What can HBCUs and Tribal colleges learn from each other to support that vision? I'll start with Deana.

Around Him: I think that my dream is that Native children have all of the opportunities that they can to be connected to their cultures and languages. I would love to see parenting students have access to those resources and be able to create that environment for their children. I think investing dollars and funds into Tribal institutions that can provide those solutions for families is the best way to achieve that. So I would like to see Native children be proud of who they are because they see who they are everywhere that they are, and that includes our institutions of higher education, their early learning environments, and their home environments. We have to be investing in things that allow parents to be whole and access those things just as much as we have to allow those experiences for Native children and families.

Croom: Julian?

Thompson: Yeah. My dream is that we will figure out a way to finally lower the walls of higher education and create conditions where there is true integration between higher education spaces and the communities that they serve. I think there's tremendous opportunity for deeper integration with K-12 spaces, deeper integration with civic and political leaders, deeper connection to the local nonprofits and other organizations that are supporting communities where higher education institutions sit because we have to get to a place where we understand that students are not just experiencing the academic space for the two or three hours a day that they're on campus. Their lives are going between that space and the rest of their lives, and the more we can create the conditions for that space to be in harmony, the better. So that's the future of higher education, not as a space that's an ivory tower for an excluded few, but one where the opportunities for wisdom, for knowledge, for connection, for research, for opportunity that's embedded in the higher education experiment becomes available to all. That's really going to help us as a country as we facilitate the type of society that each of our children and grandchildren will deserve.

Croom: Again, thank you both, Julian and Deana, for joining us for today's conversation. So many relevant elements that came out of the conversation. I think there's been... Well, one, I'll just say there's so much strong intersectionality among parenting students and Black and

Native context, and there's so much to learn from HBCUs and Tribal colleges considering how culturally responsive they were built to be and showcasing that by how they're serving parenting students in this work. So, really, deep appreciation for you both for joining us today's conversation. To learn more about the Black and Native Family Futures Fund, please go to [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org) to learn more. Also, of course, we'll have more information about today's panelists as well. Thank you all again for joining our roundtable, and have a great day.

Thompson: Thank you.

Around Him: Wado, thank you. It was a pleasure to learn from Julian and to be a part of this conversation.

Croom: 1 in 5 is produced by LWC Studios and presented by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, which is a catalyst and convener for systems, policy, and social impact leaders working to create a society where every family passes a legacy of prosperity and wellbeing from one generation to the next. To learn more about student parents and resources for them, please visit [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org) and follow @AspenAscend on Twitter. Ava Ahmadbeigi wrote and produced this episode. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Our theme song is Ascenders by Kojin Tashiro who also mixed this episode. I'm David Croom. Subscribe to 1 in 5 on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast.

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