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## Realizing the Dream: African American Males' Narratives that Encouraged the Pursuit of Doctoral Education

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# Realizing the Dream: African American Males' Narratives that Encouraged the Pursuit of Doctoral Education

## **About the Author(s)**

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## **Keywords**

african american males, graduate education, doctoral education, hassler and gallagher college choice



**REALIZING THE DREAM:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES' NARRATIVES THAT ENCOURAGED THE  
PURSUIT OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

This article used personal narratives to discover factors affecting the decision of African American males to consider doctoral education. This study was based on qualitative interviews with 18 African American male doctoral students enrolled at predominantly white institutions as they reflected on their reasons for pursuing an advanced degree. The following were found to influence their decision: (a) need for faculty encouragement, (b) motivation to pursue a doctorate, and (c) their personal motivations. Recommendations are offered for increasing the numbers of African American male doctoral students.

*Keywords: African American, men, doctoral education*

**Introduction**

“I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little African American boys and African American girls will be able to join hands with little White boys and White girls and walk together as sisters and brothers” – King (1963).

In the provocative “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King (1963) charismatically forecasted the need for a nation where its citizens would be united and enjoy equality. This well-publicized and eloquent speech help begin to free African Americans from the racial insensitivity that continues to dampen America. There have been notions of progress in racial relations, yet there is more work that needs to be done in the area of educational attainment. The rights to a formal education required legal remedy, which had major implications on the participation, completion and educational trajectory of African Americans. This discrimination begins to explain the gap between the number of graduate degrees conferred to African Americans and Whites.

Over the past three decades, the number of African American male doctoral degree recipients increased approximately 1% while the number of African American females receiving terminal degrees more than doubled. The U.S. Department’s National Council on Education Statistics (2007) reports that 1,253 (3.8 %) of all doctoral degrees awarded in the United States were earned by African Americans in 1976. Of that number, doctoral degrees were earned by 766 (61%) of African American men. Forty years later, NCES (2012) reports that 10,417 (7.4 %) doctoral degrees earned in the United States were earned by African Americans in 2010. Of that number, African American women were the majority recipients of those degrees with 6,771 (65%) graduates. The diminished numbers of African American men receiving doctorates should

serve as an alarming regression for students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. Increasing demand for workers with advanced training (particularly at the graduate level), an inadequate domestic talent pool, and a scant representation of underrepresented groups graduating at all education levels are among the growing concerns over workforce issues that relate to the economic health and competitiveness of the United States (Council of Graduate School, 2008).

If this pattern continues, Americans will encounter a lack of diversity in the workforce; the African American community will have fewer African American intellectuals; which could lead to less research on issues relating to African Americans in the United States including a decline of research that aids in understanding these communities from their perspective. If Americans are committed to King's vision of equality, there is a need to explore ways of increasing the number of African American male doctoral degree recipients. While there is considerable research conducted on African American graduate students, only recently have researchers explored the experiences among African Americans specifically in doctoral education (Golde, 2000; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Changing the focus on the research relating to African American graduate students is one of the goals of the current study. Such research is essential in the process of identifying strategies for increasing the presence of African Americans, particularly men in doctoral education. The purpose of this qualitative research is to study the factors that African American men consider when pursuing doctoral degrees.

Given the limited amount of research on African Americans in doctoral education and the low numbers of African American male doctoral recipients, it is problematic but, not surprising that studies conducted on the college choice process of African American male doctoral students at large predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are underdeveloped in the research. Additionally, where much is still unknown about the convoluted experiences of African American males in higher education (Harper, Carini, Bridges & Hayek, 2004; Sawyer & Palmer, 2014; Strayhorn, 2009); it from this context that the need for this study is presented. Considering a slight increase in graduate degree attainment it is important to understand how institutions of higher education can increase the number of African American male doctoral students in the pipeline. The purpose of this study is to examine factors associated with African American male students' intention to pursue doctoral education. Grounded in qualitative methodology, the researcher employed narrative inquiry and in-depth interviews with 18 African American male doctoral students to address the following research question: How did they negotiate their decision to pursue doctoral studies?

First, the researcher begins by providing research relating to the enrollment patterns of African Americans in higher education and studies using Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model. Then, an account of the methods associated with this study is presented. Next, several experiences from 18 African American men enrolled in doctoral programs are shared. Finally, I make recommendations for those interested in the academic development of thriving African American male doctoral students.

### **Literature Review**

Despite the enrollment gains in college for African Americans over the past thirty years, the advancements for African American males have been nominal. For instance, during the past four decades, African American women and White college students outpaced their African American male counterparts in college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics 2004). African American students comprised 2,962,100 (15%) out of 20,642,800 students

enrolled in all degree-granting institutions in 2012. African American female enrollment of 1,882,700 (9%) almost doubles that of African American men 1,079,400 (5%) attending all degree-granting institutions. That same year, African American females comprised of 2,592,800 (15%) and African American men made up 969,700 (5%) of those students enrolled in undergraduate education. Moreover, it is expected that two out of three (67%) African American men will drop out of college before completing their bachelor's degrees (Mortenson, 2001). The low numbers of African American men enrolled in college are alarming when investigating this group in graduate education.

At the graduate level, the scarce enrollment rate of African American men begs the need for more information on the experiences of African American men in advanced degree programs. Historically, the participation rates between African Americans and Whites have been unbalanced. In 2005- 2006, education was the leading field of study African Americans were awarded the largest number of degrees. There were 1093 doctoral degrees in education earned by African Americans, followed by 315 degrees in psychology, and 356 degrees in health professions and related clinical sciences (NCES, 2007). In 2000, African Americans were 12.2% of the United States population (McKinnon & Bennett, 2005). Therefore, African American doctorates were awarded at only one half the expected population level. According to NCES (2007), the leading fields in which Whites were granted doctoral degrees were in health professions and related clinical sciences, 5,340; followed by education, 5,107; 3,687 in psychology; and 3,243 in biological and medical sciences. There is a history of differences in academic achievement between African Americans and Whites who earn doctorates. During 1976 - 1977, Whites received 26,851 (81%) of 33,126 doctorates degrees awarded in the United States. Concurrently, African Americans earned 1,253 (4%) of doctoral degrees (NCES, 2007a). In essence, African American degree completion is historically disproportionate when compared to Whites. The gap between African American and White degree completion is even greater when considering the sciences.

As a group, African Americans' low representation in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields is cause for concern. African Americans earned only approximately 5% of all doctorates in science, mathematics and engineering (NCES, 2015). Specifically, African Americans were bestowed with 175 Ph.D.'s in biological and biomedical sciences, 116 Ph.D.'s in engineering, 63 Ph.D.'s in physical sciences and science technologies, and 20 Ph.D.'s in mathematics or for 2002-03 (NCES, 2007). Meanwhile, Whites were awarded 75% of doctorates granted in science, math, and engineering in 2012-2013 (NCES, 2015). Subsequently, African Americans as a group are more likely to pursue social sciences and humanities as compared to White colleagues, who are more likely to pursue social sciences and natural sciences. Should this trend continue, the economic and educational gaps between the two races will continue to widen. In today's economy, the demands for individuals with post-baccalaureate education are becoming more increasingly required for entry level positions of influence. One could argue that the attainment gap at this level is more critical for improving social equity (Borden, Brown, & Garver, 2005). Above all, social inequities for African American men may not only be limited with Whites, but a threat for disparity between African American women and African American men.

As African American women continue to enroll in higher education institutions in greater numbers in comparison to their African American male counterparts, they have become the classroom majority. Hence, their efforts and achievements represent the majority group in most reporting of African American higher education accomplishments and doctoral degree completion. In 2012-2013, African American women earned 7,775 (64%) of all doctorates

awarded to African Americans (NCES, 2013a). In 1976-1977, African American men were 65% more likely to obtain a doctoral degree than African American women, but in 2012-2013 African American men comprised 4,309 (36%) of the Ph.D.'s conferred in the United States (NCES, 2013a). When comparing academic gain between the two groups, the achievement of African American women reported greater gains. Women typically tend to have a quantifiable presence in the top 3 leading programs of study among African Americans. For example, they earned 74% of all doctorates in education, 67% in health professions and related programs as well as 62% in the legal profession. Consequently, the percentages of African American men attempting doctoral completion tends to lag behind both African American women and Whites. Recent data suggested that African American men are in need of support. Furthermore, the inadequate numbers of African American male doctorates should serve as an alarming reality for students, faculty, and administrators in higher education. These low numbers pose a serious threat to diversity and equity in higher education. Considering the increasingly diverse population, it is important for institutions to examine more closely the characteristics of individuals who are persisting in their intended degrees.

Although much is known about the uphill challenges facing African American males in higher education, the research literature is lacking the voice of the men who are persisting. Additionally, encouraging studies on African American males at the latter stages of the educational pipeline is warranted. Very few studies examine the intersection of these two concepts. The researcher assumes that African American Ph.D. students are best positioned to provide inspiration to African American male undergraduates because of their similar backgrounds and experiences. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a model to examine undergraduate enrollment decisions. The decision to attend higher education is known as college choice and has been a major focus within undergraduate research (Freeman, 2006, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Nordstrom & Segrist, 2009). Drawing from the literature on college choice relating to undergraduate and graduate students, insights into how such patterns impacts doctoral degree aspirations and, in particular, the effect on African American males will be gained. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model consist of three phases: predisposition, search and choice. Within the first phase, predisposition, students' individual background characteristics (e.g. socioeconomic status, parental encouragement, peers, high school academics, co-curricular activities) influences their aspiration for attending college. In the second phase, search, students begin the process of deciding which school to apply and courting occurs between the institution and the student. During the final stage of choice, institutions begin to increase recruiting efforts and students are narrowing down their decision about which college or university to attend.

Educational researchers expanded Hossler and Gallagher's model to examine enrollment decisions among various student populations. Collectively, higher education faculty and staff have gained information on the effects of Hossler and Gallagher models on domestic graduates students (Treseder, 1995); masters and doctoral students (Kallio, 1995); international graduate students (Waters, 1992); African American undergraduate students (Freeman, 2006; 2002, 1997); and doctoral students in a specific program (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Pooch, 1999; Pooch & Love, 2001). No studies were found in the literature that focused exclusively on African American male doctoral students at predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The limitations that exist with these studies are researchers tend to address undergraduates or a combination of master's and doctoral students with little distinction made between the two. The literature on doctoral students is central to issues relating to attrition (Golde, 2000), persistence (Bingman, 2003; Gay, 2004; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004), time to completion (Ferrer de

Valero, 2001), women in STEM fields (Carlone & Johnson, 2007); and enrollment (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Having such findings are noteworthy and valuable for colleges and universities as well as beneficial for the aforementioned populations but more research is needed.

Before African American male students can arrive at a decision concerning what graduate school to attend, researchers need to discover what experiences bring forth the reasoning used to make such decisions. Information from African American men who are currently enrolled in doctoral programs can provide insight as to what experiences helped to shape their decision to enroll in graduate school. Yet, with a greater emphasis on institutions of higher education to better prepare students and with diversity increasing in America, researchers need to identify the reasons why African American students have applied and pursued advanced degrees. Thus, in the current study, I examined the factors that led a group of African American male students to enroll as doctoral students. The next section details the method associated with this study.

### **Method**

The researcher employed qualitative research methods with the desire to understand the “lived experiences” of 18 African American male doctoral students pursuing doctoral degrees at three large predominantly White, public, research universities (Creswell, 2005). According to Patton (2002), phenomenology is “the study of how people describe things and experience through their senses” (p. 105). The chosen method allowed the voices of those who are often marginalized to be heard. In this study, the researcher sought to learn how African American male doctoral students encounter and understand their aspiration for obtaining a terminal degree. Trying to capture the spirit of human behavior, a phenomenological approach to qualitative research allows entrance into the participant’s daily life (Patton, 2002). Consequently, truth is best understood and explained by the participant’s point of view (Patton, 2002).

Guiding questions were developed that explored their understanding and asked them to describe their everyday lived experiences. Next, 90-minute interviews were executed to collect data from 18 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the institutions and participants. This method allowed the responses to be more candid without fear of repercussions in the future. Pertinent descriptions about the sites, the participants, and issues of confidentiality and reliability are discussed in this section.

The study was conducted at three predominantly White, public, large, research universities. Two institutions are located in the Mid-Atlantic section of the United States while the other studied site is situated in the North-Atlantic Region of the country. The institutions were selected as a result of similarities in enrollment, size, age, and Carnegie classification. The People’s University, Elite University, and Flagship University are the given names of the selected universities. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the institutions. These are research institutions that award more than 50 doctoral degrees annually. Collectively, the universities total enrollment is 118,084 and 7,591 (6.4%) were African Americans. At the graduate level, collectively there were 23,291 students enrolled and 1,258 (5.4%) were African Americans.

All 18 students were interviewed during the fall 2006 semester. The researcher intentionally sampled individuals based on their membership as an African American male doctoral student attending a PWI (Creswell, 2005). The sample was drawn from a list of eligible African American male doctoral students currently enrolled in doctoral degree programs from the three universities. University officials and graduate school records were used to identify African American male doctoral students at each institution. The sample was comprised of 18 full-time doctoral students currently attending PWIs at the time of data collection [Table 1]. Prior

to the interview, each participant received an IRB-approved information sheet and was aware of his voluntary participation in this investigation.

Thirteen participants came from two parent households, and the remaining five were raised in a single mother home. Ten participants in the study identified their socioeconomic status as working class, seven from middle-class, and one from a poor/low-income environment. Eleven of the participants' mothers had none to some postsecondary education, and the mothers of the remaining seven earned college degrees. The educational background of the fathers of the men in the study is as follows: eleven reported they had no postsecondary degree, and seven had an associate's degree or higher. The doctoral students in the study ranged in age from 24-44 years old, and 12 of the students were single. The mean GPA of the doctoral students at the time of the study was 3.71, with grades ranging from a 3.0-4.0. In addition to their academic success in their doctoral programs, many of the participants had strong academic backgrounds as reflected in their mean GPA of 3.81 from their master's programs. The participants came from various undergraduate institutions, with 33% graduating from a HBCU. Further, examining their undergraduate GPAs, the men in this study had cumulative grades ranging from 2.23 to 3.83 with a mean of 3.16. Nearly 40% of the study participants reported undergraduate GPA under a 3.0.

The participants completed a profile sheet which asked for background information, such as home structure, educational history, and their perception of their university. To increase reliability and validity, follow up interviews were conducted four months after initial interviews. This measure helped strengthen the rapport between the researcher and the participants in the study. Accordingly, respondents are able to provide additional information that was excluded in the original meeting as well an opportunity for the researchers to address any concerns.

Individual interviews were scheduled at times and locations on campus convenient for the doctoral students. A semi-structured interview format was important to use because it provided flexibility with the research questions and the emerging data (Creswell, 2005). The questions were derived from the literature on racial-identity, masculinity, student retention, and successful strategies for program completion. The questions focused on African American male interactions with peer students and faculty, perception of campus climate, as well as their experiences with stereotypes. The audiotapes were transcribed. After each interview session, the researcher reviewed field notes and drafted a summary from the interview. The field notes contained key themes and observational comments.

Moustakas (1994) detailed that under phenomenological data analysis, the researcher must eliminate preconceived notions about the experience in order to understand the experiences of participants in the study. Using actual examples from the participant's conversations, descriptions of what was experienced by students along with explanations of its significance (Moustakas, 1994) were drafted. Moustakas (1994) further explains that descriptions using text captures what happens within an experience. A description was created for each participant. The next procedure required composing structural descriptions of the experiences, addressing 'how' the phenomenon was experienced. The researcher identified multiple scenarios; as such, seeking all possible meanings with the data, searched for different interpretations, changed the frame of reference about the phenomenon, and constructed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, through inductive reasoning, analytical categories or themes emerged as similarities and differences in understanding the doctoral students' experiences were determined. Guided by the evolving themes and patterns, codes were assigned. A total of 19 codes emerged. After determining patterns in the coding, transcripts were reviewed to identify examples that



confirmed patterns of motivations experienced by the doctoral students. The themes are listed and discussed in the findings section.

### **Findings**

In this section the three most prominent factors influencing the decision to enroll in a doctoral program are presented. Participants on the three campuses consistently mentioned three factors: (1) faculty encouragement, (2) the motivation to pursue a doctorate, and (3) the personal motivations for developing their aspiration to pursue a Ph.D. The three themes are further examined below.

#### **Faculty Encouragement**

Reasons for pursuing a doctorate were introduced by individuals who were successful in earning such a challenging degree. The participants mentioned faculty members at their previous educational institutions who first identified them as potential doctoral students. Now at Elite University, Lamar, as a student in the master's program, detailed his experience as he was singled out for his talent by his professor. He stated:

My professor said that I was taking this class a little bit more serious than most people. I said, well Dr. Pennington because I understand how well [these classroom applications] are helping my students. He responded, well you should at some point think about the doctorate. I replied, yes, at some point I probably will but not now. I'm having too much fun teaching my high school students. He told me about this collaborative effort between [masters institution] and [doctoral institution] and if I can meet the qualifications for graduate school, they would accept me. In the program there was a focus on education as well so there must be a place for me. I told Dr. Pennington that I wanted to look into the doctoral program at Elite University; he took it and ran with it. The next day he changed all my courses, my general curriculum and instruction courses, then advised me to register for specific courses that he was teaching. He enrolled me in a research methodology course, in which we prepared a literature review and he even enrolled me in a class with thesis credits. He said 'you're going to write a thesis now. And you're going to doing it in a year, you're going to do it well, and you're going to go to [doctoral institution]. So it's a combination of me saying 'this is something that I may want to look into' and it was a combination of people paying attention to something in me that I didn't see. I did not know what it took to earn a doctorate. I did not know I had the qualifications for that. But obviously someone who has been through the process can look and see who would make a successful candidate for a doctorate. And they saw that in me and I am glad they did.

As a master's student and high school teacher, the participant enjoyed applying what he learned in graduate school to his own classroom. Observant of the participant's classroom interest, the professor was enthusiastic to further his student's education. Unaware of the requirements or expectations of a doctoral degree, the participant awaited a new challenge. With his new found confidence and his professor's trust, the participant trusted his professor to prepare him for a rigorous educational experience.

Another African American male doctoral student reflected that his professor and mentor recognized his academic talent as a junior in college. In this situation, having a mentor of the same race and gender had a lasting effect on the development of this participant. He offered:

I have a mentor who is an African American male professor at [undergraduate institution] who always says ‘Xavier! You better get that Ph.D.’ and that is how it started to pervade my mind. It resonated with me and that is where it began.

Early messages encouraging high scholastic aspirations came to Xavier from his mentor. Accordingly, now Xavier is enrolled in a doctoral education program at The People’s University. Malachi at a Flagship University also described the influence of his sociology professor who developed an interest in grooming him. This White female faculty member had a positive relationship with the participant. She demanded more from the participant than he thought he had to offer. He shared:

I would have to credit my mentor from [undergraduate institution]. I took 3 sociology classes with her. She instilled the belief in me that I could do this. When I was applying for graduate schools she told me to make a list and bring it back to her. I thought the lists of schools I had weren’t bad. She told me ‘No, these are not working; [as she introduced another list of possible institutions] these are the schools you need to apply to. She helped me set my standards high and made me believe that not only could I can do this, but I can do it well and that I can excel. And that was the first time the bar has been set for a level to encourage me to strive.

Supportive faculty members were mentioned as the agents who recognized their skills and for giving the determination required to pursue doctoral education. Knowing the possibilities that these participants had to offer, faculty members became invested in shaping the path for the student’s aspirations. The participants were assured they were receiving encouragement from someone who had similar accomplishments. In turn, the participants were honored to be hand-selected by their esteemed faculty members and were receptive to their leadership.

### **Motivation to Pursue a Doctorate**

Having the awareness that few African Americans are enrolled in PhD programs; the men in this study went to graduate school for altruistic reasons. In other words, these participants used their position to better their community. For these students, the doctorate as well as the knowledge derived from the degree was geared towards the betterment of African Americans. The participants felt it was their social responsibility to give back to their communities. “Giving back” is introduced as a major theme; however, there are two subthemes that emerged as well. First, there is a need to serve as a role model for younger African American students. Second, there is a desire to improve the conditions within African American neighborhoods. As a presence in the community or through research interest, these students spoke of improving images within their family, immediate neighborhoods, and the greater African American community as a result of achieving the doctorate.

Thirteen out of eighteen participants indicated that they will be the first in their immediate family to earn such a lofty degree. Some doctoral students wanted to influence family members to achieve similar status. Two participants had demanding responsibilities as student and parent. Victor, a student at The People’s University remarked:

I felt like [pursuing a Ph.D.] was for me to be an inspiration to my younger cousins. Also, I have a daughter and I am now setting a new standard in our family. I have been given the gift, reasons, and the luck to be here. I need to take advantage of that for others to see that it can be done.

Another father and student confirmed his peer’s statement. Gavin at Elite University added: I’m setting an example for Gavin, Jr. At 9 years old, I am his primary influence. I have to make sure that he has his head on straight, and he is doing well in school. If I don’t

have more influence over his friends, when he goes to school I am competing with his friends. If I don't have any influence on what his friends are doing then I am losing that battle. I have to clear the path and move beyond working with just him and work with his friends as well as with other kids in the neighborhood.

Both parents realized they were setting the example for their children. Thus, they were committed to rising to a new challenge of pursuing a doctoral degree. Accordingly, these participants created new standards for their children. These African American male doctoral students understood the impact of earning an advanced degree, especially with the younger generation. And in an effort to create change they started with themselves and instilled higher values for the upcoming generation. Not all doctoral students were parents; however, they took the responsibility of serving as role models for youth in their communities. Aware that there are not many positive African American role models in the community, the participants spoke of wanting to be an example for others. They wanted to be the role models for younger African Americans who are not informed about the possibility of earning a doctoral degree. Special importance is placed on African American boys who needed visible images of educated African American men. Flagship's sociology student, Malachi shared:

The only way that I can create change and help people out like I want is to earn a Ph.D. Not only is it important for me to do this as an individual. It is important for me to do it for African Americans, specifically African American men. It is extremely important to show them where I come from to help me do this. The more African American men that younger African American men see excelling, the more likely they are going to think they can strive to do it too. This is being positive, academic, visible, and accessible to young African American men. I am sure I can talk to 20 guys at my undergraduate institution and talk them into getting a Ph.D. I mean not really talking them into it, but making it accessible to them. Most African American men don't know this is a possibility. Hey, they don't know it exists. We know very few individuals such as ourselves who are getting Ph.D.'s.

Neil viewed obtaining a Ph.D. degree as an accomplishment for him, as well as a means to attract more African American men to similar goals. He points out the need to provide awareness of such valuable degree possibilities to community residents. Further, he wants to encourage other African Americans that he persevered through similar challenges. Another African American male doctoral student majoring in Higher Education Administration endorsed his colleagues' comment. He said:

All too often, young African American men don't see other people who look like them in higher positions. That is one of my reasons for telling my [students] about my education. Not only look at what I've done, but to say 'you can do the same thing too. That is one of the reasons I am here; to show the next generation that we can be in higher positions and earn a higher education degree.

Again, he wanted to use his accomplishments to inspire others. These doctoral students look to create a continuous cycle of high achieving students of color. Promotion of this achievement encourages aspiration and supports. Another student, Tyler at Flagship University faced many challenges during his program but before giving up he remembered why he was enrolled. He stated:

There are some days I wanted to pack up and leave but, when I think about the work I can do with this [degree], and this degree is not for [me] but, for the community and humanity.

The infrequent occurrences of young, healthy, educated African American male role models are described as a needed resource in the African American community. However; there are other challenges that need to be addressed. Using lens of optimism, these participants prepared a research agenda to confront issues that plagued their communities. The opportunity to improve the neighborhoods is reasons noted for pursuing a doctoral degree. Xavier at The People's University closes this section by putting forth:

[Obtaining a doctorate ] is not just a personal thing, for me it's about a transformation in the African American community, schools [in predominantly African American neighborhoods], African American institutions, and in the African American community overall. I am naturally dissatisfied with myself, my people, what our people had to endure. When I get the degree I may start my own charter school for African American boys and that will fuel the type of work that I do in those positions.

### **Personal Motivations**

Whether through the research or community involvement the men in this study wanted to be change agents, and they viewed a terminal degree as a means to do so. A doctoral degree encourages students to pursue original research. More importantly, for young African American males living in America, the flexibility offered with this degree is appropriate for combating societal issues. Their personal experiences have shaped questions that require an advance degree to address. Thus, Stefon at Flagship University introduced:

I need a doctorate in order to learn more about myself and people who are different from me.

Stefon knows the doctorate provides information for reflective learning which provides the foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships. In this sense, understanding himself will give him the knowledge to better interact with others. Neil, at Elite University, further explains his peer's comment:

In an undergraduate psychology class, I read research that was done by a Professor Steele about stereotypes threat affecting African American students in education and it looked at the lingering effects of racism. I didn't know you could do this. I didn't know people fund this type of research. I didn't know people published this. This type of research was impressive to me. That's the kind of stuff I want to do. I want to talk about the world and the ways in which it's not.

Once Neil was able to find research that he could identify with he quickly became excited with the possibility of pursuing a Ph.D. and conducting research. He wanted his experience as an African American male living in America to contribute to the literature. He understands the way that African Americans see the world is different from the perspective of the majority. Entering a doctoral degree program became a way for him to explore literature that was typically omitted from the textbooks in American colleges and universities. Additionally, this insight may provide better understanding to obstacles he encountered as a member from a marginalized group.

Other doctoral students wanted to improve the conditions for those who reside in underdeveloped neighborhoods. Phil majoring in sociology at Flagship University reported:

With my [master degree] , the program provided me a lot of great tools to go into different communities , get an assessment of what's going on and how to encourage partners from the private and public sectors to bring dollars into the communities. But what I found was, no matter how frequently a group was able to do that, there is still a cultural mindset. If that [mindset] didn't change overtime, your jobs will be lost, someone will be able to take advantage of them, and their houses will be ruined. Another

thing that drove me to get a doctorate in sociology is trying to understand some of the cultural issues and how individuals buy into a certain type of norms even though it may not be productive for the individual, family, or community. Hopefully, with this degree I plan to get a better understanding and come up with some ideas in urban planning that might have been overlooked.

Although this participant had knowledge that was derived from the master's degree, he desired greater understanding that prior educational degrees could not offer. He resorted to the theoretical offerings associated with a doctoral degree to answer pertinent questions. At Flagship University, Kamar, majoring in educational psychology, affirmed his peer's remark that earning a Ph.D. in educational psychology was the path this student believed would help African Americans.

Kamar suggested:

Pursuing a doctorate for me was about maximizing influence. Being able to create knowledge that can make schools systems better for all students, but specifically students who tend to look like me.

Within their respective disciplines, many participants' research interests were focused around social justice issues, particularly those affecting African Americans. These participants strived for knowledge, as well as brainstormed ideas for creative solutions to advancing their communities. The doctoral degree provides students with the tools required to conduct research. As such, students used the skills learned in the classroom to investigate issues that were personal to them. Students had the freedom to investigate their research interests and collect data that would expand their insights.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Researchers typically focused on undergraduate and master's students' choice pattern without taking into consideration gender and racial variables. This study specifically identified three themes affecting reasons for graduate education for African American men. The personal narratives were useful in understanding the role of faculty encouragement, motivation to pursue a doctorate and personal motivations as factors that encouraged 18 African American male students' intention to earn a doctoral degree. The findings from this study were both consistent and inconsistent with previous research conducted on undergraduate African American students. The purpose of this research was to study the factors that African American men considered when pursuing doctoral degrees at predominantly White institutions. Therefore, the participants in this study indicated the relevance of culture in their academic and professional pursuit (Freeman, 2006). With their advanced degrees they wanted to improve the images of the African American community. This finding has considerable implications for Hossler and Gallagher's college model as well as those who interact with African American male collegians (e.g., higher education faculty, staff, administrators, parents). Based on this study, when discussing decisions to pursue a doctoral degree, the African American cultural relevance should be incorporated into student's conversations.

Almost all participants made the connection between their intended doctoral degree and their altruistic goals. The findings were consistent with prior research on the importance of giving back to underrepresented students (Bingman, 2003; Carlone & Johnson, 2007). Their drive to do well was further enhanced by a desire to become positive role models for other African American students. Equally as important, these participants were conscious of giving back to younger students of color in order to provide positive images of educational attainment in the African American community. There are a dismal number of African Americans in higher

education, particularly at the doctoral level. Appropriately, they believed they should be positive role models or mentors to new students.

One factor that also shaped the path of these participants was their interactions with members of the university community. From this we can learn about the importance of university culture, the impact of individual professors, and the self-actualization of African American males interested in advanced degrees. Comments like “You better get that Ph.D.” to a young undergraduate student encouraged him to persist. The men who formed identities as doctoral students were recognized by faculty members who perceived them as capable students. One of the lessons learned from this study is that there is space for African American males to be recognized as doctoral students. Their successes, particularly with students like Stefon and Victor, who are first generation college students created new expectations. The implications that can be drawn from this study are applicable to those who want similar results for African American men. All participants received encouragement prior to enrolling into a doctoral program; therefore it is recommended that undergraduate institutions embrace strategies for increasing African American male doctoral student enrollment. Multiple sources of support are critical towards the success of an African American male doctoral student. That support can come from a variety of sources within the institutional. Faculty and administrators with doctoral degrees need to be encouraged to develop mentoring relationships with undergraduate and master’s students to aspire them to obtain similar accomplishments. Timing and repetition are both crucial when introducing a goal, therefore, presenting high aspirations or planting the seed as early as possible within the educational pipeline will begin the thought process for students. Like a gardener will water flowers for growth, faculty and administrators must constantly encourage students to strive toward their full potential. The participants’ confidence level was heightened when encouraged by their faculty to pursue a doctoral degree. Thus it is recommended that opportunities for research and other faculty interactions are constantly available.

Based on the findings from this study, it is important to introduce diverse literature and issues (e.g. racial/ethnic, religion, gender) into the academic environment for students to gain exposure to the various types of research. The men in this study were encouraged to address issues impacting their communities using knowledge and tools derived from their education. Providing students with a variety of topics may open their minds to endless possibilities. Moreover, introducing student’s perceptions of the social aspects of their lives in order to stimulate creative research interest is encouraged. The implications from this study for further research are many but can be simplified to a request for more research on doctoral students. Because of the low number of studies pertaining to doctoral degree aspiration, there is a great need for research on various groups. It is equally important that future studies to be conducted with larger samples, especially those from science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. Martin Luther King was instrumental in helping African Americans comprehend that they are capable of having similar opportunities as White Americans. Using the findings from this study can also help young African American students learn about individuals similar to themselves, who are making considerable progress in the academy. This study presents the findings of a qualitative analysis of the factors influencing the reasons why 18 African American men decided to attend three research universities. The results of the study also suggest that African American male doctoral students, when considering doctoral education, based their

decision on three primary motivators: (a) faculty encouragement, (b) motivation to pursue a doctorate, and (c) personal motivations. This research has the potential to impact education policy and procedures in higher education, such as informing the staff and administrators who work with African American graduate students about their unique qualities for success. It is also likely this study will serve as a catalyst for additional studies on African American men and add to the body of research on the experiences of African American graduate students.

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