Article

Exploring Messages African American Men Receive About Attending

a Predominantly White University

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This article discusses the findings of a focus group study of 10 African American undergraduate men at a predominantly White Southern research institution. The authors explored African American men's struggles with persistence through graduation. Findings suggest that prior to college participants faced distracting messages about what it means to attend a predominantly White institution from their families, schools, and community.

Implications for establishing partnerships with African American families, schools, and community organizations are discussed.

The collegiate success of African American men is a serious problem in the United States. College educators have puzzled over this conundrum and a growing body of literature discusses both the achievements and the plights of African American male college students (Cuyjet, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008). The gaping disparities in retention and graduation rates between African American men and their counterparts from different racial backgrounds are especially troubling. More than two-thirds of African American college men who start college do not finish within six years, revealing the lowest college-completion rate across all racial groups and for men and women (Porter, 2006). As scholars (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2010; Sutton, 2006) on African American male collegiate success aptly pointed out, institutions of higher education have devised well-conceived plans to improve the collegiate success of African American men. However, low persistence and graduation rates for African American men largely remain unchanged, particularly at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Porter, 2006).

In exploring possible causes for these issues, research suggests that the foundation of collegiate academic success of African American men rests on their upbringing experienced in families, schools, and communities (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008; Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara Barry, & Haskins, 2010; Toldson, 2008; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). The Schott Foundation recently indicated statistics for African American male high school seniors: nationally fewer than 50% graduate high school and the top 10% of low-performing schools graduate barely over a quarter of African American men (as cited in Mata, 2011).

Parental support of African American male students is of key importance specifically as they anticipate leaving home to attend a PWI (Kerpelman et al., 2008). Guiffrida (2005) suggested that high school educators should partner with African American families to facilitate students transitioning effectively from high school to college and that college advisors serve as a bridge between students and African American families. Trask-Tate and Cunningham (2010) suggested that African American male and female students are affected differently by parental support, but cemented the importance of positive influence from parents in developing students' high academic expectations. Beyond family support, Nichols et al. (2010) found that an abundance of local community resources compensated for the lack of support of African American men by their schools. Community assistance permitted students to develop positive attitudes and academic goals outside of school.

Mentoring is of primary importance to the success of African American male high school and college students. Toldson (2008) confirmed the value of mentoring, community and after-school activities, as well as career and college counseling. Focusing on African American men in college, Sutton (2006) asserted the viability of developmental mentoring which promotes shared goal setting between the protégé and mentor. Mentoring from a developmental perspective center on active learning methods rather than as mentoring based on an instructional relationship. Mentors using a developmental approach can play the roles of teacher, guide, gatekeeper, or consultant (Sutton, 2006). Sutton used the example of the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) as a developmental mentoring initiative. In SAAB the college students mentor other college peers individually and as a group and receive mentoring by staff and faculty. Such an approach takes strong institutional commitment including training mentors, funding mentoring activities, and institutional celebration of the results of the mentoring process.

According to Mock, Williams, and Stuart (2009), a student chapter of SAAB at the research site was created in 2005 and by 2008-09 it consisted of a 55 African American male students (of 374 total African American male students at the institution). Members were engaged in leadership activities, mentoring, outreach, and academic support initiatives. SAAB promotes social responsibility for self and others by the mantra, "I am my brother's keeper, and together we will rise" (Student African American Brotherhood, 2012).

Despite knowing that the collegiate success of African American college men partly stems from experiences before they arrive on campus, a lack of research exists showing how colleges and universities can partner with African American families, schools, or community organizations. The present study is significant for college educators, specifically in admissions, orientation, residence life, and multicultural student support services. Many African American college-bound men may have serious trepidations about attending PWIs because of the expectations of racism, chilly campus climates, and a perceived lack of support by college peers, staff, and faculty (Harper, 2010). College educators will benefit from knowing how families, teachers, and peers prepare African American men for college, especially if this preparation contains discouraging messages about attending PWIs.

In this article, we report data that emerged from focus groups with 10 participants at a flagship PWI research institution in a Southern state. The larger study explored reasons for African American men's low persistence and retention rates at PWIs; however, for this article we focused solely on strands of data indicating African American men may be receiving distracting messages from their home, community, and school environments before attending a PWI and recommendations from the participants to counter these messages.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory helps to explain the experiences of African American college men in this study. The model emphasizes different spheres of influence and their effect on individual development. Bronfenbrenner (1989) explicated four levels of influence: (a) the *microsystem*, reflecting interactions and experiences with people on a daily or regular basis, such as the immediate family, including parents, siblings, and other relatives who may share the same home as the participants; (b) the *mesosystem*, an integrated system of environments including home and school, such as extended family members, as well as high school teachers based on the frequency of daily interaction; (c) the *exosystem*, experiences outside the immediate sphere of influence with individuals including friends and community/church members at home, and new peers, faculty, and administrators in college; and (d) the *macrosystem*, including influences that emerge from perceived pressures to succeed, socioeconomic issues, perceived or overt racism and intolerance, and a perceived lack of opportunities for African American men in general. The broad literature categories of family environment, school and community support, along with theoretical underpinnings help to frame the methods to study the participants' experiences at a PWI.

Methods

Researchers collected data at the predominantly White flagship campus of a Southern public university system in March of 2010. Of 20,000 total students, 1,024 identified as African American in the fall of 2008. The graduation gap between all students and African American students amounted to nearly 20% relative to 6-yr graduation rates of the 2004 cohort. Yet, the

nearly 40% of African American students who graduate from this PWI clearly surpasses the 23% of African American students who graduate on average in the state.

The researchers used student affairs administrators as nominators and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. Ten African American men participated in the study, all of whom hailed from the home state of the research site. Four students were freshmen, two were sophomores, two were juniors, and two were seniors. Two of the authors conducted all three focus groups together: the first with six participants and the second and third focus group with two participants each. All focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes; all were transcribed verbatim.

Typical with the qualitative approach the authors used inductive techniques to analyze data (Merriam, 2002). Authors read and re-read focus group transcripts for meaningful words, phrases, or passages of the data indicating salient information about the lived experiences of the participants. To achieve trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) the authors conducted member checks via e-mail asking the participants to authenticate or critique the interpretations of the main themes. Of the 10 original participants, four participated in the member checks, all of whom authenticated the general interpretations of the authors.

Findings and Discussion

One overarching theme and one strategy for improvement of the collegiate experiences of African American men emerged from the data: 1) distracting messages from the home, school, and community environments about attending a PWI; and 2) student recommended strategies for support of African American college bound-men.

"Keep Your Guard Up" - Distracting Messages

Parents, relatives, and peers told participants frequently to "keep [their] guard up" or "be careful," because "there are a lot of White people up there" and "they are not fond of your color." We do not claim the participants' parents were unsupportive; however, warnings about potential issues of racism at the PWI may distract students and focus attention on negative aspects of the college experience before it has even started. Students' collegiate transition and success hinge on parental messages supporting an African American male student rather than making him question why he chose a PWI (Guiffrida, 2005; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). One participant shared his surprise about the general campus climate: "How friendly everybody is despite what I was told when coming up here. People are actually a lot more friendly [sic] than I expected them to be." The findings indirectly confirm previous literature on the critical importance of supportive environments for the success of African American male students (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2010).

To add to distractions, participants indicated friends in the home environment disapproved of the student attending a PWI. For instance, friends told one participant he was "uppity for going to school with all them [sic] White folks." Two additional salient messages not uttered but perceived by participants emanated from their communities; friends seemed to support the view that one does not have to go to college to "be who you want to be," while other participants indicated perceiving messages from friends about "the main objective in life right now [for them] is not education but what kind of car you drive and how much money you have." All these overt and perceived messages significantly undermine African American male college students' motivation to succeed at a PWI.

Beyond messages of disapproval to attend a PWI, one participant mentioned that his status of conditional admission at the university was looked down upon by friends at home. Several men talked about the stereotypes of African American men being automatically pegged as athletes, even in the home community. One participant talked about his mother's pride in telling friends and community members about her son's achievement of a full scholarship at the research site. Responses included, "aha, what sport does he play?"

In addition to well-intended but distracting warnings about potential issues of stereotyping and racism, participants indicated schools and communities do not instill enough academic self-esteem in African American male students. According to one participant, the school environment sent him and his peers a clear message about the unlikelihood of African American male success at the state flagship institution: "Being told that you are going to a PWI, so 9 times out of 10, you will not graduate at a PWI." College educators at PWIs need to be aware of these messages and work with schools on fashioning messages that are less unforgiving. These findings add to Toldson's (2008) conclusions that supportive teachers bring about academic success of African American high school students. In addition, Kerpelman et al. (2008) indicated that African American men's academic success is based on beliefs in their individual competence and performance aptitude. Messages from teachers about the perceived impossibility of graduating from a PWI critically hinder positive thoughts of personal aptitudes.

Potentially distracting messages from family and friends are understandable coming from a population who has dealt with the effects of poverty, racism, and intolerance for hundreds of years. Positive family support is key to the perceived and realized success of African American college men as this quote by a participant suggests:

Why we don't see the motivation we need goes back to the supportive family. I feel like that our own families and our communities, they play a big role in the effort that you put out and I feel like if you have a supportive family then you make a bigger effort because you want to make them proud of you. One of the reasons we don't see the motivation for some students is because their families aren't there for them and aren't pushing them.

Despite receiving distracting messages about PWIs, they offered hopeful recommendations for college and school educators to assist African American men to be successful in college.

"We Need People to be Real with Us" - Strategies for Support

Some of the participants mentioned that faculty, staff and students on campus were supportive ("this is a really helpful place"), that they considered the campus climate friendly ("people are actually pretty friendly"), and that the few African American faculty and staff were significant assets to the students ("Dr. Cowley [name changed] is one of those professors I can talk to about anything"). The participants expressed hope that the institution can assist African American men to be successful. In their minds, institutional recruitment efforts need to start targeting prospective students in secondary or even primary schools. These strategies should employ current African American college men who provide "real" information to male African American high school students rather than a sugarcoated version of the pitfalls of college distractions or difficulties:

Say someone comes to your [high] school to speak about the university. I think [the students] need someone to be real with them and to tell them what really happens. The [typical] person will be like, "Don't go to parties, go to class [*said slowly as if bored*]." But in reality they need to tell you what's really going to happen: "Ok, there is going to be these parties here and this is what I did," and tell you their mistakes.

Along with real recruiting, participants agreed that African American college men needed strong mentoring before and during college. Although all respondents were supportive of mentoring, the older students among the participants spoke up more distinctly about the critical need for support. Students noted that every African American male incoming college student should have a returning college student mentor: "They need someone who is already [in college], that knows how things work. You need to come up here already with a mentor or even someone you can email every now and then." Further, participants asserted they need mentorship from faculty and staff once enrolled on campus. This mentorship should come from African American faculty and staff if possible because of the built-in trust factor the participants perceived with other African Americans: "I think that it's a perk to have an African American faculty [or] staff member. They are not going to treat you the wrong way." However, participants also stressed that White peers, faculty, and staff can be helpful mentors:

> Yeah they can be a part of it. I mean, if you make friends with people of other groups,
> they are naturally not going to want to let you go back home. If you want to talk about
> something, they are going to be there, so they can be part of your support system."

The findings about mentoring corroborate the work by LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997), and Robertson and Mason (2008), who found that mentoring and positive faculty-student relationships positively affect African American college men's persistence. Institutions committed to the success of African American men should ensure this mentoring is developmental (Sutton, 2006) and starts well before college. This would ensure that institutions of higher education engage with prospective African American students during the school years, build relationships, and counteract some of the messages that distract students from seeking enrollment at PWIs.

Beyond mentoring, the participants asserted that African American men needed discipline to succeed at a PWI. Ideally, this discipline would emerge within each student; however, participants also explained that supporters and mentors on campus should hold African American men accountable for their actions. A positive example of this peer accountability was the African American male initiative group on campus, SAAB, but beyond that, participants recommended faculty and staff should, "See how you're doing in class. Someone who will call you if you are not going to class. Like, 'Why didn't you go to class?'" These findings corroborate the results of previous research on African American male peer support (Harper, 2010). At the research site, this support came in the form of the local chapter of the SAAB in which several of the participants were involved as a student organization. Brotherhood was important to the participants; however, the students stressed that brotherhood was not simply focused on African American men ("a brotherhood can be with any race") and that it included holding each other accountable to be successful in college ("If I say I am my brother's keeper, I need to call on my brother and check on him, like 'What's up with your grades?'").

Beyond empirical research, the findings of the present study show that all of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) spheres influenced how the participants perceived their experiences as African American men at a PWI. Immediate family members (*microsystem*) influenced the apprehensions of several participants about enrolling in the institution by giving warnings about racism ("keep your guard up"). High school teachers (*mesosystem*) sent implicit but detrimental messages about the participants' lack of chances for success at the PWI ("9 times out of 10 you won't graduate a PWI"). Friends at home (*exosystem*) discouraged students from attending the PWI ("you're uppity"). Participants also felt the influence of societal pressure (*macrosystem*) due to perceived racism and intolerance and pressure to succeed ("there are people out there who

want you to fail"). If not counteracted, these spheres of influences may set African American male college students up to feel they will not succeed at a PWI.

Implications

Although we encourage caution in transferring the results of this study to all institutional contexts, the findings point to a few critical implications for college educators. African American men who prepare to attend PWIs may receive distracting messages from their home environments about what those institutions will be like and what kind of success the students can expect. Institutional agents in admissions, orientation, and outreach must find ways to reach African American male secondary students with realistic information about PWIs so students give these institutions serious consideration. Aside from admissions professionals, more student affairs professionals and faculty need to find ways to get involved in helping African American college-bound men to anticipate college properly before they ever set foot on a campus. In addition, institutions must learn more about how parents, schools, and communities describe a specific PWI to African American men. Especially those PWIs struggling to recruit from predominantly African American regions in the state (i.e., the institution in this study), need to find ways to partner with schools, communities, and families to halt or reverse potentially conflicting messages. Beyond well-conceived campus visit days or summer bridge programs that take place on the specific campus, community organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, YM/WCAs, Rotary, Kiwanis, Big Brothers/Sisters) offer events at which institutional representatives can interact with local students in their home environment to send appropriate messages about the institution.

Two significant keys exist to all interactions with African American men in their communities. First, prospective students need "real" information about the institution. This

involves switching politically correct marketing jargon in institutional messages with authentic information. Second, the institution must successfully employ current African American male students, professional staff, and faculty to reach out to prospective students. To avoid overtaxing already well-engaged African American college men, institutions need to call on White faculty, staff, and peers as mentors for outreach activities. This needs to involve specific training and helping White staff overcome potential worries of effectiveness of reaching African American students.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Despite efforts to achieve trustworthiness, two limitations of the study are apparent. First, the sample consisted of only those men who were willing to participate in the focus groups. We should have attempted to conduct more focus groups to achieve maximum variation of the sample. We sought to understand the needs African American men articulated relative to their success. However, we did not capture voices of students who had dropped out or those who were struggling. Additional research should be conducted with African American men who no longer attend a college or university to understand what experiences led to the decision to stop their postsecondary education. The size of the focus groups further limited the study. The second and third focus groups were conducted with two participants each. All of these four students expressed their thoughts about our questions openly; however, having more participants with who to interact would have likely yielded more salient findings in focus groups two and three.

Second, the findings suggest that messages from their home environment influenced the participants during their college choice process and throughout their college careers. However, this research does not capture the men's experiences in their home environment, with their

families and friends, their teachers in high school, or before and after initial enrollment in college. This dilemma points to numerous possibilities for further research. Ethnographic studies should be conducted with African American boys and young men with their families and in schools to more deeply understand how environment influences how they perceive college.

Conclusions

African American men need assistance in distinct ways to become successful college students. They need assistance in their home, school, and community environments to navigate messages about what it means to attend PWIs. College educators should be at the forefront of providing this assistance to orient the prospective student to the PWI well before they would enroll, to build relationships with them, and to offer mentoring and outreach. This should include student affairs professionals as well as faculty, not just those who are African American. One of the main reasons for college educators to get involved well before college would begin is to counteract distracting messages African American male students may receive from their home environments. These strategies are best used in partnership with African American families, school principals, teachers, and counselors, as well as community leaders to present accurate information African American men can use in exploring college without distraction. African American men who are prepared for and who consider college ought to hear empowering messages that motivate rather than discourage. In the words of one of the participants, we need to ensure that "college is not too late" to address the critical issues faced by African American male college students.

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