



The Resurgence

Morris Brown College
Atlanta, GA

April 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

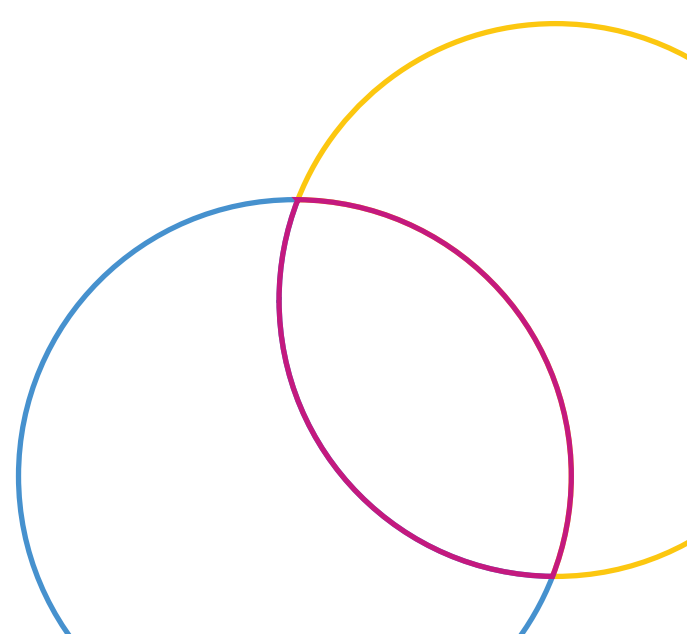
Can a dedicated community help a beloved HBCU institution survive a catastrophic financial crisis and loss of accreditation? Once “resurrected,” how can the college rebuild itself on a new foundation where all students succeed? Is it possible to offer a debt free college education so that its doors can open even wider?

The story of Morris Brown College is a story of resilience and restoration. The college lost its accreditation in 2003 due to financial mismanagement and declared chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2012 to avoid foreclosure of its properties. Enrollment dropped to near zero, but the college was kept open in part through its strong base of alumni support and unique connection to the African Methodist Episcopal church. Under its new president, the college is now building back with BMWP practices at its core, and a goal to boost success rates of historically underserved students and a focus on reducing or eliminating student debt.

The Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>



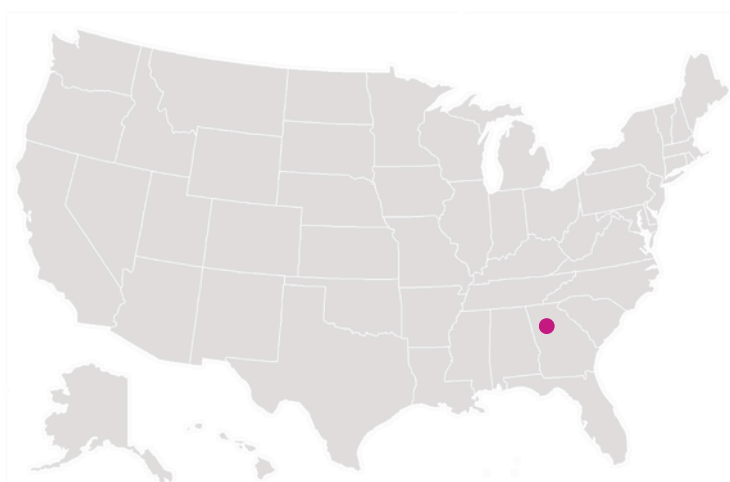
The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**



Fountain Hall - Morris Brown College

Morris Brown College



LOCATION:

Atlanta, GA

INSTITUTION TYPE:

Private 2-year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

343*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).



Policy and Practice Highlight

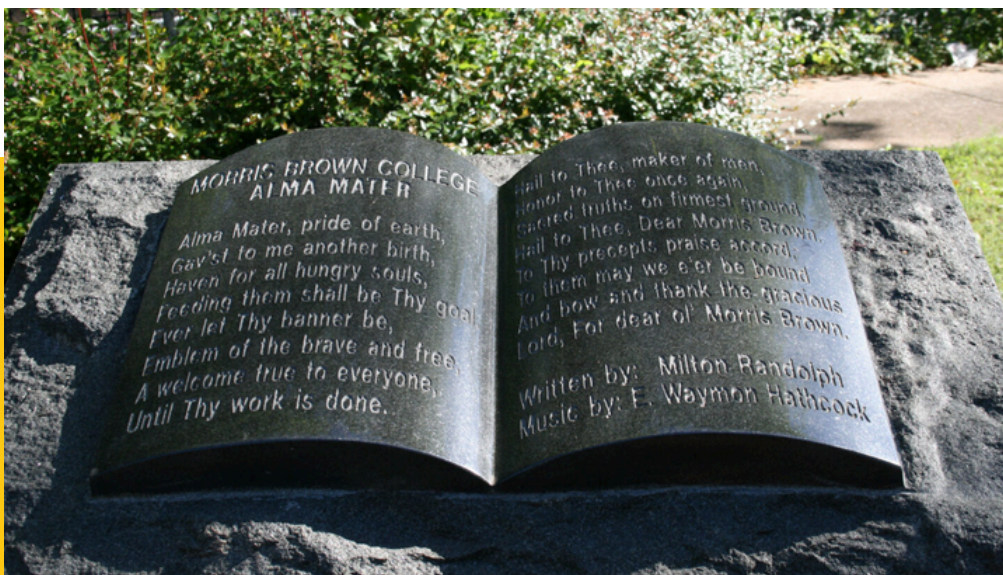
This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

In March of 2019, **Morris Brown College** hired Dr. Kevin James as the college's 19th president. Reflecting on his entry into the college, Dr. James shares that he "came in on a quest to make history as the first Black college to ever come back from death after a nearly 20-year hiatus." There are just over 100 accredited HBCUs operating in the US.¹ Since the founding of the first HBCU in 1837, others have had to close their doors. According to Dr. James, "all of the other HBCUs that have closed are still closed." As he entered the college, his goal was to write a different story for Morris Brown College.

Despite a long tradition of serving the Atlanta community, Dr. James had inherited a college that was effectively on life support. Recently bankrupt, unaccredited and therefore unable to receive federal financial aid, the college enrolled only 20 students in James' first year at the college.

Morris Brown College was founded in 1881 by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church with the explicit goal of expanding educational opportunities for members of the African American community. Since its founding in the basement of Atlanta's Big Bethel AME Church, the college has maintained a focus on providing a high quality education for students who might not otherwise have a chance to attend a postsecondary institution. "We're looking for that student who may not have had the opportunity to go to Harvard or Georgia Tech or Spelman. They come to Morris Brown and we meet them where they are. We help them find a sense of belonging and we level them up."



Morris Brown College Alumni Monument (Source: Wikimedia commons)

Though many Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs) formed at the same time as Morris Brown were founded by white philanthropists, Morris Brown holds the distinction of being the only HBCU in Georgia that was founded by formerly enslaved members of the African American community — a point of pride that further motivates Dr. James’ work to rebuild the college.

As a result of well-documented public underfunding, most HBCUs do not maintain large endowments. A 2024 analysis by the Century Foundation found that, on average, endowments per FTE student at public non-HBCUs are three times the size of public HBCUs while private non-HBCUs hold endowments that are, on average, four times the size of those of private HBCUs. Further, the analysis finds that, “collectively, the nineteen non-HBCU land grant universities in southern states hold more than \$45 billion in endowment assets, while the nineteen land grant institutions that are HBCUs in those same states hold just \$1 billion in endowment assets — an astounding 45-to-1 difference.”²

One consequence of this inequity is that many HBCUs find it more difficult to weather financial hardship. Morris Brown experienced such hardship in 2002 when the college’s former president, Dolores Cross and Parvesh Singh, a former financial aid director, were charged with financial mismanagement and misappropriation of federal funding. The two eventually pleaded guilty. Although the money was found to be used to cover the college’s operational expenditures rather for personal benefit, the episode had severe consequences for the college. Morris Brown lost its accreditation and its ability to receive all federal funding — including critical financial aid dollars — in early 2003.³

Dr. James is quick to point out that the college’s loss of accreditation did not reflect poorly on Morris Brown’s educational offerings: “HBCUs do the best job educating Black students. If an HBCU loses accreditation or gets in trouble, 9.9 times out of 10 it is about finances. It's never because of rigor or academic quality.”

“We made history”: The Hard Reset

During the college’s 20 years without accreditation, leaders managed to keep the college afloat thanks to its community. Alumni banded together to provide necessary financial support and even pitched in on groundskeeping and administrative tasks during the tough years. The AME church agreed to forgive \$4.2 million in outstanding debt, giving the college a chance at a fresh start. While these clearly were dire times, they also show the strength and resilience of the college community. Times were hard, but those who supported Morris Brown’s mission believed that the college would rise again.



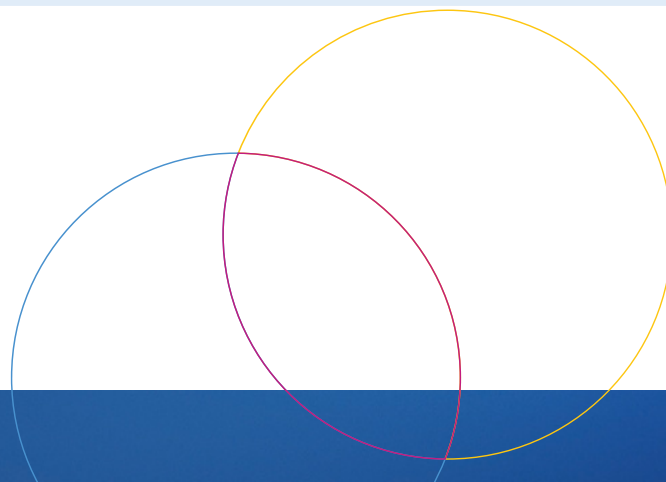
With new leadership and a substantial debt forgiven, Morris Brown made another attempt for accreditation. This time they succeeded. The college's accreditation was reinstated on April 26, 2022 paving the way for the return of federal financial aid, veterans benefits and other critical funding. "People ask me all the time, 'why did Morris Brown get accredited under this administration and couldn't do it for 20 years?'" Dr. James recounted. "I can't answer that outside of what I call Triple A — almighty God, alumni and the AME church — and my own belief that it all falls on leadership. This administration did something different and we made history."

The newly re-accredited institution embarked on what Dr. James refers to as "the hard reset." One key component of the reset involved creating a new strategic plan that could unify and animate the next phase of the college's growth. The plan — developed as a collaboration between college administrators working closely with the President, Board of Trustees, students, faculty staff and community partners — names six core priorities aimed at improving financial sustainability, academic programs, student engagement, strategic partnerships and other areas. It regrounds the collegewide vision, mission and core values and offers a clear enrollment plan with specific targets to recruit a total of 800 students over the next five years.

In addition to the plan, college leadership have also worked to reset staffing and governance systems at the college. Many key positions at the college — department chairs, Assistant Provost, the Executive Director of Online Learning, academic coaches and more — are now occupied by brand new people whose approach to their work is not influenced by the college's past. "This means," Dr. James notes, "that we've created a **brand new culture with new leaders** who are working very closely together to make sure we're meeting all of our strategies and goals." In addition to staffing shifts, Dr. James **reset representation on the college's shared governance structure** which intentionally includes representation of all shareholders — board members, administrators, alumni, faculty, student government and others — in a voting capacity.



These cultural and governance changes are important steps at the college and serve to foster a deeper sense of belonging for student, faculty, staff and other members of the college community.



Centering Student Belonging: The Resurgence

Like many of her peers, Morris Brown senior Krystal McCalla found her way to the college through an indirect route. Raised in Florida, McCalla received a scholarship to run track at a non-HBCU college in South Carolina. She was injured in her first meet and made the decision to move back home. “I knew my education was important, but something in me felt missing. I'm adopted, so I qualified for free tuition at state colleges in Florida, but my mom always would tell me, ‘you should try an HBCU,’ and she was always telling me about Morris Brown.”

After thinking through her options, McCalla took the leap and enrolled at Morris Brown. Her experience has been overwhelmingly positive. “When I tell you Morris Brown College has changed my life, I mean that,” McCalla shared.

The college changed McCalla’s life — and the lives of many of her peers — through an intentional, step-by-step process known as the “resurgence.” As they rebuild, the Morris Brown leadership team is making sure that their new foundation includes strategies that help build belonging, facilitate meaning-making, center student wellbeing and ensure students are able to articulate the purpose of their journey at the college.

The college has introduced mandatory new student orientation and a student success course. They have also taken steps to make sure that all foundational courses emphasize college values and cultural norms — an important outgrowth of the college’s close alignment with the AME church. Dr. James sees these as important structures not only for helping students feel connected, but for making sure they persist and complete. “We don't want to just enroll students. We want them to be successful. We have a retention goal of 80% for our students. To get there, we need to make sure you feel welcomed, that you have a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose. We need to give you all the tools that you need to be successful and to go out into the world to compete.”

For McCalla, a **positive interaction with the college’s admissions office** helped her connect with her sense of purpose and find the right educational pathway. “I've always wanted to be a news anchor — an on-air personality — but I didn’t know how I was going to get into that realm. I was talking to someone in admissions and they said they have an eSports program. I didn’t know anything about eSports at the time, but now I can tell you everything.”



By personalizing admissions interactions, Morris Brown is helping students feel connected to the college. These interactions also help students understand the college's offerings and give them space to connect with their purpose and understand how a college education can help them achieve it.

With this new focus, McCalla has thrived at the college succeeding not only academically, but socially and professionally as well. The college helped connect her to an eSports focused internship in 2023 and, in April of 2024, she was [named Miss Morris Brown](#) — a distinguished and highly visible leadership role at the college. Reflecting on her own success, McCalla is quick to share her intention to pay it forward: “I want to make sure that every student gets the opportunities that I’ve had because I want my peers to be successful. Whether it's scholarship opportunities, job opportunities, internships I want them to know about it because I realize that my journey doesn't stop at Morris Brown. It continues throughout my life.”

Another way that Morris Brown is building back on a BMWP foundation is by reintroducing student activities. During the 20 year period where it had lost accreditation and enrollment had dropped, the college halted all non-academic activities as a cost cutting measure. With enrollments rebounding, college leadership are bringing back student life — clubs, marching band, fraternities and sororities, honor societies and other student organizations. These are all strategies to strengthen the social fabric of the college, but — like orientation and student success courses — Dr. James sees student life as clearly connected to the college’s broader goal of supporting student success. “HBCUs are very special because they do a great job helping Black and brown students feel connected. Most of the other students look like them, the teachers can relate to them. Maybe they listen to the same kind of music or are from similar places. That's very, very important when you talk about the HBCU landscape.”



Krystal McCalla is crowned Ms. Morris Brown

A Debt Free Aspiration

Perhaps the biggest component of the Morris Brown “resurgence” is college affordability. The institution has long prided itself on its ability to provide quality education at an affordable price. As the college regained accreditation, Dr. James wanted to find ways to push the affordability conversation even further: **what if the college could help its students graduate without debt?**



Morris Brown's efforts to provide a debt free college degree is a practice that fosters social belonging by making clear that students from all socio-economic backgrounds are welcome and belong in college.

Dr. James put together a proposal for his board of directors to set tuition at a level that would make it the most affordable HBCU in Atlanta. College leaders came to the proposed amount by taking into account the maximum Pell grant award coupled with what they felt was a reasonable amount of student loan burden.⁴ By filing bankruptcy and seeking debt forgiveness from the AME church, Morris Brown is now able to operate without significant debt service obligations that many other institutions must contend with (e.g., repayment for loans to construct new campus facilities). As James explains, “because of our mishap 20 years ago and then our bankruptcy, we are now able to do something very innovative and be very affordable, where students don't have to take out as much debt.”

A college’s tuition and fees are a relatively small share of the total cost of attendance. In addition to tuition, students have to find ways to pay for books and supplies, housing and food, transportation, child care and many other expenses. In order to achieve its debt free vision, Dr. James acknowledges that Morris Brown must take all of expenses into account, “we know from the data that it's not just about getting to college. It's about having all of the tools that they need to be successful in college — making sure that they have a laptop and wifi, making sure that they have a way to get to campus, making sure that they have books, food security, health and wellness. If we don't provide it directly, we need to be a bridge builder to make sure our students have access to everything that they need to be successful. Because without those supports, it's only going to hurt our retention and graduation rates.”⁵

Dr. James is not done on the affordability front. Even though Morris Brown students are taking on less financial burden, many still leave the college with debt. College leaders have been hard at work securing additional funding from philanthropy and corporations that can help close the gap between the amount that a student’s grant-based aid covers and the total cost of attendance at the college. Accomplishing this goal is the next step in the Morris Brown resurgence — another way of helping even more students who might not otherwise think about going to college find their way to and through their doors. Another way of embodying the words in the college’s alma mater:

*Alma Mater, pride of earth,
Gav'st to me another birth,
Haven for all hungry souls,
Feeding them shall be Thy goal.*



Morris Brown College students

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Dr. Kevin James and Krystal McCalla for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

¹ Specific estimates vary. A recent White House (2024) estimate puts the number at 99 ([The Economics of HBCUs](#)), but this estimate relies on data from the National Center for Education Statistics from 2022. Other sources put the number as high as 107, but note that some are closed (see [The Hundred-Seven](#)).

² The Century Foundation (2024). [It's Time to Create a Federal HBCU Endowment Fund](#).

³ Details of the college's loss of accreditation have been widely reported. For more information see, for example, Inside HighEd Ed (2022). [Back From 2 Decades on the Brink](#).

⁴ College Navigator lists the 2023-24 Morris Brown total cost of attendance — inclusive of tuition and fees, books and supplies, food and housing along with other expenses — at \$29,613 for students who live off campus. This figure is considerably lower than the college's peer HBCUs in Atlanta: Clark Atlanta (\$43,676), Spelman (\$51,366) and Morehouse (\$62,824). SOURCE: College Navigator. [Tuition, Fees and Estimated Student Expenses](#).

⁵ Leaders at Morris Brown have cultivated many important partnerships with partners from philanthropy, local government and community-based organizations. Examples include a grant from Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation to digitize and market the school's Hospitality Certificate program, a partnership with Covenant House Georgia to help students facing homelessness and an articulation agreement with the Technical College System of Georgia that guarantees associate degree graduates will transfer in as juniors in certain degree areas.