McKinsey & Company

CASE STUDY

eHBCU: A first-of-its-kind HBCU online consortium to expand economic mobility through education

Delaware State University partnered with McKinsey to form a first-of-its-kind multiuniversity consortium to expand access to degrees, credentials, and career pathways for online learners nationwide.

51%

more likely that HBCU graduates will move into higher income quintile

3%

mean mobility rate for HBCUs, vs. 1.6% for all US colleges

20+

universities have expressed interest in joining the eHBCU consortiums

THE OPPORTUNITY

Building and scaling HBCU online learning

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are essential for creating economic mobility. According to McKinsey research, they enroll more than twice as many Pell Grant-eligible (low-income) students as non-HBCU institutions, and their graduates are 51 percent more likely to move into a higher-income quintile than graduates of non-HBCUs. The mean mobility rate across all US colleges is 1.6 percent, but the mean mobility rate for HBCUs is 3.0 percent.

Yet many HBCUs face persistent structural challenges that limit their ability to scale impact—particularly in online education. Fragmented admissions processes, limited staffing dedicated to online learners, and uneven access to capital and technology partners have constrained growth, even as demand for flexible, high-quality digital learning has accelerated.

Delaware State University (DSU), under the leadership of President Tony Allen, has worked to become a leader among HBCUs in the online learning space. To expand impact, President Allen set out to create a streamlined, student-centered online model where learners could apply once and access programs across multiple HBCU campuses, spanning both degree and nondegree offerings such as certificates and stackable credentials aligned to high-demand labor markets.

This vision gave rise to eHBCU, which launched in June of 2025, a first-of-its-kind online learning consortium—anchored by DSU in partnership with Pensole Lewis College, Alabama State University, and Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Southern University at Shreveport; Southern University at New Orleans—that preserves each institution's individual academic identity while working together.

"Despite the debate over the value of a college degree in today's marketplace, it is still a point of fact that college degree attainment is central to economic mobility, particularly in the African American community," says Allen. "In today's rapidly changing environment, it is important we meet our students wherever they are. There are more than five million online learners in the United States, while one million of them received their education at just 12 campuses. And only 20,000 are receiving their education from an HBCU. Suffice it to say, we have a significant opportunity."

As DSU and its partner institutions moved from concept to execution, they engaged McKinsey to help shape strategy, operating models, and partnerships that would allow eHBCU to scale sustainably.

"What DSU is doing through eHBCU is truly differentiated," said Ryan Golden, a partner at McKinsey. "This is not just about launching online programs—it's about building a consortium that can scale opportunity for underrepresented learners in a way no single institution could achieve on its own."

> "eHBCU represents a new model for how HBCUs can collaborate to expand access and excellence at scale. With McKinsey's support, we've been able to move from vision to execution."
>
> **—Tony Allen,** President of Delaware State University

THE SOLUTION

Designing a shared engine for online growth

McKinsey worked closely with DSU leadership and consortium partners to translate the eHBCU vision into a practical, scalable operating model. University partners engaged in structured planning for shared online offerings, quality assurance standards, and student support models, establishing eHBCU as a trusted consortium rather than simply a technology platform.

One of the most critical early steps was strengthening organizational capacity. With McKinsey's support, eHBCU successfully onboarded essential staff roles, building the infrastructure needed to support course sharing, enrollment growth, and online student success across institutions. This addressed a common pain point among HBCUs, many of which expressed a desire to provide more resources and staffing for online learners amidst growing demand.

McKinsey also supported workstream alignment across enrollment management, marketing, and academic affairs. By mapping DSU's online admissions pathway end to end, identifying policy barriers, and documenting decision points, the team helped create a replicable blueprint that other institutions could adopt as they joined the consortium. This work transformed complex, institution-specific processes into a shared model that balanced rigor with flexibility.

In parallel, McKinsey helped position eHBCU within a broader ecosystem of industry and workforce partners. Engagements with organizations in the online education space, along with outreach at national convenings, including the Essence Festival of Culture, the Bayou Classic, HBCU Battle of the Legends, and the Black Footwear Forum, expanded the consortium's visibility and credibility. These efforts reinforced eHBCU's dual value proposition: expanding access to high-quality online education while strengthening pathways to employment in high-demand fields.

"eHBCU moves beyond the traditional institution-specific online program offering," says Golden. "We worked with DSU and its eHBCU partners to build the core capabilities needed to deliver a differentiated online student learning experience—across enrollment, student support and career preparation—that will make the model enable sustained student outcomes."

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THE IMPACT

Accelerating momentum, visibility, and confidence

In just one year, eHBCU made measurable progress across strategy, operations, and visibility. University partnerships deepened, with institutions moving from initial interest to active engagement in program alignment and planning. More than 20 universities have expressed interest in joining the consortium, a direct result of increased awareness and confidence in the eHBCU model.

Operationally, the successful onboarding of eHBCU staff created a durable foundation for growth. The consortium now has the infrastructure needed to support shared courses, scalable enrollment, and consistent online student support—capabilities that can often be challenging for individual institutions to build independently

Externally, eHBCU's profile rose significantly. Consortium leaders briefed presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs nationwide, while participation in high-visibility cultural and professional convenings positioned eHBCU at the intersection of education, workforce development, and innovation.

Industry partnerships continued to expand, opening new opportunities for student recruitment, career-aligned credentials, and technology-enabled learning.

Strong executive-level support and confidence in funding further reinforced the momentum. The consortium secured a $2 million TMCF Capacity Building Grant, held successful strategic check-ins with funders, and received a green light for key governance milestones, including the July 2025 Advisory Board Retreat at Pensole Lewis College and the first official Advisory Board meeting at Alabama State University.

"eHBCU represents a new model for how HBCUs can collaborate to expand access and excellence at scale," says Allen. "With McKinsey's support, we've been able to move from vision to execution—building something that not only serves our students today but reshapes what's possible for HBCUs in the future."

MEET OUR EXPERTS

Ryan Golden

Partner, Atlanta

Serves educational organizations on their strategic collaboration and performance aspirations to enable improved student outcomes and university sustainability, and supports organizations across sectors in people and change efforts designed to improve organizational health

Duwain Pinder

Partner, Ohio-Columbus

Serves educational institutions on strategy and performance improvement and supports organizations across sectors on strategies to accelerate economic mobility