

## Using photovoice to uncover campus issues and advocate change for black males

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### Abstract:

Disparity of Black male academic achievement compared with non-Black males is well documented in a variety of educational settings (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Harper, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Sander, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). The literature has primarily focused on discussing educational shortcomings of Black male students rather than exploring contributing factors, environmental supports, and systemic strategies that could improve achievement (Harper, 2009; Jackson & Moore, 2008; McGuire, 2005). Experts contend that an individually based perspective on the issue is too narrow and suggest structural factors within the broader campus environment should be identified and addressed (Douglas, 1998; Harper, 2009; Latz, 2012). Unfortunately, when college administrators attempt to develop programs to help Black male students, the students themselves are rarely fully engaged or consulted to help understand their unique environmental and cultural contexts (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

**Keywords:** higher education | photovoice | Black male students | NCRPA | campus engagement

### Article:

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The purpose of this *Research in Brief* is to report a campus intervention that used photovoice to actively engage Black male students on a predominately White campus (PWC) by documenting

their lives and advocating for structural changes to support their academic success. Photovoice is a method that has been used to conduct participatory action research in which participants use cameras to photograph their community's strengths and weaknesses, critically discuss issues that emerge, and advocate to decision makers and community members for change (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photovoice project's three goals were: (a) to enable participants to document their community's needs and assets, (b) to spark critical dialogue, and (c) to provide platform to influence change. The project resulted in increased campus dialogue around issues of race and improved organizational support for Black males on campus.

## **METHOD**

Students at a public university with a large minority population (38%) in the Southeast region of the United States were invited to participate in the project through flyers, e-mails, and face-to-face recruitment. A final convenient sample of 10 undergraduate Black males of varied academic years, majors, and ages (18 to 25 years) agreed to participate. For this study, we use the term *Black male* to describe the experiences of students inclusive of African American and international students. At the time of the project, 6% of the student body identified as Black males, and the average graduation rate (completion within 4 to 6 years) of Black males (50%) at this university was consistently lower than Black females (61%). Given that the small sample was from one campus, findings may not be generalizable to other universities. Institutional Review Board approval was received before project implementation.

Participants were taught basic photography techniques, privacy laws, the use of photo-release forms (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). We directed students to photograph any self-identified aspects of their lived campus experiences that helps or hinders them and possibly other Black male students at the university. After a 3-week period of taking photographs, participants met to discuss the issues identified and wrote captions that described their photographs.

We analyzed and categorized the students' photos and captions into themes using constant comparison analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which each photo and theme was compared to the components of Taylor and Miller's Necessary Components Retention Program Assessment model (NCRPA). The NCRPA is a conceptual model for evaluating retention programs on college campuses that address needs of minoritized groups. The six components of the NCRPA explain the psychological and social needs of people entering new environments (Table 1) and were used to categorize the content of student photographs and captions.

To address the validity of photo categorizations, we conducted member checking (Creswell, 2007) by having students confirm the accuracy of photograph categorizations. Following photovoice protocol, several photo-voice exhibits were conducted at which students advocated for change regarding the issues addressed in their photographs and captions. Exhibits intentionally targeted community members and university decision makers, including the Provost, Faculty Senate, Director of Multicultural Affairs, and Admissions Office.

**Table 1.** Components of the NCRPA model

<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Ethnic and Peer Attachment	Sense of security and comfort gained by associating with other minorities on campus; can enhance group belonging and aid in process of social integration.
Social Integration	Associating with people on campus who have common interests and attitudes; social integration viewed as central component of model.
Worth and Competence	Sense of being a valued member of the campus community and being competent (both academically and socially); can enhance sense of purpose and level of motivation; personal attributes can influence each individual's ability to adjust and integrate into college environment.
Reliable Alliances	Sense of knowing that friends, faculty, and administrators provide assistance and advocacy; plays important role in reducing students' fears and feelings of isolation.
Guidance	Guidance provided by faculty and administrators (i.e., advising, mentoring, challenging, support) that are fundamental components of student development and success.
Leadership Opportunities	Campus opportunities for students to be peer mentors or leaders; serving others provides sense of importance, autonomy, and interdependence.

## RESULTS

The 10 students took a total of 77 photographs and chose 20 to represent their views at the photovoice exhibits. Commonly expressed themes involved perceptions of being misunderstood or stereotyped. Following is a sample of their photographs and captions that best illustrate components of the NCRPA.



**Figure 1.** Student Photo Representing ethnic and Peer Attachment *We Stick Together*. "the campus does a good job focusing on minorities but it does a bad job of hearing from the voices of minorities. being in a student organization is important to establishing friendships and getting that support because there is so few of us."

Ethnic and Peer Attachment

Students reported a strong attachment to Black peers on campus (Figure 1). At the same time, Black males did not feel included with the wider campus community. Findings suggest that supportive bonds developed by participation in student organizations are important (e.g., fraternities or sororities, interest clubs, etc.).

### Social integration

Student photographs and captions revealed scant representation of social integration with the larger campus community. Findings suggest pressure to play a role and represent an entire class of people interfered with social integration (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Student Photo Representing Social integration *Putting on "Show."* "Life on campus is often a show for the black males. We put on a show for others at school. We have to represent for the black voice in class."

### Worth and competence

Students believed that the campus community, including police officers, internalized stereotypes and did not value Black males (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Student Photo Representing Worth and competence *Another Day Another Police Encounter.* "I've had quite a few run-ins with the police and it's always just unnecessary. I was exercising on my bike and was stopped. It always starts with 'Recently' or 'You fit the description.' even though they are nice about it, it's the same underlying message of 'We don't trust you.'"

## Reliable Alliances

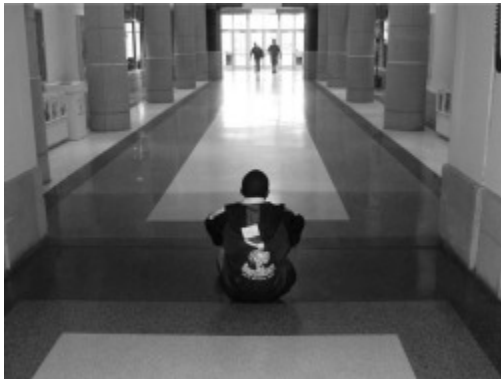
Although students reported maintaining reliable alliances with their peers, some documented difficulties in connecting with faculty and other students (Figure 4). Findings suggest that Black males feel the need to perform in exceptional ways to build reliable alliances.



**Figure 4.** Student Photo Representing Reliable Alliances *Connecting With Faculty*. "About 20% of the psychology students are black, but most are women. it's very hard to approach professors at times. other students just click easier with professors, and I find it a little harder to connect because i feel pressure to do so much better and exceed expectations to get the same connection."

## Guidance

Students documented university services that provide students with studying, reading, writing, speaking, financial aid, and career building support; however, they expressed that these services were poorly advertised, underutilized, not culturally appropriate, and less effective than they could be (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Student Photo Representing Guidance *Seeking Help*. "You look for the familiar face or black person because you know they will look out for you. others can make you feel so self-conscious of your appearance and the way you ask questions that you end up overanalyzing what others may think of you and leave offices not having your question answered or even more lost then when you came in."

## Leadership opportunities

Students reported feeling that leadership opportunities existed on campus, but that opportunities were generally limited to activities stereotypically associated with Black males, such as entertainment events and athletics. Findings suggest Black males desire more opportunities to serve in leadership roles in nonexclusive groups on campus (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Student Photo Representing Leadership opportunities *Lost in the Crowd*. "this is how the black man feels, that given-up expression, singled out, kind of feel like we don't know which way to go, very few options for black males to engage on campus."

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Addressing the call from the literature, we uncovered contributing factors, environmental supports, and strategies that could enhance the educational experience of Black males (Harper, 2009; Jackson & Moore, 2008; McGuire, 2005). This campus intervention demonstrates that photovoice (a) actively engages Black male students in documenting their lives, (b) increases campus dialogue around issues of race, (c) involves students in advocating, and (e) encourages campus leadership to adopt strategies that could improve the academic achievement of Black males on a PWC.

These results have a number of programmatic and campus-oriented implications. It was clear that the photovoice project reached targeted members of the university community as evidenced by attendance at events and conversations with key decision makers. This effect was most evident when the university's Provost remained at an exhibit for an hour after its closing to further engage participants in dialogue. His recognition of the rare opportunity for what he identified as "genuine dialogue" with students prompted him to immediately contact other administrators and invite them to walk over to view the ideas presented and to talk with the participant photographers. While causal attributions of any single advocacy effort are challenging, we believe the project's efforts resulted in an increased sensitivity to the needs of minoritized students, as suggested by Harper (2009), and contributed to the university being recognized in 2013 by the Educational Trust for closing the graduation gap between White and Black students (Sander, 2014).

Use of the NCRPA theoretical framework was valuable for interpreting student photographs and captions and provided a useful structure for decision makers to understand the concerns

expressed (Taylor & Miller, 2002). While a number of recommendations emerged from this campus intervention, a few specific illustrations demonstrate the utility of the method for motivating action within a campus environment. Given the findings of Black male students' feelings and challenges in cultivating worth and competence and fostering reliable alliances, the Director of Multicultural Affairs informed us that the photovoice project was a contributing factor for creating a new campus program known as Rites of Passage, a mentor-based program for incoming male students of under-served populations.

The case described here provides evidence of the utility of using the photovoice methodology as a tool for conducting participatory action research and facilitating student-led advocacy efforts whereby Black male students were able to communicate observations and concerns directly with decision makers and the campus community. Findings illustrate the importance of promoting the disclosure of ideas to those in power. A main outcome of a fully implemented photovoice process is to provide impetus for policy and systems level change (Wang & Burris, 1997); therefore, it is important that a public display of participants' concerns are shared with key personnel. The campus-based photovoice project described here reveals the power of the method for eliciting perspectives of students and reaching campus leaders and policy makers.

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