



My Voice Out Loud: Empowering the Next Generation

We must keep lifting up these voices and push policymakers to include Black LGBTQ+ advocates and HBCU leaders in health advisory roles, while advancing policies that expand healthcare access on and off campus.

October 28, 2025 By Montez Holton and Kelley Robinson

HBCUs are not just classrooms—they are the heartbeat of freedom movements and the architects of a more just future. For generations, these institutions have shaped the leaders who dared to demand better for our people. Today, they stand at another crossroads of justice—where the fight for racial equity must also include queer liberation, trans visibility, and health equity.

For many in Generation Z, that vision of justice can feel out of reach. Yet at Fisk University, the transformative power of an HBCU education made Black queer excellence not only possible but inevitable, coupled with nurturing queer spaces, emboldened Gen Z students to redefine what leadership looks like and to stop waiting for permission to lead and rewrite the rules of what liberation means in real time. For students like Montez, “Fisk University was more than a classroom; it was a place where identity met purpose, and where advocacy became both personal and collective.”

It meant transforming a small campus lounge into a sanctuary for queer students, organizing HIV testing drives, and inviting organizations on campus to speak on sexual health in ways that felt safe, relevant, and stigma-free. These small but powerful acts shifted the campus culture. Those efforts didn’t just raise awareness; they created a ripple effect across campus, inspiring peers to show up authentically, challenge outdated norms, and claim space with pride. It showed that advocacy doesn’t always begin with a megaphone; it often starts with a room full of people willing to be seen, to listen, and to lead together.

That same spirit lives on through HRC’s HBCU Leadership Program, where students across the country find a space where Black joy, pride, and purpose meet. It’s a place of belonging and transformation — where representation isn’t just celebrated, it’s lived. For alumni like Montez, the program offered more than leadership training; it built a network of changemakers who share a common vision: to create campuses where Black queer and trans students don’t just survive — they thrive.

This program is more than a leadership pipeline; it’s a movement grounded in liberation and love.

It connects students to mentors and peers who reflect their identities and values, showing that advocacy for LGBTQ+ equality and racial justice are deeply intertwined. Each student who joins the HBCU Leadership Program carries forward that mission — breathing new life into the movement and sowing the seeds of lasting change on HBCU campuses across the nation.

Young people's voices are not just relevant; they are essential to ending the HIV epidemic.

About [90% of HBCUs](#) in the United States are located in Southern states where sexual education and inclusive healthcare are limited by state policy. And for Black LGBTQ+ students who face the intersection of racism, homophobia, and HIV stigma, there is a deeply urgent call to empower these voices to eliminate the compounded barriers that increase their susceptibility to HIV, mental health struggles, and substance use.

When laws and institutions fail to provide inclusive sexual health education or limit access to HIV prevention and reproductive care, students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often step forward to fill the gap. They become educators, advocates, and innovators—building networks of care where systems have fallen short. These shortcomings have real consequences: Black LGBTQ+ communities, especially in the South, continue to face higher HIV rates due to structural barriers that undermine access to information, testing, and treatment.

Yet HBCUs are uniquely positioned to change this trajectory. As trusted centers of learning and community leadership, they can play an essential role in ending the HIV epidemic—by fostering open conversations about health, training the next generation of culturally competent providers, and advancing research and outreach that reflect the lived experiences of Black communities. A new generation of HBCU students and leaders is already turning resilience into action, carrying forward a legacy of activism rooted in equity and empowerment. Their vision—and their voice—will be critical to building the future of HIV prevention, care, and justice.

They are the new generation of changemakers—rooted in authenticity, representation, and justice—who are redefining what leadership looks like in the fight for health equity. Their advocacy doesn't just challenge stigma; it transforms culture, setting a new standard for inclusive, affirming conversations about sexual health. From normalizing PrEP and HIV testing to ensuring that those living with HIV can thrive with undetectable viral loads (U=U), these students are reshaping what it means to care for one another.

Empowering these young leaders with these experiences ensures that students dare to break down barriers by creating a seat at the table for their voices to not only be heard but championed. With the support of LGBTQ+ focused community-based organizations and HBCU institutions, monthly HIV and STI testing is being scheduled across HBCU campuses in Nashville, in addition to educational workshops for students and allies that focus on mythbusting misconceptions around HIV and increasing access to PrEP. These collaborative efforts show us that ending the HIV epidemic isn't solely a public health goal; it is a social justice mission.

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on and off campus. On HBCU campuses, it's equally important to strengthen faculty and staff training in inclusive language, LGBTQ+ cultural humility, and trauma-informed care. Students are already leading; it's time for their institutions and allies to help carry that work forward.

Ending the HIV epidemic and advancing justice will take a shared commitment—from educators shaping minds, health professionals providing care, faith leaders building community, and policymakers driving change. Centering equity isn't optional; it's how we affirm that the health and dignity of Black LGBTQ+ students are non-negotiable. When we uplift their leadership, we strengthen our collective movement—one that proves freedom is more than survival. It's living and loving openly, where Black queer excellence leads the way in health, equity, and justice.

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