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Successful Pathways to Undergraduate Completion

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While access to higher education has changed, one subpopulation of society, Black males, statistically has the lowest college graduation rate of all student populations (de Brey et al., 2018), presenting a significant social and economic inequality for this group of Americans. Equal access to higher education in the United States for Black students has a long and forced history. A review of Black Americans in higher education will provide a glimpse into the history of this longstanding issue.

In 1799, John Chavis was the first Black male on record to attend an American college (Othow, 2001). Still, it was not until 1823 that Alexander Twilight became the first known African American to graduate from a college in the United States (Kendi, 2012). During that time, only a few African Americans could access and successfully navigate higher education in the United States. Following 1812 until the civil war victory, very few Black free men attended school, and enslaved people were denied literacy (Gavins, 2009). After the abolition of slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, schools and colleges for Black citizens rose, but so did sharecropping, which many considered the new slavery, violence, and segregation (Gavins, 2009). Gavins (2009) notes the Black males that sought education did so in an environment of White supremacy held no regard for their disenfranchisement or unequal opportunities. The Jim Crow laws enacted a second-class citizen system on Black people, especially in the Southern states.

Americans often refer to higher education as the great equalizer however, it was not until the 1950s that the Supreme Court ordered universities such as the University of Florida and the University of Georgia to enroll Black students (Kendi, 2012). Colleges began integrating their campuses after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, case in 1954. The 1960s brought social unrest and protests to college campuses over racial equality. By 1980 only 11% of

Black men in America had attended four years of college compared to 25.5% of White men (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). From 1980 to 2010, Black male college enrollment increased, but the number compared to White men remains staggeringly disproportionate (Harper & Harris, 2012). Black males, statistically have the lowest college graduation rate of all student populations, presenting a significant social and economic inequality for this group of Americans.

Although the barriers to success for these students have been researched, there is less research about the success factors, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors leading these young men to degree attainment. Information from those who have lived the journey will focus this research on the factors that led black men to college completion. Identifying the achievement roadmap of Black men who have completed an undergraduate degree is crucial to supporting the success of Black men who follow (Scott & Sharp, 2019). As such, this study seeks to capture the authentic life stories of Black men who have persisted through college. Recognizing the strategies that led to their academic accomplishment is an advancement toward educational equity (Kim Hargrove, 2013). This study will highlight Black male college graduates and their narratives seeking to promote an understanding of the multi-faceted cultural and organizational issues encountered in higher education.

American higher education trends have shown Black men complete college at a rate of up to 20% lower than other subpopulations (de Brey et al., 2018.). Higher education aims to ensure that populations politically, educationally, medically, linguistically, and culturally thrive. However, the data demonstrate an inequality. The significant disparity of college completion for American Black males leads to disproportionate access to the American dream believing that all citizens have equal access to quality education. Scholars describe American society's racial inequality as approaching an all-time high (Carter, 2018).

Issues related to Black male access to higher education have existed throughout American history. Though there have been repeated attempts to put into practice equal educational access to result in comparable outcomes, the data are clear that we have not yet achieved that goal. Black male students who make it to college have the lowest subpopulation graduation rate (de Brey et al., 2018). The question of why we still have disparate results is a complicated one. Many factors, external and internal, have been considered. External factors such as lack of access to qualified teachers in K-12 (Hayes et al., 2013) and lack of access to quality materials and technology (Harris et al., 2014), absence of family support and belief that education is worthwhile, deficiency of knowledge of how to get to college and an adequate support system (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018), microaggressions (Albright & Cironi, 2022), and racial biases (Patton et al., 2016; Range et al., 2018) are all factors that can be attributed to Black men not making it to and through college. Internal factors that impact Black men and their academic success have been found to include a lack of motivation (Goings & Shi, 2018; Adams et al., 2020), lack of self-confidence (Turner, 2020), and lack of resilience and perseverance (Range et al., 2018; Duckworth, 2016).

However, there are Black male students who are achieving and completing an undergraduate degree and doing so in predominately White colleges. This qualitative study sought to look into the authentic journeys of these students with profiles on LinkedIn professional social networking site to document through narrative format what they recalled as crucial to their success. Through the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012), Black male student success is looked at through the lens of what went right instead of blaming what went wrong. By focusing on the positive aspects of their K-16 education experience, their community and family support, what influenced them, how they overcame adversity, and their

internal aspirations and emotional toolbox, the qualitative data show a pathway to success that can be valuable to others. Considering the primary question of how Black men describe their authentic lived experiences to and through college completion, three primary themes emerged from these narratives: influential factors, systemic factors, and personal investment factors. Each theme comprises elements that contributed to their academic success and relate to the primary research question.

The three themes above represent the data gathered after studying and consolidating participants' answers to the semistructured questions. The perceived experiences influencing the persistence of Black men to undergraduate achievement represent the flow of authentic educational journeys for these men. The category of Influential Factors captures the fabric of their lives that gave them the courage and belief that they could go to and complete college. It includes family and mentors, belonging and encouragement to involve having at least one person who truly believes in them, engagement in church and athletics, faculty and staff, peers, and overcoming challenges, including first-generation college students. Systemic Factors relate to the external forces pressed upon them generally beyond their control, including work obligations, labels, finances, resources, teachers, study habits and test strategies, racism, and microaggressions. Finally, the Personal Investment category looks at their feelings, choices, and focus, including opportunities, engagement, cultural competence, resilience, motivation, pride, anger, the pursuit of more, and the quest to reach a goal.

Influential Factors

Harris et al. (2014) pointed to a lack of resources, learning and study skills, and academic rigor expectations in early childhood education can lead to a lack of unpreparedness in higher education. Teacher ability, investment, and cultural understanding impact whether minority

students are marginalized or succeed (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Hayes et al., 2013; Milner, 2016). The participants all expressed a lack of preparedness for higher education. They indicated a lack of study skills preparation and realization of a lack of resources. In particular, they discussed the slack daily investment of their teacher's rigor in the classroom and realized days were wasted when opportunities for beneficial learning could have occurred. The importance of engaged and invested teachers in our K-12 classrooms cannot be overemphasized. Initiatives have been enacted over the years to provide training and tools to teachers of marginalized students, but stories of sub-par teachers continue to surface. The continuation of deficit thinking about Black male students plays a significant role in their negative school experiences (Little & Tolbert, 2018).

In this category, participants shared how support from others, feelings of belonging to groups, and encouragement ungirded their belief that they could succeed and overcome challenges. Their success through feelings of encouragement came from several areas. These include shared examples of family encouragement toward degree attainment, faculty and staff reaching out to support and provide guidance toward needed resources, the confirmation and validation from their church family that they were enough and capable of accomplishing more, the power of being a first-generation college student, and the pressure of not being a first-generation college student and the influence of one person believing in them. All eight participants shared examples of how support from others led to internal self-confidence that inspired persistence toward college degree attainment.

Undoubtedly, for all the participants, family influence was critical to their authentic journey toward educational success. The foundation of respecting authority, understanding the purpose of school, structure, belief in themselves and that they could do and be more, and

enough freedom to explore their path seem to be some common themes among the participants that assisted in forming their attitudes of persistence.

Belonging. The influence of belonging, which associations can define, collaborations, engagement, interactions with peers one-on-one, within groups, faculty and staff, student services activities, and programs are all examples of extrinsic support measures that lead to feelings of belonging and acceptance. An integral part of the college experience and academic success is engagement with peers and faculty in the classroom and extracurricular activities (Tinto, 2012). All eight participants expressed feeling that they belonged at their college, even though it was predominately white. They all cited the small college environment, the caring and friendly peers, and the faculty and staff as the reason for feeling cared for and that they were where they belonged. Overall, the sense of belonging and someone, even one person, believing that you can achieve seems to be an essential theme for all participants as part of their successful educational journey.

Church and Athletics. Engagement in community activities such as athletics and church was a common theme that all participants in the study mentioned. They grew up being active in their communities, and that carried through when they went away to college. Socialization was a practiced part of their lives as children and a practical aspect that proved to be a helpful strategy for college academic achievement. Church and athletics relate to finding that place of belonging and community of people who support and believe in the best of others and their accomplishments. These social constructs appear to serve as support pillars for positivity and achievement.

Faculty and Staff. Faculty and staff engagement with students on a regular and informal basis was a critical aspect of academic success for the participants. The fact that they “really cared” and “were always available” were comments made by participants when recalling the interactions with faculty and staff during their years in college. The one on one time and the relationships built with professors were also indicated as critical to academic success. All the participants mentioned people surrounding them with help, care, and motivation to support them with positivity as important factors leading them to college completion.

Overcoming Challenges. The challenge of being a first-generation college student was present but seemed minimal to these participants and easily overcome. Four, or half, of the participants were first-generation college students. The challenges they indicated resulted from being the first in their family to attend college related to knowing how to apply to college, timelines, how to fund college, and understanding the intricacies of college resources. Three of the four were student-athletes and leaned on the athletic framework and coaches to walk them through the college process.

Point of Transformation. When asked if they experienced a particular moment of transformation in their college experience, their answers revolved around the realization that others genuinely cared for them and the authenticity of their educational journey. One participant recalled realizing the moment of accountability when he looked in the mirror and knew he had to be responsible for his failures and his successes. Another participant had an awakening after almost being sent home for college for academic failure. He then realized how much he wanted academic success. Two participants cited finding their academic passion as the turning point of the realizing that they wanted and needed to do whatever it took to be academically successful.

All of the participants related their turning point to being surrounded and supported by people who genuinely cared about them and their success. That motivated them to want to be successful.

Systemic Factors

Seven of the eight participants indicated they had work obligations while in college, but none of them indicated it negatively impacted their academic success. Labels were a systemic factor for three participants who had early education opportunities at predominately White schools. However, they spoke of their time there as being a ‘token Black kid.’ These participants longed for a teacher who looked like them and could relate to them on a cultural level. Being the only dark-skinned child in a classroom was very isolating. They can look back and realize they were afforded a good education, but at a cost of feeling isolated and misunderstood. Tokenism, or being an only representation or symbol of a minority group, to give the appearance of inclusivity is how they described their experiences. A skilled teacher, regardless of color, could take this situation and authentically include the young student by comparing skin color to cocoa or cinnamon and urging the other students to talk similarly about their own skin tone to help normalize body differences (Albright & Cironi, 2022). As Schaeffer (2021) found, the possibility of a Black male student being taught by numerous White females in America is very high. In schools where 90% of students were Black, only 5% of the teachers were also Black. The participants longed for that connection, the teacher that could authentically understand their perspective. As Brooms (2018, 2019b) and Scott et al. (2013) found, Black male role models can impact self-efficacy, aspirations, and expectations for who they may become.

Racial Discrimination. Several chronic stressors can negatively impact academic success, such as racial discrimination, violence in neighborhoods, police brutality, socioeconomic status, financial instability, absent parenting, and lack of social support networks

(Patton et al., 2016; Range et al., 2018). Racial socialization, which includes communication regarding the meaning of race, instilling cultural pride and preparing for bias, and a strong peer network, can help students overcome their stressful environments (Brooms, 2019a). Finding other Black friends as a support network on campus can provide a strong association of support, especially on predominately White college campuses (Gilkes Borr, 2019). Equity-focused school-family-community-based partnerships can provide strong networks of support, resources, and opportunities that can contribute overcoming racial discrimination in educational systems and lead to positive academic outcomes (Griffin et al., 2021).

Each day, African American youth experience discrimination, resulting in depression (English et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020). Historically, mental health issues within the Black community have been viewed as a stigma and not applied to them. This denial only further expands the depression and anxiety that results from the many issues they face daily within American society and the issue of not being able to seek support for psychological well-being (Isimeme, 2021). Racial socialization of young Black men prepares them for entering school and the challenges they might face (Cheeks et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2020) and assists them with racial identity formation (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019). Caregiver practices such as active parenting, monitoring performance, conversations about school, consistency, protection from drugs and crime, and involvement at school have been shown to have a positive impact on African American youth development and academic achievement (Francis et al., 2021; Previ et al., 2020; Varner et al., 2018).

Racial discrimination has a proven link to negatively impacting academic success (Patton et al., 2016; Range et al., 2018) and mental health (English et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020). Racism did apply to all participants; however, one participant is mixed race, Black and White.

Interestingly, he mentioned struggling with racism throughout the entire conversation, not just when asked about racism. Not fitting neatly into either world may have caused his lack of solid cultural confidence, whereas the other participants had the benefit of developing it. Racism can have a negative physical and psychological impact on those experiencing it (Zambrana et al., 2017). All eight participants cited incidents of racism in college; however, their responses were enlightening and indicative of their cultural self-confidence.

The participants all had experiences with racial discrimination at some point, but they had all diminished it or learned to use it to their benefit on their educational journey. Their comments included minimizing its importance by “shrugging it off” and “doing what you must do to get to where you need to be” and using it as motivation to “accomplish what you need to move on and get out of the situation.” These statements of self-worth exhibit a keen understanding that their journey holds more value than any racist comments or actions tossed in their direction. This focus and a deep sense of purpose in racial socialization seem pivotal in grounding these young men toward success (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Cheeks et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2020). Microaggressions were in the literature as a factor impacting young Black men (Mills, 2019). However, other than the mention of feeling like a token Black kid in elementary school, only one participant appeared to struggle with microaggressions. One participant, who felt his Creole heritage was used to label him as learning disabled, took years to come to terms with his cultural heritage being stripped from him. His unique cultural heritage made him feel like he was an immigrant in his own country. This lack of sense of belonging did impact his K-12 academic success. Once he was able to find academic support and ground himself in cultural understanding in his early 20s, he became not only academically successful but also personally proud of his heritage.

Resources and Mentors. All participants mentioned the endless resources available in the small, private college setting. The expansive list of resources they experienced includes: one-on-one counseling and advising, tutoring with extended hours, embedded tutoring, career counseling, special programs for minority students, fraternities and sororities, athletics, financial aid office staff that you can meet face to face with, computer labs with a computer available for each student, laptops given to students, student food pantry, student transportation to town, and the list goes on and on. The students indicated that whatever they needed, they found available or someone was willing to make it available to them to assist them in being successful.

Throughout a student's life, Black male role models can impact their self-efficacy, aspirations, and expectations for who they may become (Brooms, 2018, 2019b; Scott et al., 2013). The educational aspirations of Black men are impacted by their social and family support and approval, as well as their community's cultural abundance (Brooms, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019). Mishra (2020) found that family, religious, and peer social networks can influence academic success. Spalter-Roth et al. (2013) compared racially homogenous mentoring relationships with White advisors to Black graduate students and found that both types of relationships are advantageous. The equivalent race mentoring relationship provided emotional and cultural support, while the White male to Black student relationship offered scholarly cultural information and access to needed networking (Spalter-Roth et al., 2013). Encouraging environments at school with supportive cultures can positively shape Black males' educational experience (Brooms, 2019b). Peer support groups such as fraternities have also correlated positively with Black male academic success (Miller & Bryan, 2020).

Mentors, role models, someone who took them under their wing, and someone who encouraged and believed in them were all reoccurring stories from the participants. Mentors have

been shown to lead to academic success (Johnson et al., 2015, 2020) and contribute positively to mental health (Hurd et al., 2016). Mentors can be assigned or can occur naturally, such as with coaches, teachers, or others within the educational system (Brown, 2012; Hurd et al., 2016; Ross, 2014), but regardless of how the person of encouragement came into their life, all of the participants agree that these people were pivotal to their success. Comments from participants such as, “People telling me I was smart and could make it,” “Encouragement from everyone from faculty taking time to the cafeteria and janitorial staff encouraging me. It made a difference,” “People believing in me, taking an interest, caring, and showing me the way made the difference,” and “When I realized those around me cared and wanted me to be successful, there was no way I was going to let them down” tells the story of what a difference encouragement can make and how it can motivate students to succeed. These stories of encouragement and believing in the participants' academic success seem to tether them to claim their success.

Personal Investment

All participants mentioned some aspect of their investment in education as part of their success strategy. Whether it was the inherent opportunities they were provided, the cultural richness by which they were surrounded, or the more internal motivation from experiences that led to pride or anger. A common theme for all was a pursuit of more, a better life, a journey to reach a goal they had set for themselves.

Resilience. Resilience is an intrinsic factor that can be a positive asset for many youths. Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to change or hardship. Students of color that display resiliency can draw on their cultural identity to keep moving forward when facing challenges (Butler-Barnes et al., 2013). Turner (2020) found that Black men in a predominately

White institutions could thrive by drawing on their cultural identity, applying their persistent background, and collaborating to obtain the support needed. How American society views and labels Black men impacts their success and resiliency with labels such as criminal, aggressive, and against education, forcing them to work harder to overcome the preconceived ideas regarding who they are authentically (Alexander, 2016). Czopp et al.'s (2015) study revealed that positive stereotypes, or approving opinions, about a social group can impact "systemic changes within society related to power and privilege" (p. 451). Grit, effort, and determination are more critical to success than talent (Duckworth, 2016). The decision to push through and show up consistently, regardless of the barriers, can bring students through many difficult situations to achieve their goals and strengthen resilience.

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back quickly from change or hardship, is a critical factor in academic success, even more essential than talent (Duckworth, 2016). All the participants told stories of their grit and resilience when they made a conscious decision to push through and show up regardless of the barriers and difficulties they faced. Turner (2020) found that Black men at PWIs could thrive and be resilient when drawing on their strong cultural identity and collaborating to gain the support they needed for success. These participants shared stories of being strong in their cultural identity while, at the same time, not fearing to ask for the resources available to assist them with their academic success. Their strong sense of identity and confidence to ask for needed resources appears to have supported them in achieving their goals through strengthened resilience.

Motivation. A personal expectation to succeed and motivation to press on can be the strongest predictor of academic success (Goings & Shi, 2018). It is a reflective process for a Black male to view himself as intellectual and an environment that encourages and expects

academic success is a strong contributor (Adams et al., 2020). Verbal motivation and encouragement from family and friends can provide pivotal inspiration (Anumba, 2015). Grit, the passionate pursuit of long-term goals, not intelligence or talent, enables students to commit to seeing things through (Duckworth, 2016). This determination and commitment support Black males' perseverance at a predominately White institution and has been shown to add to the predictive validity of academic success (Strayhorn, 2014). Black male voices are critical to understanding the success factors in navigating educational inequity. Understanding what motivated them to value, guide, and persist through higher education to completion contributes to the existing literature (Alexander, 2016) and provides additional insight into Black male graduation's complicated cultural and organizational issues in higher education.

All of the participants talked about involvement and commitment. They were engaged in activities in K-12, stressing the importance of participating in sports, clubs, and relationships in college to assist with academic success. Four participants were all college athletes. They talked about the importance of their teams, their peers, the required study halls with their teams, and the camaraderie they had with being part of the team. The most important aspect of being part of a sports team was accountability, to ensure they kept their grades up and stayed out of trouble. They made statements such as, "The encouragement from the team and coaches made a difference. I knew people believed in me and cared." and "I had support from everyone. Even in my darkest times, I would have someone that would encourage me." and "It is all about relationships. Build strong relationships. Relationships will make the difference anywhere."

The internal desire or motivation toward a goal is a reflective process. For a Black man to view himself as an intellectual is the first step toward academic success (Adams et al., 2020). The participants in this study had varying journeys to viewing themselves as smart or capable of

college. Still, they all eventually had that revelation that it was indeed an option for them and that they could take advantage of the opportunity given. Once they internalized that college was an option for them, the internal motivation to succeed, the drive to prove to themselves and others that they could achieve, was overwhelming. Encouragement from family and friends motivates (Anumba, 2015). One participant was determined to prove his father wrong when told he would never amount to anything. His negative words provided motivation. It appears that positive and negative motivation can provide the impetus for academic success when applied through determination.

Cultural Confidence. The reoccurring theme of cultural confidence runs as an undercurrent of the participant's stories. Cultural competence is a toolbox of skills that allows for effective and appropriate communication with people of other cultures. All participants discussed how to shift between cultures and relate with those from different cultures. They all seemed to have had experience in the predominately White world and thus knew about navigating that culture. Whether instilled in family, church, or community, the ability to overcome negativity and focus on a goal can be supported by a solid connection to community as found by Turner (2020) and as evidenced by the participant's stories. Students of color raised to value education (Strayhorn, 2014), raised participating in religious activities (Toldson & Anderson, 2010), or participate in cultural or historical experiences as youth (Brooms, 2019a) are more academically successful. The participants in this study experienced all three of these in their youth. They were all raised to value education. They all participated in religious activities throughout their childhood. They all had some cultural experiences during their youth at some point. Cultural confidence did equate to self-confidence in the case of these participants and appeared to have contributed to their academic success.

Recommendations

For future research, this study can be replicated using the antideficit framework to include graduates from diverse colleges and universities to include large research universities, community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). By expanding this reach, while still using the antideficit lens and recruiting via LinkedIn, a broader range of authentic lived experiences can be compiled to see if any variation in success factors emerge. This study could also be expanded geographically beyond the southeast United States to include all regions of the country. This could also uncover any differences in influences or aspects that support their academic success. By increasing the diversity of perspectives and adding to the authentic lived experiences, the richness of the study could grow.

The best recommendations come from the participants. Each contributor was asked, “If you could tell your story on a national stage, what would you contribute as the best way to support other Black men to educational achievement?” It was unanimous that it is important to develop a good support system of positive people that can provide encouragement and utilize resources and establish good habits that will lead to academic success. Relationships are the number one common theme that came from their authentic experiences as important to educational achievement. The right people willing to assist at the right time, their willingness to be open to accept the assistance from the relationship, openness to diversity of relationships –the basic human kindness of people helping people seems to make all the difference.

Personal tenacity, or never giving up, and dedication to pursuing the goal was the second most related theme. Taking personal responsibility for overcoming and pressing forward regardless of what is going on around them to remain laser focused on the roadmap to success was heard time and again through their voices relaying their stories. Their personal motivation

was instilled through cultural self-confidence, strong community and family support and a belief in their ability that was inspired by a significant other relationship believing in them. John and Andrew had powerful comments about how important surrounding themselves with a supportive group of people was to their success.

Conclusions

In this study, I sought to capture the authentic lived experiences of several Black men who volunteered via LinkedIn, a professional social networking site, to share their educational journeys. These participants were eager to share their stories. They wanted their voices heard and were excited to have the opportunity to share with the hopes of helping others. The purpose of capturing their authentic lived experiences was to show a roadmap of success they took to obtain their undergraduate degrees. Their stories from the antideficit lens were to reveal how they arrived at higher education, focusing on what went right, not so much on what went wrong. The focus was also on the external and internal factors that propelled and supported them along the way that provided them with the self-confidence and motivation to overcome obstacles and their emphasis on the goal of academic success. All the participants agreed that relationships were central to their success. A strong support group, whether that was through family, church, community, peers, or one caring person that believed in them, made it clear that support, encouragement, and belonging were crucial to their academic achievement. As Sam summed it up, “Relationships, relationships, relationships. A successful education is all about positive relationships.”

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