

A Seat at the Policymaking Table: Supporting the Advocacy of Ed Prep Leaders at Minority-Serving Institutions

INTRODUCTION

At the intersection of educational empowerment and social progress, Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) represent beacons of hope for addressing longstanding disparities faced by marginalized and underrepresented communities of color. As research resoundingly affirms, MSIs are **highly effective drivers** of economic opportunity and mobility for students of color, essential for the future of America's **competitive advantage** in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, and serve as models for the broader higher education community on how to create **nurturing environments** for learners from diverse backgrounds. **MSI educator preparation programs (EPPs) also play a pivotal role in the development of a diverse teacher workforce yet are too often left out of policymaking and advocacy discussions.**

The significance of MSI EPPs in readying aspiring educators of color will only continue to grow as America further diversifies, expanding the number of qualifying MSIs and the demand for culturally relevant and sustaining methods of teacher preparation. According to the Department of Education's most recent **projections**, students of color are expected to comprise nearly half of all college students by 2025, meaning it will be impossible for America to meet its educational and economic goals unless state and federal policymakers better support, and listen to, the institutions predominantly serving students of color.

To gain a better understanding of MSI EPP leader and faculty experiences navigating the policy world, The Education Trust (Ed Trust) and the Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED) convened two focus groups to: 1) identify resources, supports, and opportunities to help MSIs more effectively inform and shape policy decisions; 2) uncover barriers that prevent engagement in policy advocacy; and 3) brainstorm recommendations to better position MSI EPP leaders within pertinent policy conversations. This brief details the results of those discussions beginning with an overview of the role of MSIs in expanding and diversifying the teacher workforce.

ABOUT MSIs

MSIs are a fundamental cornerstone for postsecondary degree attainment among students of color. According to the Department of Education's **2023 MSI eligibility matrix**, there are over 850 institutions of higher education that are eligible for, or have received, MSI designation. MSIs are comprised of seven variations of institutions as established in Title III and Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, each with their own eligibility criteria. **Collectively, MSIs enroll 4.8 million students, or 28% of all U.S. undergraduates, and disproportionately educate students of color:** Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) comprise 19% of all colleges and universities yet enroll **62% of Latino students**; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) represent only 3% of institutions of higher education but enroll **10% and graduate nearly 20% of Black students**; and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), which make up less than 1% of the higher education landscape, enroll nearly **9% of all Native students.**



MSI DESIGNATION	REQUIREMENTS FOR ELIGIBILITY
Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHs)	Institutions that have an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 20% Alaskan Native students or institutions that have an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 10% Native Hawaiian students
Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)	Institutions that have an enrollment of undergraduate students that is at least 10% Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander students
Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)	Institutions that have an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 25% Hispanic students
Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs)	Designated by the Higher Education Act of 1965
Native American-Serving non-Tribal Institutions (NASNTIs)	Institutions that are not Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) that have an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 10% Native students
Predominately Black Institutions (PBIs)	Institutions that are not HBCUs that have an undergraduate enrollment that is at least 40% Black students
Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)	Designated by the Higher Education Act of 1965

Source: [BranchED Educator Preparation at Minority Serving Institutions](#)

Given their pronounced role in educating students of color, there is mounting interest among education leaders and advocacy organizations in understanding how MSIs can prepare a higher-quality, more diverse teacher workforce. MSIs are already vital preparation grounds for a significant portion of prospective educators of color. **In the 2019-20 academic year, MSIs enrolled 26% of all EPP candidates in the country but, when disaggregated by race and ethnicity, served nearly half (48%) of all candidates of color.**

Research shows that access to teachers from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds is **beneficial for all P-12 students**, especially students of color, resulting in **improved academic performances** and sizable reductions in disciplinary incidents and truancy rates. But, despite the unambiguous benefits of educator diversity, America's teacher workforce is significantly less racially and ethnically diverse than the students they serve — less than **20%** of teachers are individuals of color, compared to **54%** of students.

MSI EPPs and their leaders possess a deep understanding of the unique needs of diverse student populations and, despite being greatly outnumbered by predominately white institutions, they are already proving essential for the

production of high-quality teachers of color. Consequently, these institutions should be involved thought partners as policymakers pursue efforts to diversify the teacher workforce and decide future educator preparation policy. However, despite their expertise as practitioners and leaders, MSI EPPs are often underrepresented within advocacy spaces and proposed policy solutions.



METHODOLOGY

To better understand why that is, BranchED and Ed Trust held two focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes, with 14 deans, assistant deans, and department chairs who work at HBCU, AANAPISI, and HSI EPPs. Focus group members primarily resided at institutions in Texas and California, but some were in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. The focus groups were designed to better understand the participants' experiences navigating the policy world and served three purposes: 1) identify resources, supports, and opportunities to help MSI EPP leaders more effectively inform and shape policy decisions; 2) uncover barriers that prevent engagement in policy advocacy; and 3) brainstorm recommendations to better position MSI EPP leaders within pertinent policy conversations.

OPPORTUNITIES

Participants voiced the importance of context when discussing their students and communities

Just as each represented institution differed, there was diversity in the students and the communities they served as well. Education does not look the same across the nation and these leaders acknowledged the unique experiences and strengths each student carries into their programs. This diverse institutional context surfaces the need for equitable experiences for all teacher candidates, predicated on the understanding that students are not one-size-fits-all. Many of the EPPs represented in this focus group embrace a student-centered approach in creating mechanisms to support candidates through test preparation efforts and financial support.



Participants are sensitive to the barriers that students, particularly students of color, face when entering the teaching profession and agree that policy change is a key vehicle to address unnecessary ones

Some barriers are financial, including rising costs of attendance and fees associated with multiple certification exams. Other barriers are related to restrictive admission requirements or the complex teacher preparation landscape, with one example being the proliferation of low-quality alternative certification routes that alarmed several focus group members from Texas. Some participants expressed the additional challenges of recruiting students of color to consider teaching careers.

"Many underrepresented populations have not experienced education at its truest altruistic form and because of that it's very difficult to get [those] future educators into a pipeline," said the dean of a College of Education in Virginia.

Participants reported barriers affecting their ability to address student concerns through the policymaking process

Geographic location surfaced as a key difficulty impeding successful advocacy. Participants, especially those at institutions in rural or isolated communities, felt that their voices were often overlooked in policy discussions because of the sheer distance between them and their state capitol.

Even for more proximate institutions, participants acknowledged that staying informed about policy decisions and connected to policymakers requires significant resources, often designated staff, that many EPPs simply cannot afford. And for programs housed within large institutions or statewide systems that possess significant government relations capacity, participants expressed obstacles elevating their priorities.

"There's not a place where Minority-Serving Institutions meet together and figure out what shared issues or what should our common voice be."

—Assistant Dean of MSI EPP, California

“In Texas, the majority of our institutions are HSIs, MSIs across the state two-year, four-year, but I don’t think that our legislators at all understand that or understand what that means.”

—Dean of MSI EPP, Texas

Participants discussed feeling like policymakers lack general awareness and understanding of the contributions of MSI EPPs

This ultimately results in a disconnect between state policy decisions and the reality of what is happening at the EPP or district level. A department chair from California expressed amazement at “how little [legislators] truly know about what happens in the California classroom,” while simultaneously acknowledging that “they were very interested in hearing our perspective, hearing our stories.” This was a recurring motif: no one believed that MSI EPPs are being intentionally ignored or excluded. Several participants shared that, when face to face with policymakers, they can often convey the important contributions of their MSIs to high-quality teacher preparation. Those opportunities are rare, however, and the challenge has been maintaining consistent relationships and ongoing touchpoints with relevant policy stakeholders.



ADVOCACY SOLUTIONS

While it is important to acknowledge that the 14 participating MSI EPP leaders are not fully representative of their field, their insights offer a meaningful guide. The focus groups generated a series of solutions to facilitate increased participation of MSI EPP leaders in the policymaking space:

- Improve communication between state policymakers and MSI EPP leaders
- Increase representation of MSI EPP leaders within existing state advocacy and policy spaces
- Develop a shared messaging and advocacy platform responsive to MSI EPPs
- Provide structured opportunities for MSI EPP leaders to enhance policy knowledge and advocacy skills

Ultimately, MSI EPP leaders conveyed a desire for stronger relationships with their state policymakers, believing some of the challenges facing their candidates and programs can be remedied through improved communication and by cultivating legislative champions. Increased communication may also help bridge divides between policy and practice and allow policymakers to understand more deeply, and perhaps even experience, the on-the-ground impact of their educator preparation policy decisions.

Many of our focus group members are actively trying, yet finding it difficult, to communicate with policymakers. Instead of independently pursuing relationships, a more effective advocacy approach might be to intentionally include MSI EPP leaders within existing teacher preparation coalitions that already have inroads with state policymakers. Existing coalitions would greatly benefit from the diverse views of MSI EPP leaders, whose voices will only become more crucial as the diversity of undergraduates continues to climb. By facilitating connections to existing state policy coalition spaces and direct advocacy opportunities, MSI EPP leaders can access real-time information about legislative and regulatory updates and play a more engaged role influencing future educator preparation policies.

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