

Creating a VantaBlack Ecosystem for Black Empowerment and Institutional Change Within PWIs

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Abstract

This commentary proposes the VantaBlack Ecosystem as a strategic model for advancing Black empowerment and well-being within predominantly White institutions (PWIs) during a period of increasing political and institutional constraints on diversity initiatives. The framework outlines how universities can establish mutually reinforcing structures—such as cultural centers, academic programs, research initiatives, and affinity networks—to collectively support Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Unlike traditional diversity efforts that primarily focus on student outcomes, the VantaBlack Ecosystem emphasizes the importance of investing in Black employees as essential to sustaining student success and institutional change. The article reflects on the author’s experience at the University of Idaho, where initiatives including a reinstated Black cultural center, strengthened Black Studies programming, and the creation of research labs contributed to building a hub for Black community life on campus. Lessons from this implementation highlight both opportunities and challenges, including staffing limitations, institutional politics, and the need for shared vision among stakeholders. This article outlines four significant institutional shifts and transformations, which were structural, symbolic/cultural, educational, and relational. The commentary concludes by offering a practical framework for institutional leaders seeking to foster environments where Black communities can thrive despite shifting political and policy landscapes.

“A black room in a white house will, over time, become a reflection of that university, not the Black community.” Daryl Scott, Professor of History, Morgan State University

Keywords: VantaBlack ecosystem, institutional change, Black empowerment, institution within an institution, Black cultural centers, campus climate, anti-Blackness, higher education policy

Introduction

Higher Education in the United States is undergoing rapid change. Capitalism, neoliberalism, and White supremacy, particularly anti-Blackness, are undermining many of the pillars of what the academy has been thought to stand for (Douglass, 2021; Jashnani, 2025). Pillars like inclusion of minoritized populations, free speech, preparation of an educated citizenry, attracting the best talent from around the world, and academic freedom. Many scholars who thought that such ideals would be sacrosanct have found that these and other values were fragile and could be undermined by the right pressure from federal, state, and local governments (Marginson, 2025). Given that higher education and its affiliated organizations in the United States have valued autonomy and have generally functioned as individual entities. They were unprepared to combat a strategic concerted effort to attack these fundamental values. However, no population is more affected by such damaging changes than Black people on these campuses. Many scholars believe the raise in anti-DEI bills were created to specifically, but not only target and to negatively impact Black populations at colleges and universities, as the faces at the bottom of the well (Black people) as legal scholar Derrick Bell (1992) described. When White people catch a cold, Black people catch pneumonia.

While HBCUs have been negatively affected by these changes, Black administrators, faculty, staff, and students at PWIs in conservative states have had their initiatives specifically targeted (Wippman, 2025). Many have experienced the forced closure of Black cultural centers. Affinity groups and academic and social activities have come under greater scrutiny. With such devastating changes impacting these campuses. It begs the questions: how can Black people create “hush harbors” of refuge and empowerment that will advance this important campus demographic?

In this commentary, I will share a model that I believe can assist leaders in creating “hidden institutions” that can lead to Black self-efficacy and empowerment. Resisting those Black metaphorical rooms as Scott (2014) describes becoming a reflection of the White university. I draw upon the radical propositions expressed by the notion of Afro-Futurism to propose such a space of healing, restoration, and Black advancement within the academy. Combating concerted efforts to deny the humanity and academic genius of Black people in such White-dominated institutions. I therefore propose the VantaBlack Ecosystem that creates and furthers the idea that Black people can create an institution within an institution that supports, affirms, protects, and advances all members of the Black populations on these campuses.

What is a VantaBlack Ecosystem?

In recent years, scholars and thought leaders have proposed various ways that private and public institutions and organizations might center the needs and advancement of Black people. In 2023,

Cyndi Suarez, former president and editor-in-chief of NPQ (Nonprofit Quarterly), introduced the concept of the Pro-Black world. To provide a model for what that could look like, she and her colleagues started with non-profits and non-governmental organizations. They described how such organizations could move beyond White liberals' obsessions with notions of universal diversity, equity, and inclusion. And directly address the distinct challenges and specific needs experienced by Black individuals within these institutions. With the idea that if you meet the needs of those who are usually most harmed, you will meet the needs of other marginalized populations.

In 2024, former HBCU president and scholar Joseph L. Jones (2024) coined the term Pan-Black. This term was a nod to the idea that Historically and Predominantly Black Institutions of Higher Learning should be specifically leaning into their identities and serving the diverse Black diasporian populations on their campuses (i.e., African Americans, Caribbeans, and Africans, etc.). He argues for the importance of Black institutions infusing Blackness across every aspect of institutional decision-making and university-wide efforts.

While both of these concepts are helpful when thinking about ways to meet the needs of Black populations on college and university campuses, there are some unique differences. For instance, integrating a Pro-Black worldview within many nonprofits may be somewhat easier because of the option of utilizing a top-down leadership approach. However, at most PWIs, shared governance would necessitate buy-in of many stakeholders, many of whom may view Pro-Blackness as equivalent to anti-Whiteness. Those on the political left and right would need to be persuaded of their benefits to them. To me, that does not seem like the best use of time and resources. When thinking about Pan-Blackness, some of the same issues arise.

Therefore, this challenge necessitates a new approach that decenters those who have historically been advantaged to create space and resources for one of the most underserved populations of college and university campuses, Black people. The approach I propose is the creation of a VantaBlack ecosystem, which draws from Freeman's (2025) notion of VantaBlack Leadership--an approach that enables Black people within colleges and universities to create an "institution within an institution" which is adaptable and meets the needs and aspirations of Black students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

I first encountered the term *VantaBlack* through an R&B album by the singer, Lalah Hathaway, bearing the same name (Kellerman, 2024). The term originates from a specialized coating recognized as the darkest man-made substance, independently verified to absorb approximately 99.965 percent of visible light, thereby rendering it the blackest known material (Threewitt, 2024). Within the context of this study, the concept of a *VantaBlack ecosystem* is employed as a metaphor to describe an interconnected institutional environment that intentionally and

unapologetically centers the thriving, flourishing, and advancement of people of African descent within colleges and universities.

While higher education institutions have been described as complex cybernetic organizations which are complex to lead and manage given all of its constituencies (Zlatanović, Babić, & Nikolić, 2017). In this paper, I am advancing the notion of a VantaBlack ecosystem as an emergent framework whose core principles have been shown to be effective when viewed through the lens of institutional change in higher education. The evidence that I am presenting is best understood through understanding and acknowledging how White nationalism and anti-Black racism informed institutional outcomes, structural developments, and cultural shifts during the partial implementation of this model at the University of Idaho (Gavin, 2021; Goodwin, 2024).

The notion of building a “institution within an institution” is not theoretically novel, however it neatly aligns with well-established higher education change theories, such as subsystems, institutional layering, and counterspaces (Bazirake, 2025; Ford, 2006; Garcia-Louis et al., 2024; Patton, 2010). Colleges and universities have many units with complex, unique subcultures, identities, and priorities, such as academic colleges and departments. For instance, within a university, an academic college functions as an institution within an institution with semi-autonomous units that share similar missions. So it is within that context that the VantaBlack Ecosystem should be understood as a strategically coordinated metaphorical institution.

Similar initiatives that make up the VantaBlack ecosystem (i.e., Black Cultural Centers, student groups, faculty and staff associations) have, in the past, functioned as fragmented units, serving only a specific segment of the Black population on college and university campuses (Tyehimba, 2013). However, I am proposing a model that will bring institutional coherence and alignment to previously disconnected efforts. This will create mutually reinforcing networks that reduce inefficiencies, duplications, and isolation across Black-focused initiatives.

Black-focused initiatives are often derailed and undermined not only by anti-Black racism but also because of the complexity and highly decentralized nature of higher education institutions; efforts often do not overlap, are not structurally supported as needed, or strategically aligned (McDougal et al, 2024). The VantaBlack ecosystem addresses these concerns by introducing a tightly coordinated framework that connects structures, people, and resources, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustainability and institutional impact.

Historically, PWIs have sought to serve Black students by providing them with academic programs that center the Black experience, hire Black employees, facilitate affinity spaces, programming, and groups. However, I believe one missing aspect of such support is the health and overall well-being of Black employees. Focusing exclusively on resources that support

Black students, yet neglecting the needs of Black administrators, faculty, and staff, will not ultimately lead to the overall persistence and success of the students (Prempeh & Freeman, 2023; Prempeh & Freeman, 2024). It is analogous to social service programs exclusively focusing on children without any investment in the parents (Thomas & Halbert, 2021). Black people are a communal racial group. This means that, for the individual to fully thrive and flourish, the members of the community that the individual comes from must be nurtured, too.

The literature on Black employees often cites that Black faculty, administrators, and staff suffer from feelings of a lack of belonging and heightened work expectations (Wilson, Ghosh, & Jason, 2025). Of particular note are the expectations related to serving as “othermothers” and “otherfathers” for Black students with no additional compensation (Mayberry, 2021). It becomes an additional tax that weighs on these individuals. However, what the VantaBlack ecosystem seeks to do is to create physical spaces, initiatives, groups, and activities that are mutually reinforcing.

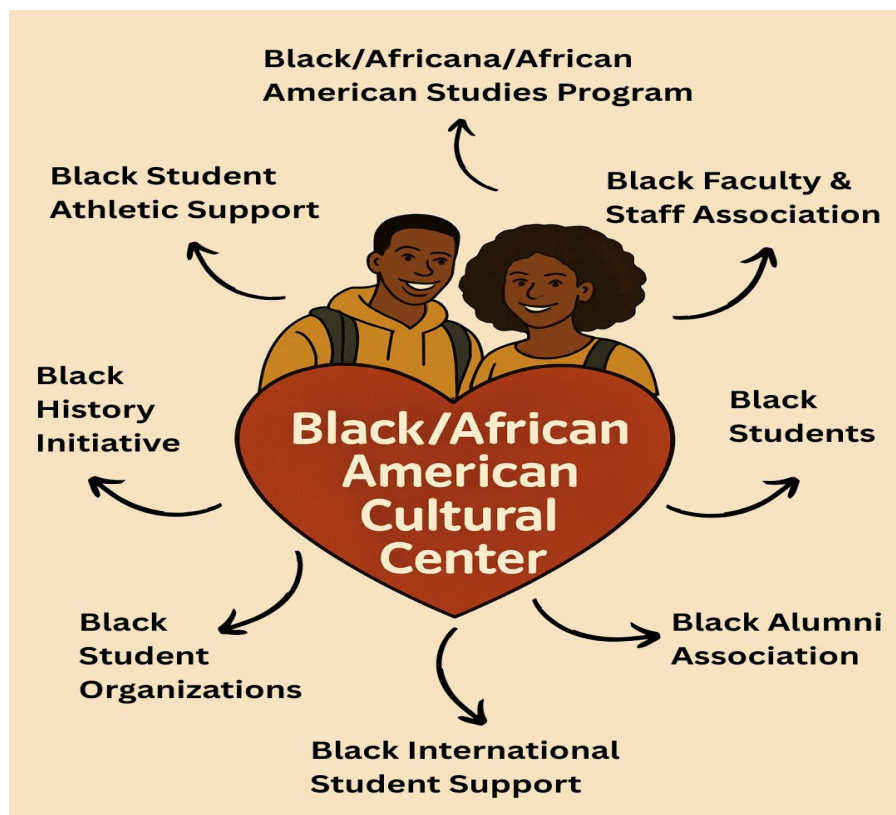


FIGURE 1. VantaBlack ecosystem.

As you can see from the model, the center of the ecosystem could be a physical affinity space like a Black or African American Cultural center which would serve as the hush harbor and safe space for meetings, classes, and renewal (Freeman, 2021). It could be the one sacred space where

Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators could congregate and provide support for each other.

It is critical that such a space have someone hired to manage that space, such as a director, other staff members, and student workers, to ensure the longevity of its efforts. Who is hired as director is key to ensuring continuity, given that students are rightfully transient when they finish their studies. The director would be viewed as the first among equals among faculty, staff, and administrators regarding Black issues on campus, as the center would serve as the clearinghouse for Black cultural initiatives. This does not mean that independent Black faculty and staff associations, Black affinity groups, and academic programs would not maintain their autonomy. It means that Black and African American Centers work in concert with these other entities to provide support and seek to ensure limited unnecessary duplication of efforts among groups and initiatives. Leaders of these Black initiatives and groups are clear about this philosophy.

In the next section of this commentary, I will share one attempt towards this model. Moreover, it candidly shares its strengths and challenges. However, in light of the institutional changes needed in American higher education to meet the needs and aspirations of Black students and employees. I believe that such a model can be effective at PWIs. Recognizing that modifications may be needed, given the unique needs, limitations, aspirations, and political context of each institution.

Reflections Regarding the Attempted Implementation of a VantaBlack

Ecosystem

Success Experienced

While not initially named as such, I began envisioning the development of the VantaBlack Ecosystem as an institutional response to the calls for justice in 2020 from the Black Lives Matter Movement, given the murder of George Floyd. The president of my institution, along with my Chief Diversity Officer, asked me to share some ideas for ways the university could show that Black lives mattered at our institution. Based on the essay Freeman (2020) had previously published, I shared that the university needed to have its Black Cultural Center space reinstated, hire a director for the position, and create more scholarships. All of these initiatives were supported by their burgeoning Black Faculty and Staff Association.

While we, Black Faculty and Staff Association, were unable to get specific scholarships, we were able to get the center and the director position filled. Later on, we strengthened our Africana Studies program and renamed it Black Studies. And we launched an award-winning academic initiative, the Black History Research Lab (Gasper & Freeman, 2023), that investigated the contributions and experiences of Black people in the institution's history. This lab produced a book (Gasper & Freeman, 2024), a workbook (Lyne, Gasper, & Freeman, 2024), and a traveling

exhibit (Freeman, 2022) on the history of the contributions of Black people at the University of Idaho. Later on, I led in the launching of the Black Research Institute for Flourishing and Thriving.

Students recognized the new space as the center of Black activity. From Black student athletes to engineering students. It was a cool space for Black people to be themselves beyond the White gaze of the campus. Hiring a very competent director was key. It was on its way to being the very hush harbor that I envisioned it to be. Having such a space allowed even faculty from the Black studies program to engage with students and inquire about their academic and programmatic needs.

In such a culture, you have to have a vision. It can be one person or a group of people who can see possibilities where others cannot. In my case, I had to be a visionary, pragmatist, and pessimist at the same time. This is often because we had very few individuals at our institutions committed to this work.

Specific Significant Institutional Shifts and Transformations

Area 1: Structural Transformation

One of the greatest structural transformations was the reinstatement of the Black/African American Cultural Center (B/AACC), adding two staff members: the director, who was full-time, and the administrative coordinator, who was part-time. While we were undermined regarding the size of the space that we eventually secured, it was located in the student union, and we were able to raise the funds to renovate it in a way that celebrated Black life and culture in an unapologetic way that no other space on campus had.

Another institutional transformation was the creation of the Black History Research Lab (BHRL). It is the first and only non-STEM-related research enterprise housed within the university's most prominent research building. It is extremely competitive to earn that space and is based on a mix of securing external funding and project impact. This became a physical space that both undergraduate and graduate students could use to engage in research specifically related to the advancement of Black people on campus and beyond. It became a sight of mentoring and training.

It also became the site of the Black Research Institute for Flourishing and Thriving (BRIFT), another scholarly entity that allowed students to envision and research the ways in which the campus could better serve its Black population. Lastly, the expansion and renaming of the Black Studies program created the ability to modernize the curriculum, and connecting B/AACC, BHRL, and BRIFT gave the VantaBlack Ecosystem the academic base and credibility.

Area 2: Symbolic and Cultural Shifts

One of the greatest impacts of having the B/AACC as the physical recognized “hub” of Black life on campus, was it gave students a place to go for support and allowed them to be themselves outside of the White gaze. Having the BHRL and BRIFT served as other nodes to the central hub. It allowed space for Black empowerment symbols and history across the spaces. Each location has its own library of books on Black history, culture, and advancement. That, along with establishing the Black faculty and staff association, shifted our presence on campus from virtual invisibility to visible institutional presence.

Area 3: Educational Transformation

While we had courses taught on Black History for nearly 40 years and the Africana Studies minor for nearly half a decade. One of the greatest impacts on changing thoughts regarding the presence of Black Americans on campus was the creation of BHRL. This national award-winning scholarly enterprise created exhibits hosted across campus that highlighted alums, current students, and former and current Black faculty, staff, and administrators. The creation of the book, *The Seminal History and Prospective Future of Blacks at the University of Idaho* (Gasper & Freeman, 2023), shifted institutional dialogue. Rather than people asking if there was a history of Black learning and working at the University. It began a discussion about how this history should be highlighted throughout the campus and community. Some of our greatest partners were the University library, History department, Archives department, the local chamber of commerce and visitor center, county historical society, and theatre.

Area 4: Relational Shifts

While not as strong as I had hoped, we began to create a network of programming and activities that spanned organizations and units. For instance, the BRIFT helped co-sponsor social events that brought together Black faculty, students, and administrators. The African Student Association began to have social and educational events with the Black Student Union and the local chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). While I would have liked more joint activities and events. Often, some individuals did not understand the value of collaborating on their entity’s calendars to avoid many overlapping events, particularly in February, Black History Month.

Challenges Experienced

While overall this was a success story, especially for the state of Idaho. There were some challenges. Often, Black employees and students did not get the big picture of the VantaBlack ecosystem. My goal was for the members of the Black community to see the creation of these

initiatives as a strategically coordinated network of institutional structures, cultural spaces, academic programs, and relational networks designed to collectively sustain the thriving and flourishing of Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators within the University.

However, given what would be considered their primary responsibilities at the university, Black faculty and staff would often be more concerned with their day-to-day roles over Black initiatives and activities. While they might agree with the VantaBlack ecosystem conceptually, the unit-level politics in which they were hired to work often was their main concern.

While I shared my vision with some student leaders and the Black/African American Cultural Center director, it did not filter down to the average student and employee. They often viewed each initiative as a singular initiative. Similarly, most Black students primarily got involved with social activities and engaged resources when it met their individual needs and interests. But they were not necessarily committed to advancing the ecosystem as a whole. To be fair, many were consumed with student life and were unaware of what it was.

Other challenges included concerns about the White gaze and the gazes of other non-Black minoritized populations. Given that it was important to allow anyone at the university to use our designated space and activities. It could cause self-policing.

There were barriers to working with the athletics department beyond supporting athletes who may have found themselves in some type of challenging situations. Most Black American students came to the university through recruitment to play sports. And because the athletics department was generally a closed community to outsiders. Even if you were a Black faculty or staff member, you were not provided with access to encourage students to participate in other activities related to Black student social or academic events.

Another major challenge that presented itself was supporting non-native-born or second-generation African or Caribbean immigrant students and employees. After 2020, the university shifted its efforts to recruit Black students in other states with denser Black populations, like California. They were now focusing their recruitment efforts within the state, where many of the Black students were children of African refugees and asylum seekers. Their understanding and view of America were different from those of students who were descendants of enslaved Americans. In my experience, such students saw America as the land of opportunity and were not necessarily interested in learning about Black history and discussing Black empowerment beyond the African context.

Similarly, for the last four years, my wife and I have been the only faculty members who were descendants of enslaved Americans. And I happened to be one of the only Black full professors who were both tenured and held that rank. And none of the faculty members were hired to study

or teach specifically on the topic of Black American issues. All other faculty of African descent were hired to teach and conduct research on topics not specifically related to Black issues. Therefore, when we taught in the Black studies programs, it was considered an act of service without additional compensation. And while there were Black staff members who served at the university, outside of the Black/African American Cultural Center director and his part-time administrative assistant, none were specifically hired to support Black students. And many did not see it as their responsibility to do more to support Black students specifically.

However, I think the major challenge was the lack of full-time staffing to get things done. Much was left to the director and his part-time assistant to meet the needs of nearly 150 Black students. Each of us has gifts and talents, but we cannot do everything. He was put in an unfair position, expected to serve in an “otherfathering” role, recruit, mentor, teach, create activities, serve as an academic advisor and coach, and much more. To properly create the institutional change that would lead to the flourishing and thriving of both Black students and employees, fiscal resources and appropriate levels of human capital would need to be provided.

Responses to the Challenges

While not all challenges were fully resolved, several were addressed through adaptive leadership strategies, resulting in meaningful, though partial, institutional change. These efforts illustrate both the possibilities and limits of advancing ecosystem-based transformation within constrained environments.

To address the lack of a shared understanding of the ecosystem, I advanced a long-term institutional vision (e.g., a 2035 projection) and engaged key stakeholders, including the B/AACC director and student leaders, in conversations about alignment. While diffusion across the entire campus remained limited, this effort resulted in greater coordination among core actors, laying the groundwork for a more integrated approach to Black initiatives.

Given institutional and political constraints, including limited access to certain units such as athletics, progress was achieved through a pragmatic leadership approach that prioritized areas within feasible influence. This resulted in incremental, but durable gains, particularly in academic and cultural domains, even as some structural barriers remained intact.

In response to severe staffing limitations, efforts were made to formalize leadership roles within the ecosystem, most notably by hiring a full-time director for the Black/African American Cultural Center and adding a part-time assistant, along with several undergraduate and student workers. This shift represented a key institutional change, moving from informal labor expectations to recognized and compensated leadership infrastructure, even though overall

staffing levels remained insufficient. Other advancement was increased hiring of students in undergraduate and graduate research assistant roles associated with BRIFT and BHRL.

To move beyond episodic programming, I led and supported the creation of more durable institutional structures, including the Black History Research Lab and the Black Research Institute for Flourishing and Thriving, alongside strengthening Black Studies. These efforts shifted the university from isolated events toward ongoing knowledge production and academic infrastructure, signaling a transition toward more sustainable institutional engagement.

The development of B/AACC as a central hub helped mitigate fragmentation across students, faculty, and staff by creating a shared physical and relational space. This contributed to a cultural shift in which Black community life became more visible, centralized, and accessible, even if participation varied across subgroups.

Given institutional and political constraints, including limited access to certain units such as athletics, progress was achieved through a pragmatic leadership approach that prioritized feasible areas of influence (i.e., coordinating initiatives through student affinity groups and community partnerships). This resulted in incremental but durable gains, particularly in academic and cultural domains, even as some structural barriers remained intact.

Taken together, these responses contributed to several forms of institutional change:

1. Structural transformation: establishment and staffing of the cultural center and creation of research entities
2. Cultural shifts: increased visibility and centralization of Black community life.
3. Educational Transformation: expansion and strengthening of Black Studies and research initiatives.
4. Relational shifts: improved coordination among key stakeholders within the ecosystem

While these changes did not fully transform the institution, they represent a shift from fragmented Black-centered empowerment efforts toward an emergent ecosystem-level organization, demonstrating the potential of this model when partially implemented.

This case reveals the limitations of partial implementation, particularly regarding staffing constraints, uneven stakeholder buy-in, and the absence of full ecosystem alignment. These constraints further reinforce the central premise of the VantaBlack Ecosystem: that fragmented or under-resourced efforts are insufficient to produce sustained institutional transformation.

What Might a VantaBlack Ecosystem and Its Enabling Conditions Look Like in the Future?

Enabling Conditions

Visionary

To create an effective VantaBlack Ecosystem, it would be important to create a shared vision of what that could look like. For instance, at the University of Idaho, I (Freeman, 2023) shared a vision of what the university could look like in the year 2035 with such an ecosystem. The leader(s) would need to be adept at communicating with multiple constituencies, conveying that all Black- and African-related initiatives should work together. If not, you will have competing organizations that are pursuing the same limited resources and possibly cannibalizing each other rather than supporting each other.

Hire Presidential and Provost Leadership with DEI Experience

It would be important to hire presidential leaders and provosts adept at addressing DEI issues within the higher education context. They should display a track record of having navigating such issues under pressure. Given that supporting Black people in higher education outside of sports can be volatile, experience is important to know how to lobby both internal and external constituents for support and cover.

Hire Faculty and Staff with Demonstrated Commitment to Black Empowerment

Hiring faculty and staff with experience and expressed interest in Black empowerment and advancement is critical for the Ecosystem to work. While cluster hires might not be supported. When search committees are seeking employees for institutions, one of the areas of strength they can look for is evidence of intentionally doing things that advance the Black community. Particularly, hiring senior Black faculty who are tenurable upon hiring, as they will be able to influence institutional change in ways that junior and untenured faculty are not. They are in a position to speak up in ways to protect Black students, staff, and junior faculty.

Leadership within the VantaBlack Ecosystem is not confined to positional authority but is enacted through what may be described as ecosystem leadership—the ability to cultivate alignment across institutional units, secure resources, and sustain a shared vision under conditions of political and organizational constraint. This form of leadership is particularly critical within PWIs, where advancing, Black-centered initiatives often require navigating competing priorities, shared governance structures, and external political pressures.

Create Central Spaces that Celebrate Black Culture

While colleges and universities may avoid the creation of Black cultural centers, institutions can create spaces where all groups can feel celebrated, and within that space, highlight Black history and culture. Black faculty are also key to this, as they can create research initiatives that call for spaces that provide congregational space for Black students and employees.

Encourage and Significantly Invest in the Development of Student and Employee Affinity Groups

Black students, faculty, and staff need to be intentional about creating affinity groups, officially or unofficially, to build community and strategize to support one another and initiatives that advance the Black community on campus.

Core Components of a VantaBlack Ecosystem

To clarify the structure of the VantaBlack Ecosystem, it is important to move beyond enabling conditions and explicitly identify its core components. The ecosystem is not defined by a single initiative, but by a network of interdependent structures that collectively support Black thriving within the institution.

1. Central Cultural Infrastructure (The Hub)

Cultural Centers or Dedicated Spaces

These serve as the physical and symbolic center of the ecosystem—functioning as a “hush harbor” where Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators can gather, build community, and access support. This space anchors the ecosystem and facilitates coordination across its other components.

2. Academic Infrastructure

Academic Programs (e.g., Black Studies)

These units institutionalize Black knowledge within the curriculum and provide intellectual grounding for the ecosystem. They also create opportunities for faculty engagement and student learning that extend beyond co-curricular experiences.

3. Knowledge Production Units

Research Labs and Institutes

Research entities generate scholarship, document institutional histories, and contribute to broader academic and public discourse. They also enhance institutional legitimacy by embedding Black-centered inquiry within the university's research mission.

4. Affinity and Relational Networks

Student, Faculty, and Staff Affinity Groups

These groups provide relational support, mentoring, and informal leadership structures. They are critical for sustaining engagement and fostering a sense of belonging across different campus constituencies.

5. Leadership and Coordination Structure

Formal and Informal Leadership Roles

Effective ecosystems require coordination. This may include a cultural center director, faculty leaders, or cross-unit committees that align efforts, reduce duplication, and maintain a shared vision.

6. Programmatic and Experiential Layer

Co-Curricular Programs and Initiatives

Events, workshops, and community-building activities activate the ecosystem and provide regular points of engagement. However, within this model, programming is not the endpoint but rather an expression of the broader infrastructure.

7. Resource and Support Systems

Funding, Staffing, and Institutional Backing

Sustainable ecosystems require financial investment and human capital. Without these, efforts remain fragmented and overly dependent on individual labor.

This distinction between structural components and enabling conditions aligns with organizational change literature that differentiates between institutional design and implementation capacity.

Summary

Importantly, these components are most effective when they operate in mutual reinforcement rather than isolation. The absence or underdevelopment of any single component weakens the

ecosystem as a whole, whereas alignment across components increases the likelihood of sustained institutional impact and transformation.

While many of the individual components of the VantaBlack Ecosystem, such as cultural centers, affinity groups, and Black Studies programs, have existed historically, this model calls for more than reinstatement. It calls for a recommitment to a holistic and coordinated approach, in which these elements are intentionally aligned as part of a broader institutional strategy rather than functioning as fragmented or peripheral initiatives. Institutional transformation occurs not simply through the presence of these components, but through their integration, resourcing, and recognition as central to the university's mission.

In this sense, the VantaBlack Ecosystem advances institutional transformation by shifting Black support structures from the margins to the organizational core, thereby influencing decision-making, resource allocation, and campus culture in sustained ways.

Conclusion

While additional research across institutional contexts is needed, the University of Idaho case provides compelling preliminary evidence that coordinated, Black-centered institutional ecosystems can produce meaningful structural, cultural, and academic change. As such, the VantaBlack Ecosystem offers a promising model for organizational transformation within complex higher education environments.

As I conclude, I believe that institutional change is possible. Even in light of the attempts to intimidate and roll back the policies and practices that safeguard the advances of Black students and employees. However, PWIs must intentionally facilitate ecosystems of support. One-off programs and initiatives are not enough. It is important to create initiatives that chronicle the history of Black people on campuses and capture current history as it happens. It is also critical to have a plan for the future and how infrastructure will be created so that groups and initiatives will last beyond a person or a set of personalities.

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