

# I Am My Brother's Keeper: The Impact of a Brother2Brother Program on African American Men in College

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*This qualitative study focuses on the perceived effects that Brother2Brother (B2B) peer groups had on African American male college students in the Chicago area. Students' perception of their educational and personal experiences, commitment to scholastic achievement, and integration into the campus environment were highlighted. Seven focus groups with members of B2B chapters yielded six themes: Academic Motivation, Personal Presentation, Validation of Emerging Skills, Personal Growth, Ethic of Collaboration, and Rewarded through Accountability. These themes demonstrated the importance of supporting the development of African American male collegians' non-cognitive skills. Implications for educators and recommendations for higher education institutions are discussed.*

## **Introduction and Purpose of Study**

This qualitative study examines the perceived impact that membership in Brother2Brother (B2B) peer groups had on African American male collegians in the Chicago area. Extant research indicates that membership in a peer group, such as a fraternity or study group, is positively associated with scholastic persistence and overall psychosocial development (Harper, 2006). This is particularly so for ethnic minority college students (Bonner, 2010; Carroll, 1988; Hake, Crow, & Dick, 2003; Harper, 2006; Harper, Byars, & Jelke, 2005; Harper & Harris, 2006; Kuh, Palmer, & Kish, 2003; Oyserman, Grant, & Angel, 1995). Understanding the college experiences that motivate students to achieve academic and personal goals is important, especially for African American males, whose college retention and completion rates are lower than those of other ethnic groups, and also lower than those of their female counterparts (Cuyjet, 2006).

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In the greater Chicago area, for instance, the underachievement of African American male students (and other ethnic minority students) has gained more attention recently (Allensworth, 2005). A 2008 study by the Chicago Urban League (in partnership with Global Business Network) reported that college graduation rates for African American males in the Chicago region stood at 11%, compared with 30% for whites.

The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC), composed of junior college and universities, has been working for years to remedy educational disparities. Toward this end, the Consortium secured a two-year grant from the Illinois Board of Higher Education in 2007 to initiate the Brother2Brother (B2B) project. This peer-based program assists African American males to achieve a college education by providing scholastic, career, and social support to students, cultivating leadership skills, nurturing brotherhood, and asking participants to make a personal commitment to graduate. This paper focuses on the perceived effects that B2B had on students' psychosocial, educational and personal experiences, commitment to scholastic achievement, and integration into the campus environment. The findings in this study can help higher education institutions better meet the needs of African American male college students and better support their academic achievement.

## **Literature Review**

### *African American Men and the Higher Education Gap*

African American men remain underrepresented in higher education, constituting less than 5% of all undergraduate collegians (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004; Porter, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Reasons for this underrepresentation have been widely documented. African American students are not encouraged to achieve academically during their primary and secondary education (Duncan, 1999; Polite & Davis, 1999), have the lowest high school grade point average (GPA) compared to other groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), fail to finish high school (Strayhorn, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009), are disproportionately targeted for disciplinary actions including expulsion (Bowman-Perrott, & Lewis, 2008; Skiba & Rausch, 2006), and are disproportionately placed in behavior disorder and special education classrooms (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Kunjufu, 1986; Rawls, 2006). Those who make it to college lack indispensable requirements for success, including basic comprehension, and reading, writing, and test-taking skills (Adelman, 1996; McGinnis, 2002).

Aggravating these problems are the lack of institutional commitment to providing African American males with academic support services (i.e. mentoring, tutoring) (Duncan, 2005), and to establishing a welcoming campus environment (Flowers, 2004; Schwartz & Washington, 2002; Smith, 1997; Swail, 2000). Invisibility and alienation (Cuyjet, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008), inhospitable environments (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Sedlacek, 1999), stereotype threat (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Steele, 1997; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan & Andrews-Guillen, 2003), and teacher neglect (Flowers, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005) also have been described in the literature as contributing factors to the underrepresentation of African American males in higher education. These factors, in turn, affect the graduation rates of African American men (Cuyjet, 2006), who are not only the least likely to enroll in college, but are also the most likely to drop out without earning a bachelor's degree (American Council on Education, 2003; JBHE, 2007).

*The Brother2Brother Program*

B2B is a peer-based academic and social integration program modeled after the nationally known Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB). Peer groups, such as B2B, facilitate academic integration and persistence (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Swail, 2003), provide guidance and direction for the newly enrolled (Just, 1999), and counter the effects of prejudicial attitudes, particularly at predominantly White college and universities (Berger & Milem, 2000; Smith, 1997; Tatum, 2003). Although their research does not examine B2B programs, some authors suggest that peer groups foster students' positive self-perception and personal agency, and provide corrective feedback at the academic and social levels (Bonner, 2001; Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Positive peer communities are supportive audiences for emerging skills and new ways of being, providing opportunities for students to earn admiration from peers and faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; White & Cones, 1999). B2B is designed to encourage persistence from freshman to sophomore years by attending to participants' social, emotional, and cultural needs (SAAB, 2010). In the vision of its founder, Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe, these factors are essential to increase African American male collegians' chances to achieve academic and social success (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006). In addition, the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) states that B2B helps participants identify career goals, builds support networks, promotes students' involvement in campus activities, and instills a desire to "give back" to their communities (SAAB 2010). A focus on accountability, proactive leadership, self-discipline, and intellectual development are hallmarks of SAAB's B2B, all of which are considered essential to the development of effective and responsible citizens (Ray, Carley, & Brown, 2009).

Between the fall of 2007 and the fall of 2008, eleven members of the Chicago South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC) established their B2B programs. Membership ranged from 10-80 participants in every chapter and 290 students participated in B2B during the two-year period funded by the grant (Boesen, G. personal communication, December 1, 2009). Following the model developed by Dr. Bledsoe, each chapter established a strategic plan as well as personal development plans for each participant (Boesen, 2010). The plans involved setting academic, career, and personal goals for participants (e.g., effective study methods, service learning), recruiting, organizing regional student seminars, conferences, and college fairs, and creating partnerships with other B2B groups to hold joint activities (Boesen, 2010). Participants were also required to mentor and tutor middle and high school students.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The psychosocial and personal experiences of African American collegiate men had not been adequately addressed in the literature prior to 2000 (Harper, 2004). Since then, many studies have demonstrated the influence of non-cognitive factors in promoting retention, persistence, and academic success of African American students. Non-cognitive variables, as defined by Tracy and Sedlacek (1985) and Sedlacek (2004), are: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, ability to deal with the system and racism, persistence and long term goals, strong support, community involvement, leadership experiences, and knowledge acquired in a field. Other studies have confirmed the impact of non-cognitive factors on African American males. Hamilton (2005) found that attachment to college, personal and social adjustment, and the support of a strong person are all important predictors of college completion for African American male collegians. Likewise, Schwartz and Washington (2002) found that academic and

college integration, college satisfaction, supportive relationships with mentors, and coping ability contributed to academic performance and retention among African American freshmen men. Strayhorn's study of the role of supportive relationships concluded that having such relationships facilitate African American students' satisfaction with college (2008). Strayhorn (2008) also identified internal locus of control, hard work, time management, and developing a cool passion for a major positively impacting the academic success of African American male students.

Many non-cognitive variables associated with African American males' achievement are nurtured and stimulated through the activities of peer communities such as B2B. Additional knowledge about the effect of this program is needed to maximize our supporting these students' success in college. This framework provided a useful way to understand the experiences of those who participated in the B2B program.

### **Current Study**

This study was part of larger project in which matriculation, retention and graduation rates of African American male collegians involved with B2B were examined. A team of researchers was asked by the Consortium to evaluate the project and a number of variables were observed. This paper focuses on the perceived effects that B2B had on participants' psychosocial, academic, and personal experiences.

The study posed the following questions: What is the academic value of B2B program according to participants? What is the social value of the B2B program according to participants? What do participants learn in the B2B program that they feel can be applied to their lives as students and as growing men? To explore these questions and identify the influence of non-cognitive variables on participants' experiences, this study used a qualitative approach. This approach allowed us to maximize our chances of capturing, in their own voices, the unique meanings these students attributed to their experiences.

### **Methodology**

Seven focus groups were held to gather feedback from B2B members: two were conducted at the end of the first year of the program, and five were conducted at the end of the second year. Guided by open-ended questions and a clearly defined topic, focus groups were an ideal method to gain insight into individuals' perceptions and help participants build on each other's ideas (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Straw & Smith, 1995). A different research assistant was employed each year as focus group facilitator. Neither research assistant was affiliated with the B2B program. Both research assistants had experience facilitating groups and possessed some familiarity with qualitative methods of data collection. To ensure that facilitators were familiar with focus group techniques, additional training was provided. They were instructed to ask probing questions, discuss unexpected topics that might arise, and draw out responses from all participants (Krueger, 1993). An interview protocol was created in collaboration with the Consortium director, based on careful consideration of the critical issues of interest to this inquiry. Each focus group met once and lasted between one and a half to two hours. Participants were asked to reflect on their involvement with B2B, including their experience with peer mentoring, participation in regional activities and conferences, and student-led workshops. The facilitator inquired about B2B's contribution to members' academic success, and the impact it had on their career and personal goals. Participants were also asked

about the reasons for joining B2B and the impact the program had on their class attendance, motivation to finish college, personal presentation, and grades. Students' narratives described perceptions and attitudes toward the program and the elements of the program that inspired and motivated their academic pursuits.

### *Sample*

A non-probability judgment sampling (Marshall, 1996) was used to select the seven B2B chapters, ensuring that the two types of institutions hosting B2B programs were represented (five junior colleges, and two four-year universities). This sampling method also allowed for inclusion of the chapters that had the highest number of members, and the incorporation of as many student characteristics as possible. All B2B members within the institutions selected for the sample were invited to participate in the focus group. Participation ranged from 3-9 individuals, with ages varying from 18 to 23 years old. Most students were in their sophomore year. No other demographic information was collected from participants, except to confirm that they were currently enrolled in the B2B program.

### *Data Analysis and Results*

Discussions were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim by the facilitators following each focus group. The focus group facilitator for the second year (who was familiar with qualitative coding methods) and the author of this paper coded and analyzed the data. Hyper Research™, qualitative research software for coding and retrieval of text clusters, was used. Each coder selected and examined text clusters, such as sentences and paragraphs, which were believed to express a meaningful idea about the participants' views of B2B. The coders then compared and discussed these clusters, continuously looking for instances that represented salient concepts, adding new information, and identifying core themes. This procedure ensured that the opinions and views of the respondents were observed and categorized consistently. Subsequently, empirically grounded thematic patterns (Creswell, 1998) were identified and collapsed into similar key categories.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the data revealed six core themes: Academic Motivation, Personal Presentation, Validation of Emerging Skills, Personal Growth, Ethic of Collaboration, and Rewarded through Accountability. Direct quotes have been presented as indicative of respondents' views.

### *Academic Motivation*

Those who became involved with B2B hoped to become more disciplined in their school work and to develop a consistent study routine. Respondents' feedback indicated that gradually this goal became more tangible and better defined, in that students used B2B as an opportunity to learn better study habits, manage their time better, and stay focused on the goal of graduating from college. Some groups found creative ways to incentivize all members to improve their grades or raise their GPA by setting a high GPA goal for the entire group, and regularly

monitoring each other's grades. This group approach created high expectations for school success. It made it more natural for those struggling academically to ask for and get help when needed by reinforcing the perception that members were watching out for each other. Several students explained that having someone else looking at their grades besides their family made a difference, "it makes you want to do good in school." Also, respondents explained that getting low grades meant to "let their brothers down," risking their camaraderie and affecting their team spirit. This group expectation clearly affected academic performance of some students. After improving their grades considerably, some students made it to the dean's list. One student said that his grades improved because "his self esteem went up" due to being part of the group and wanting to "represent it right." Here is what two other students reported, "I can't tell somebody to go to class and maintain a good GPA if I am not doing it myself. So it motivated me to maintain a high GPA" And "I went from a D average to almost a B average in the matter of one semester".

Respondents also reported that there was consistent peer pressure among them not to miss classes. Members also felt that the program had a real impact on their class participation. They paid more attention in class, chose to sit in the front of the classroom, displayed a more committed attitude and better disposition, and offered their opinions during class discussions more often. Here is a typical example of what many respondents said, "B2B has motivated me to be ...more focused on my classes. Basically I am more organized than I was" and "Respondents reported a change in faculty attitudes toward them as well".

Respondents believed that their actions drew the attention of their professors, which, in turn, led to greater motivation to focus on their academics. Several students credited their persevering in college to their membership in B2B, as well as to seeing their B2B peers graduate. These newly discovered academic benefits and rewards were clearly factors in the college socialization of these students. When "the spotlight is on you," as one respondent explained (in the sense that one shines and others notice it), it fosters a desire for the student to perform in ways that they always wanted, but were not sure they could – as accomplished students. Those who were already in good academic standing felt "motivated to achieve even more and to help out others," as one student described.

### *Personal Presentation*

"Dressing to impress," or wearing professional attire, is a significant element of B2B that is designed to create a culture of success. It not only seemed to promote a sense of maturation and purposefulness in participants, but it also improved academic motivation. While some groups encouraged their members to wear a suit and tie every day, most required that they do so at their regular meetings and events. This element of the program gradually became one of the favorite aspects of B2B. Responses indicated that participants seemed to recognize the value of presenting a professional image through their appearance. Repeatedly groups reported that people thought of them differently when they did not wear baggy pants or use slang. Not only did participants report an impact on their skills (i.e. learning to tie a tie), but the majority also reported that dressing up created a positive attitude in them and in others toward them. Students commented on their surprise at the reactions of others. For example, many observed that professors noticed them more when they dressed up, offered them compliments, and in general acknowledged them more. Some credited their way of dressing as the reason for being called upon more during class to offer their thoughts and opinions. This recognition, in turn, compelled

them to focus more on their classes, motivated them to play a more significant role in class discussion, and improved their self-image. They believed that their dress code conveyed their eagerness and seriousness, as well as their respect for the institution, their peers, and themselves. “A tie changes your state of mind,” according to one member, while another said “dressing up signals to others that you want to learn.” Some participants noted that they were more likely to behave “like gentlemen” and change the stereotypes about African American males.

### *Validation of Emerging Skills*

Coupled with the theme of academic motivation was participants’ interest in generalizing their learning to other areas of involvement in the institution. Being a member of B2B was a bridge that connected them with other areas of the campus. Students reported that they became interested in attending activities held by other student groups. Even more significantly, some members reported assuming leadership roles in other groups (i.e. student clubs). Students pointed out that the good planning and teamwork learned in their B2B group prepared them to organize activities such as Welcome Days (campus orientation for freshmen) and fundraisers. According to their responses, as participants solidified these gains, they also recognized that B2B was pivotal in supporting their emerging skills or validating those they already possessed (i.e. organizational and logistic, public speaking skills), but had not exercised yet.

Skills for guiding others also emerged in some of the groups. For example, the B2B group at one of the universities developed a close mentoring relationship with the high school in the area. For these collegians, mentoring high school students became an attractive feature of the program. Mentoring activities included psychosocial support and tutoring. Clearly, the emphasis on helping others develop and advance, a hallmark of B2B programs, generated feelings of positive self-regard and confidence. It also produced unexpected results as well. Mentors were surprised that they became sources of inspiration for their high school mentees – they did not anticipate becoming role models. This helped to “improve the image of minority males in general,” as one participant described. Another student said:

One reason why I joined was to influence people...because other people might be going through the same struggles that you are going through or went through.

Finally, B2B members saw a development of their persuasive skills related to recruiting new members for the program. For example, one student explained that he often sat in the cafeteria and approached “brothers” who were new to the college. He said: “I felt confident enough to simply engage in regular conversation and then ask if he had ever heard of B2B...” Persuasion, participants reflected, involved more than just signing someone up for any group. As some admitted, their decision to join was based less on their knowledge of B2B’s “message,” than on the qualities that the “messenger” emanated, such as seriousness, commitment, responsibility, and concern. One student said that he had not joined B2B in his previous institution, but “when [B2B member] came to me he offered a sense of brotherhood [...] that we are a small community and stick together to help each other.” Developing skills for recruiting was particularly important, as members constantly had to devise new methods to increase membership from the first to the second year, or as students graduated and left the institution. While in the first year word-of-mouth seemed to prevail, other approaches were pursued in the

second year. For example, students learned to make better use of internet venues, such as 'Myspace', and other web-based social networks.

### *Personal Growth*

Members derived a sense of personal growth from belonging to a program that created expectations for them, fostered new abilities, and cultivated responsibility for others' achievement and well-being. This, in turn, contributed to a higher level of self-confidence and purpose. Based on respondents' feedback, personal growth was manifested by an increased repertoire of abilities that included: problem-solving, resource mobilization and networking, self-organization, and being accountable to oneself and peers. One student said that the leadership skills he learned in the group brought him "out of the shell to take on more responsibility." Despite the fact that every B2B group had an advisor (usually a staff or faculty member), members were expected to contribute. This included coordinating events; organizing local and regional conferences and gatherings; planning fundraisers; and generally being available and accessible when others needed support.

Respondents indicated that their membership in B2B inspired them to be "part of the solution" to the problem of African American males' underachievement. Through their involvement in the program, they came to recognize that they were unique in their ability to contribute to, and help other African American young men to succeed. Many felt a strong urge to "give back," as some students put it, whether it meant setting an example in their community, advising and encouraging others, or reaching out to other African American men in the college. They especially valued the peer mentor component of the program. Several respondents had never heard about mentoring African American college students before, and were attracted by that potential in B2B – being a mentor as well as a mentee.

In addition to appreciating and benefiting from the "brother mentoring" that occurred in their groups, respondents also felt that they gained by being exposed to and being in the company of, successful African American men during conventions and events. They reported coming back from these encounters very energized. Particularly impactful was learning about the problems faced by young African American men, such as scholastic underachievement and overrepresentation in the prison system. Observing successful African American males engaging in civic responsibility, presenting at conferences and motivational workshops, emphasizing constructive social behavior, and succeeding in business, "makes you want to be good and to grow as a person," said one student. These experiences helped participants see themselves as evolving young men, as typified by the following comment:

I was able to attend several conferences [...]. To just see African American males doing something positive, you know, trying to be positive role models...[...]. To see so many others out there trying to complete a degree and helping others...I really like that...being able to be a part of that because, you don't really see a lot of us doing something productive in those leadership roles. To be around them...I can feed off that.

Clearly, those involved with B2B felt that the program impacted them well beyond their academic pursuits. For example, participants spoke about the skills and personal qualities they had acquired since joining the program. These included reading more books, being more concerned about their physical health, conducting themselves in respectable ways in their



community, avoiding swearing and vulgar language, and in general, acting like what a group described as “civilized men.”

Such experiences, coupled with encouragement to emulate positive behavior, stimulated members to try new actions, some of which were scary or associated with a sign of weakness. For example, several respondents came to realize that it was acceptable to ask for and receive help, particularly academic help. Where before they might have felt embarrassed or inadequate by their lack of knowledge or by their grades, they came to value these opportunities to open up, let others in, and demonstrate character strength. In addition, responses indicated that many overcame the fear of speaking in the classroom. Those students came to perceive themselves as individuals who could contribute to a discussion, that they had something of “substance” to say, and “didn’t have to hide anymore,” as a student explained.

The theme of personal growth contained a meaning of redemption for many participants. Before joining B2B, not only were they not achieving academically, but other areas of their lives might also have been in disarray. B2B appeared to have helped several participants reflect upon and transcend troubled personal circumstances that might have shaped their past. Here are a couple of comments that illustrate this theme:

My way of recruiting is that I can find common ground with just about anybody. I can do it with a crack head because I witnessed that in my family. I witnessed alcoholism, child abuse...things like that. I used to drink, I used to smoke, I used to party and go out and try to find women...and I tell them about how I made a transition and got back on the right track. Now I am going to talk to you and see what you want to do with yourself and try to find ...common ground.

When I came to [B2B] I was coming from ground zero. I was homeless and trying to take care of my two-year old son. I got kicked out of school my junior year ...But the brothers help to make me the person that I am. I am supposed to stand up and ask questions; I am supposed to tell the young brothers to pull their pants up, to invite them for this or that event...

### *Ethic of Collaboration*

An emphasis on collaboration, not competition, was a program attribute that kept members engaged, as reported in the focus groups. This ‘ethic of cooperation’ seemed consistent with participants’ moral standards, resulting in an element of cultural congruity and relevance that kept them involved. Clearly, the values embraced by B2B were values that participants felt they could stand for, including supporting the welfare of their fellowship, developing collective goals, and being responsible for each other’s successes. For example, one student said, “When I got to [B2B] I found that ...wow... those values, respect, integrity, straightforwardness, ambition, compassion, still exist among people who look like me”.

As a consequence, respondents reported experiencing a heightened appreciation of their racial identity while realizing their uniqueness as young Black men. The result for them was feeling accepted and developing a conviction that they matter. For example, participants reported that they felt protected and looked after, especially right after joining the group, when many had felt a mix of mistrust and apprehension. One student expressed this consensus by saying “they took me in, they led me to the conferences, took me to the meetings and

seminars...and it gave a sense of purpose.” Repeatedly, it was explained that, because they are a “brotherhood,” they were motivated to take care of each other. Participants also appreciated this ethic of collaboration because for them it meant, “getting a male perspective on things.” This perspective was particularly important for those who felt they had not had a reliable male presence in their lives until they became a part of B2B. Here are a couple of comments that exemplify this awareness:

Also, you know, it helps me to be more conscious of being an African American male [...], I can basically do whatever I want, I don't have to limit myself...I [am keeping] my options open, which makes me more confident as a person.

I am 23 and I [...] it is just me and my mother. So, you know, being surrounded by my brothers here, just getting that male push in my life [...] has helped me a lot.

Respondents emphasized that the B2B program made them more conscious of what is expected of them as college students. Moreover, it awoke in them a sense of responsibility for other African American males and toward their African American community in general. One student best reflected this sentiment when he said:

Being the vice-president [of the chapter] I am in a position to help others. I am getting coached by my younger brothers and by my older brothers...it motivates me. Like to stay in school, to do better, to go on to something better to help others, to help my community. This has been one of the most defining moments of my life.

In addition, the mutuality they encountered among B2B peers had an affirming effect on participants and made it easier to hear feedback, even when feedback was not positive, as reflected in the following students' comments:

We teach each other, we critique each other on how to communicate. And it is hard to hear that what you are doing is wrong.

Somebody is always going to watch over you, making sure you are doing what's right and they are going to tell you [if] you are slacking off. It is like a big brother.

### *Rewarded Through Accountability*

When participants referred to personal accountability, students spoke about being responsible for their education and academic performance, their commitment to personal development through self-exploration, and cultivating skills needed to pursue one's goals. However, students also spoke about being responsible for the group's logistical and emotional welfare and maintenance. Clearly, many did not anticipate the amount of responsibility involved in being a B2B member. Initially, they joined simply to “get something out of the group.” Gradually they realized that they had to account for the welfare of those around them. Although they felt the pressure to achieve, they also felt the pressure to work for others' achievement. One student said:

Before, I was all about myself, and how is [B2B] going to contribute to my future...Now it is 'I'm my brother's keeper.' I keep going back to that...it is one of my favorite things about the program. It is not about you, it is about how we can help each other, how you can improve yourself in order to help someone else achieve as well. It's about helping others and learning through the experiences of other people.

B2B simultaneously built their confidence and provided support, but also required members to take responsibility for maintaining the program. This created an atmosphere of mutual benefit and reciprocity amongst participants. The give and take entailed sacrifice and dedication, created accountability to the program and to the success of its members, and made participants feel they mattered as individuals.

An additional level of accountability emerged in the responses. Their investment in making B2B a viable program raised their profile within the school. It also continued to require that they "practice what they preach," and lead by example (by doing well in school). For this reason, B2B participants felt that they were playing an important role in their institutions. By creating a "brotherhood of caring and concern" for African American males, as student repeatedly said, they added to the institution's resources.

### **Limitations**

Despite a small sample, thick descriptions and information-rich narratives from students in several sites provided further knowledge and insight about B2B affiliates. Another limitation arose from the use of focus groups because participants tend to influence each other, or self-censor their remarks. Hence, exploring the complexity of individuals' beliefs may have been restricted.

The information reported in this paper is not representative of other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Latino, Native American). However, this limitation does not diminish the usefulness of these findings. While results cannot be generalized, it is important to note that this exploration was not intended to find generalizable results. Rather, the purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of how B2B affected these African American male collegians' perceptions, insights, attitudes, and experiences in college. African American male students' experiences are marginalized and not well understood. There is a need for more specificity and nuanced knowledge about the kinds of programs that can support adjustment to college for African American males.

Further, findings from this study are based on self-reported data. This can impact the study in many ways. For instance, participants may feel obligated to only speak positively about the program, which is a legitimate concern in focus groups that attempt to discuss their experiences in programs. Participants may also feel pressured to exaggerate their academic standing among their peers.

### **Discussion**

Findings showed that, beyond its cognitive and academic value, B2B was perceived as essential in mediating challenges to success, including the acquisition of the social and intellectual capital needed to achieve their college goals. The program strengthened participants' competence in overcoming stereotypes, isolation, and other hurdles associated with

underachievement. Self-confidence, becoming more adept at meeting important college expectations, and developing a sense of purpose characterized the subjective experiences of B2B members. These findings confirm the positive influence that non-cognitive factors have on the college experiences of African American males.

As participants reported, there was group pressure to not miss classes, it is possible that those attracted to B2B were students who were already diligent in attending classes regularly. On the other hand, this study confirms what others have found: being part of a positive peer community affects students both academically and non-academically. Academically and cognitively, from members' perspective, B2B was crucial for their survival and thriving in college. They felt empowered by the expectations the program created for them and the culture of support that permeated the group. These elements translated into academic commitment and motivation, as reported by students throughout the focus groups. Overall, students reported that they improved their grades, increased their class participation, and raised their GPA.

Clearly, though, membership in a B2B program had an importance far beyond scholastic gains. In this sense, this study confirms past findings that suggest that peer group influence has a substantial impact on students' psychological development (Bonner, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). B2B helped members accomplish a number of developmental tasks, including acquiring social competence and personal agency, pursuing purposeful goals, learning self-discipline, and developing self-worth.

An important finding was related to how students perceived their role within the institution. At one level, members felt that B2B made a significant contribution to the school as a student organization. In addition, by virtue of their participation in B2B, several students felt equipped to join other groups on campus. Hence, students felt that B2B contributed to campus diversity and improved opportunity for contact between students. This cannot be underestimated, as past research has shown that the more students are integrated and engaged in the college environment, the less marginalized they feel, and their prospects for graduating improve (Allen, 1992; Flowers, 2003; Hopkins, 1997; Swail, 2000). In part, this integration had to do with B2B membership increasing students' understanding of what was expected of them as college students. More importantly, members believed that their leadership made a difference and fulfilled an important function in socializing others (and being socialized) in the ways of college, thus enhancing the mission of the institution. Their role therefore, was essential to creating a culture of support and success for African American men. In turn, this appeared to have contributed to their sense of belonging and assimilation.

This finding, along with participants' insights regarding their personal presentation, is relevant to what some have called the invisibility of African American collegians. Invisibility is a ubiquitous experience for African American male college students, as their talents, abilities, traits, and worth are not recognized due to stereotyping or racism (Cuyjet, 2006; Franklin, 1999). This study demonstrates that, as participants' profiles were raised by their playing a part in campus life and by drawing positive attention, they came to think of themselves as individuals of consequence, not people to be ignored, rejected, or overlooked. It is hard to ascertain the full implications of this finding. One implication can be understood by examining the discrepancy between what these students had the capacity to do and what they were actually accomplishing. For example, most B2B members already arrived at the program with a college commitment. At the same time, several of them were aware that they had not been able to fully utilize their abilities until becoming active with B2B (i.e. public speaking, self-presentation, practical

competencies). This discrepancy was mitigated, partly, as the brotherhood helped them to establish a tangible path for bringing forth their latent, unexpressed qualities.

B2B members demonstrated a strong service ethic, and the organization played an important role in students' desire to give back to their community. One example is that one of the B2B groups developed a partnership with a high school that also had a B2B program. In this case, all the benefits associated with being a "Brother" i.e., mentorship, role modeling, tutoring, and introduction to the college experience, were fully available to the students in this particular high school. This involvement may have stimulated the academic achievement of the high school mentees and, perhaps as important, it appeared to have been a factor of personal growth for the B2B members.

To summarize, participants used B2B to access academic resources, socialize each other into the academic environment, and raise their grades and GPA. In addition, the sense of belonging fostered by this affiliation appeared to meet members' personal expectations, and empowered them to think of academic success as possible and desirable.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study explored the psychosocial, educational, and personal experiences of African American male collegians who participated in B2B peer groups. Their perception of their own strengths and development as young men, the significance of their relationships with their B2B peers, and the perceived benefit of belonging to a culturally congruent peer group were highlighted. Analysis of the data suggested that meanings attributed to these experiences influenced students' determination to persevere in college. Their subjective experience confirmed the impact of non-cognitive factors, found in past research, on these students' academic motivation, commitment to scholastic achievement, and institutional integration.

B2B affiliates were eager for knowledge, and thirsty for academic and non-academic experiences. Higher education institutions should pay more attention to the special role that positive peer communities play in actualizing these aspirations. For African American male collegians, positive peer communities help them see that they are a vital part of the college environment. Involvement in positive peer communities can also validate the desire to serve the larger community, and are congruent with participants' cultural values and ethical beliefs. Knowing that retention and graduation of African American males is compromised, we recognize that B2B is an effective medium to cultivate the nonacademic factors that facilitate their scholastic success. Toward this end, institutional support is crucial for the success of such programs. Because these groups take time to establish, it is important to nurture students' leadership in the beginning, when groups are recruiting, creating bylaws, and developing formal procedures. Institutions also must ensure the availability of resources. For example, participants were not always able to access tutoring or other academic resources they needed.

Higher education institutions should provide ample opportunities for frequent dialogue between advisors, faculty, staff and students. Such opportunities can be powerful tools for dispelling stereotypes and helping faculty and administrators see African American male students as capable and committed to achieving academic and personal goals. Dialogues could be organized as encounters, forums, open discussions, or focus groups, where students are invited to share their educational experiences, their perceptions of the supports available to them, and their college goals.

This study furthers knowledge of the rich subjectivity of African American male collegians. It shows that a sense of purpose, defined in part as responsibility and commitment to others' welfare, is a compelling motivator. Higher education institutions are well positioned to help African American collegiate men merge their academic goals with their personal goals of social justice toward their peers and communities. Toward this end, academic activities (i.e. assignments, readings, civic engagement activities, service learning) can enhance their motivation to persevere in college. Finally, this study did not focus on retention and graduation outcomes. More research is needed to determine specific ways in which B2B and other positive peer communities affect student persistence toward degree attainment. Also, non-cognitive factors, found in past research and confirmed in this study, can be a useful framework to guide the implementation, development, and evaluation of B2B programs in the future.

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