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Is the Black Male College Graduate becoming an Endangered Species? A Multi-Case Analysis of the Attrition of Black Males in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how some black college students survived the phenomenon of low graduation rates, also known as attrition, occurring among black male students attending colleges in the state of California. Current research indicated that this phenomenon is a nationwide issue. The gap between black male college students and non-minority college students is significant and an indication of either discriminatory practices or inefficiencies within the system. This multiple case study involved a series of semi-structured interviews and field observation over a three month time-frame. The data was coded and triangulated. The findings pointed to several psycho-social factors that supported our framework of Social Network Theory and Resiliency Theory.

Background

For decades, African Americans, as a race and culture, have fought for and advocated for access to a democratic education (Cuyjet, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2007 & Kunjufu, 2004). Today, access to higher education is less of an issue than it was in previous decades with new legislation and the development of more current educational theories (Orfield, Marín, & Horn, 2005). Another issue is beginning to take center stage; the issue of attrition in higher education. Attrition in postsecondary education for black men is a serious concern because of the negative repercussions that may result from the incompleteness of degree programs ((Baum & Payea, 2004; Perna, 2005)). This is especially true of California institutions of higher learning (The Education Trust, 2005; Fischer, 2007).

Though the attainment of a college degree is significant for any ethnicity (Baum & Payea, 2004, Perna, 2005), in African American culture, such an achievement is significant because it provides greater leverage related to quality of life (Spring, 2007; Sadovnik, 2007, Schoorman, et al). In essence, education improves some “equilibrium” on multiple levels within the African American culture and society (Harris & Harper, 2012)). Since African Americans are still among the most marginalized ethnic group in American society (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004)), the reduction and elimination of this attrition rate would play a significant role in future generations of black families as well as African American culture in general (Allen, et al, 2009; Sadovnik, 2007; McDaniel, et al, 2011)

Statement of the Problem

California was once a magnet for African American educational pursuits for decades (Banks, 1981; Hilliard, 2001; Noguera, P. A. (2003). In recent years, California's attraction to black college students has waned, in large part, because of the graduation gap that exists between black males and other majority races (The Education Trust, 2011). This gap has widened over the years and influenced numerous black male college students to drop out of predominantly white institutions (PWI) altogether (Arcidiacono, 2011; Davis, 2007). As a result, black males have taken a significant step backwards due to the graduation gap between African Americans and non-African American students of higher education in California (Engle, J., 2010; Sibulkin, & Butler, 2005).

There is a great deal of literature explaining the potential cause of this attrition rate (The Education Trust, 2005, Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010, Negga, Applkewhite & Livingston, 2007). Some research focused on racial or cultural deficits as the cause of this attrition rate (Lewis, et al, 2008). Some focus on socioeconomic factors and the lingering effects of more restrictive financial aid policies and legislation (Palmer, Davis & Maramba). Others blame inadequate administration or governance (Smith, 2009; Pope, 2005). Additionally, the success of black college students who did thrive and graduate was often attributed to the practice of culturally relevant teaching practices (Gay, 2000; Callins 2007,) or adult learning theory (Brookfield, 2003; Knowles, 1998). This case study focused on the existence of social networks as well as psychological resilience as a factor in analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of attrition.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this multiple case study was to examine the phenomenon of attrition for black male college students at predominantly white institutions (PWI) in California from a psychosocial perspective. If these causes or factors can be determined, manipulated or eliminated, it may be possible to improve graduation rates and academic outcome for black male college students attending California institutions of higher learning.

Significance of this Study

Over time, it's becoming more apparent that both students and faculty can utilize this research for the purpose of improving graduation rates (Davis, 2007, Engle & Theokas, 2010)), which have a direct long term effect on employment opportunities for black males, (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). As a result, black males are also less likely to become involved with deviant or criminal behavior that often leads to becoming part of the prison industrial complex, (Meiners, 2011, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). Additionally, research indicates that black males who obtain college degrees tend to have children who will also obtain college degrees. (The Education Trust, 2011)

Theoretical frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks were utilized in this study. *Resiliency Theory* (Brown, 2008; Morales, 2008; Smith-Osborne, 2007) focused on factors related to overcoming learned helplessness, developing learned resourcefulness (McWhirter, Burrow-Sanchez & Townsend,

2008) and adapting to adversity on a consistent basis. The other is *Social Network Theory* (Ahn, 2011, Alexander, 2008, Lin, 1999; Williams & Durrance, 2008) which focuses on relationships and their strengths as a means of support when facing significant challenges.

Research Questions

1. What psychological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?
2. What sociological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?
3. Which “best practice” strategies can black males utilize to improve academic achievement and college graduation rates?

Limitations

California Community Colleges or Junior Colleges were not considered nor included in this research project because of the high rate of transfers, inconsistent attendance, and higher incidents of absenteeism. Additionally, four year academic institutions and graduate programs typically prepare you for professional, employment whereas community colleges typically do not. Other limitations involve the use of a small number of participants. However, triangulation, coding and member checking helped to establish trustworthiness.

Literature Review

Factors associated with the success or failure of black male college students on PWIs cover a myriad of topics. Among them was socioeconomic status (Walpole, 2008; Fhagen-Smith, 2010), the prison pipeline (Meiners, 2011, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011), stereotype threat (Aronson & Good, 2002; Steele, 1995, Cabrera, 2006), blind racism (Harper, 2006)), tracking, issues related to cultural relevancy, and several other contributing factors. A review of the current literature was conducted in order to gain a broader perspective of previous research pertaining to this phenomenon. Additionally, this review was also conducted to determine how much research exists related to sociological as well as psychological contributing factors along with socioeconomic and policy related factors.

Marginalization (social exclusion)

Though marginalization in higher education describes various populations with differences in ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, geography, etc....black men are among the most marginalized in reference to graduation rates (The Education Trust, 2005; Arcidiacono, et al, 2011)); especially in California, a state once known for its educational progressiveness and prowess. When you consider that Blacks amount to less than 7% of the state’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), one can only wonder why disproportionate numbers of black men are in incarcerated in prisons and jails from county to county, while their attrition rate in higher education continues.

Demographics

According to the latest US Census Bureau (2010), blacks were 6.6% of CA population. During the same year, blacks were 29.1% of prison population (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2011), and only 5.1% of CSU population (California State University, analytical studies Report, 2012). Considering that it is the largest university system in the United States, with over 420,000 students, what happens to black male students at the CSUs is noteworthy and warrants attention (Table 2).

One argument that has gained popularity is that black male college graduation rates are diminishing due to lower enrollment of black males in recent years (Table 1). Based on data from California State University Statistical Reports (2012), all CSU campuses are experiencing slight and varying declines in enrollment overall due to budget cuts. As a result, these slight reductions generally affect most ethnicities in attendance to some degree. As blacks make up the 4th largest ethnic group in California (U.S. Census, 2012)), comparing and contrasting populations between various types of institutions can provide a better perspective of how social, cultural and human capital interact and affected current and future black males collegians.

The California State Universities (CSU)

Table 1

Blacks enrolled percentages compared to other ethnicities in the CSU system

Ethnicity	2010		2011		2012	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black -	21,330	5.2%	21,462	5.0%	20,902	4.8%
White -	138,992	33.7%	137,987	32.4%	135,167	31.0%
Asian -	56,203	13.6%	61,519	14.4%	65,151	14.9%
Latino -	81,434	19.7%	92,764	21.7%	103,012	23.6%

(California State University, Statistical Reports, 2012)

CSU Graduation rates

Table 2

Institution	Over-all Grad Rate	Black Male Grad Rate
Cal Poly SLO	72.9%	52.2%
San Diego State	66.2%	50.0%
Chico State	61.8%	18.2%
CSU Long Beach	54.0%	44.0%
CSU Fullerton	51.4%	33.8%
CSU Dominguez Hills	30.9%	13.1%

(NCES /IPEDS, 2010)

As the CSUs are considered to be primarily “teaching institutions”, there is more emphasis on pedagogy over research. Faculty at CSUs are expected generally expected to teach more classes, and have more experience and interest in teaching compared to faculty at the UC system. This only stirs more curiosity as to why the CSUs have lower graduation rates overall than the UC system. Indeed, at CSU Dominguez Hills, there is a larger percentage of black students and black faculty, yet this institution has one of the most dismal graduation rates for black males in the country (US Census, 2012). In terms of socialization and capital, CSU Dominguez Hills has an advantage culturally and ethnically. Clearly, socialization alone is insufficient regarding black male academic achievement in higher education.

Surprisingly, the University of California system (UC system) fairs better regarding graduation rates (Table 3), than the CSU system despite the fact that, as a research university system, it is generally more academically rigorous, more expensive and more selective, yet graduation rates are consistently higher than the CSUs (CITE).

UC System Graduation rates

Table 3

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Over-all Grad Rate</u>	<u>Black Male Grad Rate</u>
University of California -Berkeley	91.1% / for Blacks males	69.2%
University of California -Los Angeles	89.8% / for Blacks males	62.8%
University of California -Davis	82.3% / for Blacks males	70.0%
University of California -Riverside	68.1% / for Blacks males	68.1%

(The Education Trust, 2010)

There may be some exceptions to this phenomenon as graduation rates at the following institutions indicate that their retention, recruitment and diversity initiatives seem to have some effect on overall graduation rates (Table 4).

California Graduation Rate Exceptions for Black College Students

Table 4

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Over-all Grad Rate</u>	<u>Black Student Grad Rate</u>
UC Riverside	68.1% /	for Black Students 72.2%
Loyola Marymount	79.9% /	for Black Students 77.7%

(Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010)

Cultural Deficit Theory

Based on Cultural Deficit Theory (Villegas, 1991), black males are less likely to achieve or demonstrate academic excellence in college based on socioeconomic factors, poverty and dysfunctional conditions that exist within their respective communities. The problem with this theory is that it’s based on the belief that the root cause of the issue lies within individuals rather than systematic inequities within the community and educational systems themselves.

Additionally, this theory doesn't stand up to scrutiny when you consider that CSU Long Beach and UC Berkeley, despite their respective racial gap disparities, demonstrate that high graduation rates can be achieved by institutions that exist in or near "at-risk" environments.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

A counter theory to *Cultural Deficit Theory* is Gloria Ladson-Billings' research regarding *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1994). Though Ladson-Billings theories primarily focus on K-12 education, it has also been effectively applied to higher education as well as adult and alternative education. Several other critical race theorist, critical pedagogists and multicultural education specialist embrace and practice aspects of cultural relevancy, such as Geneva Gay (2000, 2002), Asa Hilliard (2001), Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter (1989, 2006), and Sonia Nieto (2004). The book *Diversity & Motivation* by Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, (2009), is especially applicable to the objectives of this research study as it relates to higher education.

The School to Prison Pipeline

The "school to prison pipeline" (Meiners, 2011) describes the pervasive negative and dysfunctional conditions that contribute to the eventual academic downfall of many black boys and adolescents due to socioeconomic factors and social inequities that exist in numerous at-risk neighborhoods). Standardized tests, tracking, zero-tolerance and other negative influences within the K-12 system establish have the potential to influence black boys towards deviant behavior, low self-esteem and the need to find acceptance often among others who are already on this prison pipeline (Meiners, 2011).

A common belief in black culture is that there are more black males in prison and jail than in college. Based on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), (2010) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010), this simply isn't the case nationally. However, if we compare black male populations in California prisons in 2010, and 2011 with the black male enrollment populations of both the California State University system in 2010 and 2012, and the black male enrollment population of the University of California system for 2010 and 2011, a shocking set of statistics arises. As illustrated in Table 5, the black male prison population in California has four times that of the black male population at both public education systems combined! What should also be taken into consideration is that the California Department of Corrections (CDCR) is currently undergoing realignment under Assembly Bill 109 (AB 109) as a result of the ongoing "revolving door" incarceration and parole violation process. Furthermore, a large part of the population described in the realignment, are black men. In essence, CDCR was court mandated to make significant changes in its infrastructure and policies in an attempt to reduce recidivism and "runaway" spending. The data listed in table 5 illustrates a reduction in the black male population over the past two years since Assembly bill 109 went into effect.

Additionally, the average cost of housing an inmate in California for one year was \$47,102 in 2008, (CDCR, 2008). Compare this to the maximum Grad Plus school loan amount of \$20,500 per year and it becomes clear why there is so much controversy regarding the prioritization of educational and correctional resources.

Table 5

	<u>2010</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>%</u>
Black male enrollment CSU system	7,662	(1.86 %)	7,841	(1.84 %)
Black male enrollment UC system	3,131	(1.34 %)	3,223	(1.36 %)
Black male California 4 year public college total	10,793	(1.67 %)	11,064	(1.67 %)
California Black male prison population	44,405	(29.10 %)	41,047	(29.20 %)

Based on data from the California State University (2011), and the University of California (2011), black male collegians comprise less than 2 % of the population of all public college systems in the state. This is far below the 5 % black population all gender in the CSU system in 2011, and the 5 % black population by all gender in the UC system for that same year. Blacks are only 6 % of the California population, yet, as of June 2010, unemployment rates for blacks was at 11.1 % compared to the national average of 8.9 %. Just about the only place where blacks accrue large percentages is in the California prison system where black males comprise 29.2 % of the prison population. These factors are clear indicators of systemic inequities that begin long before college enrollment, and are likely to have both immediate and long term effects on the psychosocial aspects that shape black male education.

Meritocracy System

The concept of merit still plays a popular role within the educational system and is apparent in standardized tests such as SAT, PSAT, GRE and the CAHSEE (Thompson, 2007; Moule & Diller, 2012). These tests do not take into consideration the concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993; Morgan, 1996), and they contribute to the banking system based on teacher centered practices and rote (Freire, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Black male college students, historically, have been victimized by such systems of merit as they are not relevant culturally. Built in biases equate to a false sense of merit and perpetuate the concept of the glass ceiling within higher education.

Stereotype Threat

Introduced by Claude Steele (1995), stereotype threat has becoming a growing concern and factor for black male in general. Black male college students often have to contend with the fear of perpetuating a negative stereotype associated with their culture. It doesn't matter if the stereotype is false as long as it generates a fear of being viewed in a negative light. This stereotype threat creates anxiety which often develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Museus, 2008). A positive self-image may play a major role in avoiding these scenarios.

Cultural Inversion

Growing up in a culture rich with positive black images and role models can lead to a strong sense of black identity and pride (Negga, et al, 2007; Hooks, 2003, Elion, et al. 2012). Though this is generally considered to be desirable, it can also be a major drawback for those that refuse to relinquish their identity to the dominant and different culture that often exists on

PWIs (Ogbu, 1992; Taylor & Usborne, 2010). Black male college students who are unable or unwilling to “fit in” by adopting behaviors, habits or characteristics of the dominant culture may lead to a condition of cultural inversion where some black male students are viewed as defiant, outcasts or arrogant, when in actuality, their behavior may be one of solidarity and a refusal to be assimilated.

Blind-Racism

Blatant forms of racism and discriminatory practices are often less prevalent today, though they still exist on many campuses. Typically, it is the blind-racist perspectives of faculty and support staff that tends to view all people as the same or equal, when in actuality this is a concept that does more harm than good (Tynes & Markoe, 2010; Castro, 2008). The belief that we are all the same prevents even most knowledgeable academics from understanding that your culture and therefore your needs are unique to you and thus cannot be standardized or homogenized into a single viewpoint or world view (Ubah & Robinson, 2003). This concept is most common among structural functionalist who often unintentionally (and sometimes intentionally) fail to acknowledge your uniqueness. This is the epitome of the difference between equality and equity.

Methods

Research design

Based on the benefits of providing “voice” to research, a multi-case study design was selected (Babbie, 2010; Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 1998). This design was best suited for discovering hidden or unexplained phenomenon that may not be evident utilizing other research designs that rely less on social and cultural input.

The Interview Process

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured process that included twelve questions related to black males and college graduation. The purpose of the interviews was to get direct feedback from participants regarding their experiences toward the completion of a bachelorette or graduate degree. This data was compared and contrasted with the current literature for validation purposes

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected by an outside committee of experts in the field of education (assistant superintendents, principals, vice principals, directors, assistant directors and coordinators), from three different education programs throughout California (K-2 education, alternative education and higher education). This panel discussed the qualifications of over twenty-five potential candidates and eventually selected three participants for this research project. All participants were required to be of African American descent. One participant was a current student; another was a former student, and the final participant was a faculty member of African American descent.

Participants

The participants in the study completed documentation regarding their confidential and voluntary participation. Details regarding the purpose of the study and their role were provided. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the identities of our participants.

Case Profiles

Jamal –

Jamal is an undergraduate (junior) in his early twenties majoring in business administration with a GPA above 3.50 on a 4.00 scale. He is a fulltime student who depends on financial aid as well as part-time employment and is a member of the black student association at his institution. He's single with one son, volunteers as a tutor, and is an active member of a local church. He lives in an apartment with roommates and grew up in the same community where he attends college. Jamal's parents are college graduates and his siblings also went to college. He also has plans for graduate school.

John –

John is in his mid-thirties and graduated from a California public institution five years ago with a degree in psychology. He's married with children and currently works in social services for a government agency. He's a home-owner and affiliated with "black oriented" fraternity. While in college, John competed in collegiate athletics during the five years he attended school. John's parents and siblings never attended college; he was raised outside of California, and is a self-proclaimed agnostic.

James –

James is an associate professor in the field of criminal justice at a public institution in California. He is a military veteran and a former peace officer in his late forties who is divorced, a home owner and a native Californian. James practices Buddhism and is an advocate for black students from at-risk social environments. James is also a product of the California Community College system, the California State University system as well as the University of California educational system.

Role as Researcher

As investigator, my role was primarily to be the instrument used for data collection that will be coded and analyzed for the purpose of drawing conclusions regarding this phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data was collected utilizing semi-structured interviews from three participants from different backgrounds, as well as documentation and field observations. Interviews were recorded and field observations were not participatory.

Data Analysis

Data was, coded, recoded and organized into themes and “like” categories. The process of methodological triangulation, cross case analysis and member checking was used to establish trustworthiness.

Cross Case Analysis

a cross analysis of all three cases revealed several similarities between cases such as an acknowledgement that fear plays a significant role in the psychological influences that many black male collegians experiences. Though each case described different types of fears, these fears were related in that they were generally related to a lack or loss of control. For example, fear from a lack of preparation for the academic rigors of college is a common experience among many college freshmen of all ethnicities. When black males experience this, it is often exacerbated by additional challenges in dealing with culturally irrelevant curriculum or teachers who aren't culturally competent enough to prepare black freshman for the academic rigors that confront them in higher education.

Table 6

Research Questions	Jamal	John	James
1. What psychological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fear of the unknown 2. Culture shock 3. Fear from lack of preparation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confusion 2. Loneliness 3. Fear of assimilation 4. Culture shock 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Demands on self 2. Whether you enjoy school 3. Negative peer pressure
2. What sociological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. lack of black socialization 2. I can't relate to instructors 3. Working while being a full-time student 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Balancing school and sports 2. Instructors can't relate to my culture 3. Being away from loved ones 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Escaping stress to excess through social networks 2. student-athletes with dual pressures
3. Which "best practices" can black males utilize to improve their college graduation rates?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. tutor 2. study groups 3. support groups 4. let go of "baggage" 5. faith/ religion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. relaxing hobby 2. have a written plan 3. minimize obligations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. meet with your instructor early 2. study group 3. support group 4. time management

Findings

The results of this study indicate that there were several influences that were contributing factors in the attrition of black male college students. Several of these factors confirm what the literature says regarding black male college students at California institutions of higher learning, such as cultural inversion, meritocracy and blind-racism and others.

According to our participants, Black males college students who had more experience with other cultures and ethnicities prior to attending PWIs seem to adapt easier to the paradigm shift (Jones, 2001; Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009)). What the study also revealed was that black male students who developed support groups in combination with faculty were more successful academically which improved graduation rates (JBHE, 2010). This *social network* extended beyond face to face interaction and included online social supports such as Facebook, twitter and on-campus virtual learning environments such as blackboard. Though this was not one of our frameworks, this approach is in alignment with Albert Bandura's *social learning theory* which states that learning takes place within social settings and interactions (Bandura,

1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Taylor, 2003). This also seems consistent with one of our frameworks; social network theory.

As for the application of resiliency theory, all three of our participants applied this theory in different ways. Though “cultural inversion” (Ogbu, 1978, 1992) did play a role in our participants’ educational endeavors, our participants stated that the reluctance or refusal to take on traits or behaviors of their non-African American peers extended only to social situations and not academic situations. They were more likely to study together at the library or a local coffee shop by day and associate with other blacks on weekends and for entertainment or religious venues. This down plays the theory of blacks having a fear of “acting white” (Cook, 1997; Harper, 2006) regarding academically related practices in this study.

Limited Resources

All participants in our study described their high schools as well as their respective college as having considerable limitations regarding resources, even though all three of our participants attended different educational institutions. Though all participants shared this view, the details of their experiences were quite different.

Jamal shared his experiences:

In high school, it always seemed like we were reading the text books of the generation that came before us. I knew we were broke when I received a boom that was the same book my uncle use to use when he was in school 12 years earlier. One of the reasons I tutor math courses on campus today is because I realized how old our math books were. Some of the videos were in VHS tape format, and many of our teachers simply use one text book and copied several of the pages from the book in order for the entire class to be able to read our homework assignments. By the time I started college, I knew I had some catching up to do.

John said the following:

When I went to college, cutbacks were common place then as well. The difference is now it’s so bad that they’re canceling classes not because of low enrollment, but simply because that can’t afford to have an instructor. so they end up over-working the faculty that’s there and after they burn out, what kind of education does that leave us?

James states:

You’re singing to the choir gentlemen. I’m the one. I’m that guy who teaches three classes and then takes on two more as well as chairing a committee and then having my budget reduced so I have to eliminate a few conferences and class field trips. As much as I hate to say it, the bottom line isn’t about us. It’s about corporatization of education, or “dollars and cents.”

Banking System

Despite the popularity and success of culturally relevant teaching strategies and cultural competence measures and requirements for educators throughout the state, many college

professors still use a “banking system” approach, (Freire’, 1993), or pedagogy that stems from traditional practices that are antiquated and culturally lacking by today’s standards. In some instances, educators who remain stagnant and inflexible are those that have acquired tenure some time ago and continue to practice what they are comfortable with rather than engaging in professional development options.

The banking system is especially problematic for black male students as it further restricts and dehumanizes students who are made to feel as if they know “nothing”. Paulo Freire refers to this as an oppressive and political action; not the kind of pedagogy that empowers and builds the confidence of the oppressed.

Learned Helplessness

Based on the interviews and observations in our study, a common cause of failure or difficulty in academic achievement stems from the belief that past failures and setbacks are likely to repeat themselves. It creates a mindset that results in a “self-fulfilling prophecy” that often leads to lackluster efforts or even worse, giving up. Over time these practices can and often become habitual and progresses from quitting a test, to dropping a class, to dropping out of school altogether. The participants in our study stated that they rarely, if ever, experienced learned helplessness because of their habit of exercising what will eventually be described as learned resourcefulness.

John’s comments regarding learned helplessness seemed to reflect the general attitude of all the participants in the study when he stated:

As a black man, especially in a white environment, unless you’re blind, you quickly come to realize that most of the time when I’m on campus; I know that it’s pretty much just “me” out there. I’m not saying that there’s no support or friendliness or sharing or alienation or animosity. I just mean that you can be around well intentioned people who have no idea what you’re thinking or feeling because I’m the one that generally has to adapt or change. See, it’s not really my campus anyway. It’s their campus and because I’m in a constant state of change, I’m generally the one who has to work harder for less. So from the start, I expect problems. That’s not pessimism. It’s just good sense as a black man.

Learned Resourcefulness

In essence, “learned resourcefulness” (McWhirter, Burrow-Sanchez & Townsend, 2008) is the opposite of “learned helplessness (Chovil, 2005)”. Based on the interviews and field observations, the participants in this study utilized learned resourcefulness on a regular basis as a means of addressing academic challenges. Where and how these skills were developed or learned seems to be related to a series of beliefs and habits that manifested in early childhood. John described how playing college sports with some of the best athletes in the state boosted his confidence not only in sports but in his career and with his family. Jamal gives credit to his confidence to his faith and the fact that his college educated parents expected nothing less than success.

Though these tactics can create pressure, the participants in this study were quick to point out that it's a different kind of pressure. The pressure to move forward and push yourself with those who have been through it and who have a deeper understanding of who you are and how you feel as a black man on a predominantly white college campus and environment speaks volumes, according to our participants.

Collective Identity

Our research participants pointed out that support groups and study group sessions were paramount to their success. Beyond providing academic resources as well as psychological relief because becoming a part of an ethnic community, this type of racial socialization also contributes to developing a collective identity, (Ogbu, 2004; Kook, 1998). This is an identity that is shared among all those within the group. This identity includes a sense of pride and boosts self-esteem because identity is a positive one that is not based on the traditional values of the status quo at PWIs.

Conclusions

In response to the research questions:

1. What psychological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?

The self-esteem of the student enrolled in higher education is a factor as well as their ability for resourcefulness (CITE). These influences were generally developed long before enrollment. Resiliency appears to be associated with a belief system that developed into a useful skill for academic survival; therefore, it is possible to learn or improve one's resourcefulness. Based on this research study, having low self-esteem, lack of stress reliever or activity, neglecting to have a plan and backup plan, avowing support groups and study groups, are all psychological factors or influence in academic achievement.

2. What sociological factors contribute to the attrition of black male college students in California?

As described in the literature and by our participants, there are several sociological factors that contribute to black male attrition. Among these factors is poor support from family, lacking proper academic preparation before entering college, being raised below the poverty line or under significant financial burdens, and being a parent.

The development of a social network of peers and faculty can provide a sense of belonging as well as legitimate academic support. It's also not unusual to maintain two, three or four of these networks to fit a particular social need.

3. Which "best practice" strategies can black males utilize to improve academic achievement and college graduation rates?

The participants in this study provided a list of strategies that was useful to them and may be of tremendous help to current and future black male students.

- tutoring
- study groups
- support groups
- letting go of "baggage" from the past

- having faith or practicing religion
- engaging in a relaxing hobby
- having a written plan of action
- minimize obligations and distractions
- meeting with your instructors/ advisors early and consistently
- getting feedback about your plan from peers and advisors
- time management

All three of our participants generally felt that they were ill prepared for this level of academic rigor in the beginning. However, they were not aware of this upon enrollment. More information related to anticipated academic rigor as well as better communication related to academic expectations and standards would've been more helpful were it available.

Based on our study, current students can apply resiliency theory in combination with well-developed social networks in an effort to minimize and overcome attrition at colleges throughout California, despite the challenges of the current economy.

Former college students can join or develop a support network that current students can participate in which provides both support and a sense of belonging with experienced peers. And currently active professors can apply the concept of resiliency theory by interacting with and through their current student population as a means of eliminating these risks before they begin.

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