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## African-American Male Inclusion, Involvement, Perception and Achievement at Predominantly White Institutions

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALE  
INCLUSION, INVOLVEMENT,  
PERCEPTION AND ACHIEVEMENT  
AT PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

African-American male achievement in higher education is an ongoing challenge in the United States. Many Black undergraduate men are less prepared for rigorous college-level work than their peers from other racial groups, resulting in low retention and graduation rates in higher education institutions (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). African-American men also tend to be less engaged than others in institutional clubs/organizations, structured campus activities and enriching educational experiences outside the classroom (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004).

African-American men often have difficulty graduating due to numerous factors at predominantly white institutions (PWI). The sense of being involved and included, the elimination of racial stigma and the creation of support services from the college or university all tend to have a positive influence on African-American male achievement (Bush & Bush, 2010). This paper will discuss the factors that contribute to African-American men matriculating successfully at predominantly white institutions, as well as what strategies such institutions are doing to promote academic success in this population.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2010, 1,341,354 African-American men were enrolled in postsecondary institutions (ACE, 2012), yet only 33.9% of the 2003 cohort of African-American men in four-year institutions had graduated in six years (NCES, 2011). By contrast, 58.2% of white men from the 2003 cohort completed their studies within the same six-year period (NCES, 2011).

The problem of low persistence in the African-American male population is a national concern. At predominantly white institutions (PWI), the gap between black and white completion rates is critical. Research has shown that the major factors that deter African-American men from success in postsecondary education are institutional exclusion, perceived racism, a lack of student involvement, the absence of resources identifiable with men of color and a lack of connectedness to the institution (McClure, 2006; Tinto, 1993).

Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) report that the more involved students are, the better their chances at academic success, which improves the retention rate at their institution. In general, African-American men are underrepresented at predominantly white campuses. In fact, African-American men accounted for less than 4% of full-time undergraduates at public colleges and universities between 2006 and 2010 (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). It is easy for these students to feel excluded from the campus culture and to experience a lack of mentors or role models. Black students at PWI's may often view the campus as isolating, alienating and hostile and are also faced with negative stereotypes about African-American men (Strayhorn, 2013).

With such negative factors facing this group of students, it is highly likely that graduation and retention rates among African-American men will be low. Many higher education institutions in the United States are aware of these challenges and have implemented various initiatives, and offered specific resources to promote positive academic achievement as these students matriculate through college (Harper & Harris, 2012). Predominantly white institutions must monitor the resources and

initiatives they implement to promote academic achievement, especially in regard to this population. The rates of graduation and retention of African-American men may be increased if predominantly white institutions become committed to their improvement (Cuyjet, 2006).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Student Involvement**

*Involvement*, as defined by Astin in 1999, is the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to their academic experience. Numerous studies have shown that involvement is tied to the academic success of college students. Involvement in campus activities has been shown to be a high predictor of student success (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) also concluded that students who are integrated/involved in a college community are less likely to drop out and more likely to be academically successful. Whether students are active in Greek life, religion, athletics, politics or art, such involvement plays a critical role in their development and college success (Harper, 2012). In 2003, Dr. Shaun Harper surveyed black men who were academically successful at a predominantly white institution and discovered that leadership in student organizations strengthened their college experience, enhanced their practical skills and connected them with key university officials (2003).

Research shows, however, that involvement in athletics does not offer the same benefits as other forms of engagement. Black men are overrepresented in revenue-generating sports such as basketball and football (Eitzen & Sage, 2003). African-American men constituted 55% of football and basketball team members at public Division I institutions, while accounting for less than 4% of full-time undergraduates (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). The athletes' intense training and game schedules interfere with class and studying, thus graduation rates for athletes who are either male, Black (both male and female), or those who play football or basketball are lower than those of students who are non-athletes (Eitzen, 2003). Harper et al. (2013)

also reported that across four cohorts, 50.2% of Black male student-athletes graduated within six years, compared to 66.9% of student athletes overall, 72.8% of undergraduate students overall, and 55.5% of Black undergraduate men overall.

Involvement in Greek organizations provides the benefits of social connections and the development of leadership skills, which have been shown to increase overall academic performance (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). Members of Greek organizations have higher levels of involvement and better cognitive development than non-Greeks (Pike, 2003). This heightened sense of involvement leads to a desire to strive for academic success. Nelson, Halperin, Wasserman, Smith, and Graham (2006) reported, however, that Greek involvement might have a varying effect on academic success, which is consistent with a 1996 Pascarella et al. study.

Extensive research has been done on the effect of minority-based organizations and their importance to student achievement. Many underrepresented students, including African Americans, rely on the support they get from minority-based organizations and credit much of their success to these organizations at predominantly white institutions (Willie, 2003). At predominantly white institutions in which African-American students are in the minority, higher academic achievement and success come from involvement in different types of minority organizations. The social support they receive from membership contributes to positive self-identity and development, and helps to eliminate the students' feeling of isolation (Harper & Quaye, 2007).

Critics of minority-based organizations include Goldsmith (2004), who suggested that minority-based organizations worsen race relations on campus and can be detrimental to the overall development of minority students. Schneider and Ward (2003) and Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, and Levin (2004) reported that involvement in such organizations prevented members from becoming completely integrated in the college community. Harper (2003), however, studied the experiences of 32 high-achieving (i.e., grade point average > 3.0) African-American men and reported on the benefits that derive from active involvement in clubs and organizations.

## **Student Perception**

Research suggests that academic achievement is more easily achieved when students perceive they have social support (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004). When students feel they have social support, they are better able to navigate the collegiate environment (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003). Hirschy and Wilson (2002) concluded that students' perception of the friendliness of their peers influenced their willingness to speak in class, while the instructor's behavior had less impact on student behavior. A student's perception of institutional support was directly related to increased competencies, both socially and personally, and these competencies led to higher academic achievement (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007). Fischer (2007) found that all students experienced greater satisfaction and improved persistence when academic connections with the faculty are present and perceived as necessary. In their 2007 study, Smith, Allen, and Danley found that Black male undergraduates interviewed at five different predominantly white institutions unanimously perceived their campuses as being more hostile toward Black men than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups. Campus climate appears to affect the achievement of the students on those campuses. Harper and Hurtado's (2007) study of campus racial climates confirms that Black undergraduates continue to feel excluded at many PWI's.

## **African-American Men**

The years 1990 to 2008 saw a 15.1% increase in the number of African-American men enrolled in college, leading to a total enrollment of 627,000 (Aud, Fox, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Drake, 2010; Lee, 2011), yet only 9.8% of bachelor's degrees in 2008 were conferred on African Americans. Of that 9.8%, only 34.3% of those African-American graduates were men (Aud et al., 2010; NCES, 2010). The overall graduation rates in colleges and universities have increased across racial/ethnic groups, but in recent years degree completion has not increased at the same rate/pace for minority students, and

particularly African-American men (Lee & Ransom, 2011; refer to Figure 1). The participation rate for African-American men in higher education is lower than that of women from all racial groups (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

Race	1996	2000	2002	2003	2004
White	54.8	57.1	57.3	58.2	58.8
African American	32.8	35.6	34.0	33.9	34.2
Hispanic	41.3	44.6	44.1	44.6	45.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	59.5	62.9	64.0	65.0	65.7

**Figure 1. National 6-Year Graduation Rate by Race and Percentage.**  
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2001 and Spring 2007 through Spring 2012, Graduation Rates component. (This table was prepared with data from November 2012).

The troubles faced by African-American men begin long before college. Young African-American men often do not have access to, or are discouraged from participating in college preparatory curricula and activities (Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, parents of African-American men often lack a college education or an understanding of how to support their sons in college (Harper, 2012). African-American men are often labeled an “at-risk population” in education (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Davis, 2003), which perpetuates negative stereotypes among educators, and in turn can create a less than welcoming academic environment (Bailey & Moore, 2004). Without support, these challenges may compromise the academic achievement of African-American men, often leading to their overall dissatisfaction with college (Strayhorn, 2008). Tinto (1993) stated that dissatisfaction is an important predictor and precursor to a student leaving college. Sedlacek (2004) found that certain non-academic and non-cognitive variables were perceived as instrumental to student success in college, including institutional attachment, personal,

emotional and social adjustment and developing a relationship with a person who gives strong support.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study examined the factors that contribute to African-American men matriculating successfully through college at a predominantly white institution. It offers strategies that PWI's are using to promote academic success in this population, whether through campus initiatives, resources, or centers designated to help African-American men.

The present study included a sample of 57 African-American men matriculating at a predominantly white institution in the Midwestern United States. The group of men was diverse by age, year in school and grade point average. A focus group was held and participants were asked questions such as, "Do you feel included in the campus environment?", "Do you have resources readily available to you in case you need help?" and "Are you involved in any campus organizations? If so, how have they helped you while in school?". The focus group was conducted with an all-male population to encourage more open and personal responses.

In addition, research was conducted on institutions that have implemented initiatives, established resource centers or other resources that promote scholarly success in African-American male students. The graduation rates and retention rates that the institutions reported since implementation of such initiatives or resource centers were also compared.

### **Hypothesis**

Numerous studies have been done on the factors that contribute to students successfully matriculating through the higher education system. Cuyjet (2006) indicates that the more involved students are and the more included they feel on the campus, the better they perform academically. Similarly, this study's hypothesis is that the more involved African-American male students are and the more included they feel, the better their

academic success at PWI's. This study also explores the particular challenges faced by African-American men. A second hypothesis is that African-American men may face greater difficulties getting involved, and feel included in the PWI campus environment.

Finally, this study also examines programming that universities and colleges can undertake to assist African-American men with matriculating successfully through a PWI.

## **Data Collection**

Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews for several reasons. Krueger (1998) and Mertens (1998) reported that focus groups are an effective way to collect large amounts of information that is abundant in detail, while allowing participants to build on the reflections of others and gain more insight into their own experiences. Additionally, focus groups were used because "the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views can be quickly assessed" (Patton, 2002, p. 386).

Several departments and student organizations at the target institution were contacted via email to spread the word that focus groups would be conducted, and to encourage all African-American men to participate. Potential participants were contacted via telephone, e-mail or through social networking sites.

The purpose and importance of the study were explained to participants, who were invited to participate in a 30 - 60 minute focus group with other African-American male students. Fifty-seven (57) students agreed to participate. Each focus group had an average of four participants. A semi-structured interview style was used in the focus groups, which allowed participants time to reflect, while ensuring a clear direction of the discussion and maintaining focus and order (Krueger, 2002). Specific questions were used (see Appendix), but discussions often became conversational as participants reacted to the statements of their peers. Several questions sought responses about the importance of inclusivity and racial dynamics in the participants' college experiences. Each focus group session was audio-recorded (with the participants' permission) and recordings were transcribed upon completion.

## **RESULTS**

Participants' campus experiences are reported in this section. Three themes emerged that are rich in detail and identify the challenges these participants experienced:

### **1. Is this place for me?**

Participants elaborated on their feelings of inclusion and of being welcomed to the university as African-American men. One participant noted that, "When I first got here being black didn't sink in. I was just excited to be on campus." The student explained that over time he became aware of a separation between the races. Some participants indicated that they needed to "play a role" when interacting with non-blacks at the institution: "... In order to fit in with the black community you have to do the things that black people do, then once you're around the white people you have to put on this different persona." Many students from the focus groups shared this sentiment. The desire to "fit in" with the majority was also identified as a constant struggle.

While some participants reported that they felt welcome at the institution, others claimed indifference, stating, "You're simply just there to be there." One participant noted, "I feel welcomed by the black people, but not by other people." Another participant remarked, "I always have school pride, but sometimes I feel like is this really where I want to be, is this really where I want my degree to be from? I don't feel connected." A student from the southern United States commented, "There's interaction among certain small groups of people, but it's not like an interactive campus. The few events on campus are never heard of or talked about. You don't get a real 'college feel,' so I'm not connected." Such comments reflect the need for institutions to pay particular attention to the challenges of academic cultural inclusion.

### **2. Is racism still alive?**

Participants in every focus group described the challenges they faced with perceived racism and racial bias at the institution. While few reported personal experiences of discrimination, it was clear that the participants believed that racism exists at the

institution. One participant described his perception of “cultural divides” between different ethnicities and cliques formed by ethnic groups: “I gradually started noticing...where black people hung out; how it was just like a separation.” Another student believed that campus police were far more likely to be found at large gatherings of black students than at gatherings of whites. This participant argued that administrators showed preferential treatment towards predominantly white student organizations: “Black Greeks are treated way less fairly than white Greeks.”

Participants were particularly troubled by the institution’s wording in “Timely Warnings,” which were issued to the campus community to alert them of a suspected crime. While acknowledging that the alerts were federally mandated, participants felt that the descriptions of the alleged assailants were so general that they seemed to target most African-American men. Participants also complained about several instances in which white female students filed false charges of robbery and assault by a black male. Participants agreed that such cases created negative impressions and had a deleterious effect on the campus climate.

### **3. My involvement is important.**

The most important thing discussed was the importance of student involvement in the campus community. Participants were open and honest regarding the extent that involvement on campus has added to their college experience and academic achievements. Participants stated that they depended on each other rather than looking to the university for support.

When asked how involvement impacted their academic achievements, one student stated, “I’ve gained friends, a lot of people who I can lean on and ask for support or just get advice. ...I changed my circle when I got involved, [and] it impacted my grades in a positive way.” This mirrors research concluding that students who feel they have a strong support system demonstrate higher academic achievements (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Skowron, Wester, & Azen, 2004). Another participant added that participating in a Greek organization “...cleared away all the negative stuff; not focusing – it was just work, school, and working on joining my frat, that’s all it was. So I really had time to focus

on my studies and my GPA went up.” Other black Greek members echoed similar sentiments. “[There’s] a lot of stuff that I had to have a certain GPA to do, so I had to push myself to achieve and maintain that GPA,” one student reported, while another participant added that involvement “will help motivate you to be better than what you are and become better than what you have been.”

From the participants’ perspective, success in campus activities seemed to be dependent on the type of involvement. One participant, who was in a leadership position in a cultural organization, stated: “Being involved keeps me busy and it makes me focus on grades. I’ve learned so much from my involvement out of class and formed relationships with administrators that add to my experience. I think being involved is what’s kept me on the Dean’s List so many semesters.”

Athletes from both revenue and non-revenue generating sports reported negative college experiences: “They do whatever they can to get the max benefit for themselves and not us,” one participant said about the athletics department. When asked how being an athlete affects academics, one participant stated, “You really don’t have time to sit down and prepare yourself for the next assignment...and it really can take a toll on you.” Another participant reported that “being an athlete will definitely wear and tear on your mind and body and I know it has affected my grades.” One participant described a fellow athlete who sought counseling to manage the stress from his participation in athletics. Stress related to participation in college athletics has been shown to negatively affect academic achievement if proper advising and support are not available (Eitzen 2003).

Most participants in this study attribute their success to finding an outlet to convey their racialized experiences, stories and insights. An institution cannot improve students’ lives unless their everyday experiences are expressed and explored.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are some limitations to this study. Detailed demographic data were not collected on individual participants, and reported results do not take variations in participant age, socio-

economic status, living situation or length of college experience into account. Every student's college experience is unique, so the small number of students used in the study may not provide data that can be generalized to larger college populations. The results will be particular to one environment, social experience and region of the United States. Midwestern college students may have different college experiences than those who attend college in other regions of the country. School size may also play a major part in the campus climate. Every campus has different socio-economic demographics, and the size of the African American population may also affect the involvement and inclusivity of this group on campus.

## DISCUSSION

The experiences of the men in this report may be similar to those of African-American men at other predominantly white institutions. While their experiences should be taken into account when an institution assesses its campus climate, many times their voices are not heard. The feeling of not being connected to their institution, as indicated by many participants, could play a role in the high rate of minority attrition in the first and second years of study. The six-year graduation rate of the population targeted in this study is 18%. Additional steps need to be taken to promote successful achievement and continued matriculation among African-American men.

Most predominantly white institutions understand the need to improve services for African-American men; many institutions have undertaken initiatives to address their needs. Some such initiatives are featured in the latter half of Michael J. Cuyjet's *African American Men in College* (2006). Cuyjet (2006) identifies nine programs that show promising results in improving the student engagement and achievement of African-American men (Harper 2012). The "Black Man On Campus" (BMOC) project, instituted at Bowling Green State University in the Fall of 2000, was intended to support the academic and social success of the target population through mentoring relationships, providing a classroom environment that embraces their cultural heritage, and the creation of activities to promote a posi-

tive self-image (Cuyjet, 2006). Participants in the BMOC Project achieved a higher GPA than non-participants (Cuyjet, 2006). Harper (2012) reports that though these programs are admirable, replication may not achieve the same results because each institution has its own climate and student experiences differ.

Harper and Kuykendall (2012) offered eight standards for African-American male campus initiatives. These standards are being used by teams of student affairs administrators, faculty, undergraduate African-American men and others at institutions across the United States and abroad (NASPA, 2013). The eight standards are:

1. Inequities are transparent, and data are used to guide institutional activities.
2. Black undergraduate men are meaningfully engaged as collaborators and viewed as experts in designing, implementing, and assessing campus initiatives.
3. Actions are guided by a written strategy document that is collaboratively developed by various institutional stakeholders, ranging from undergraduate students to the college president.
4. Learning, academic achievement, student development, and improved degree attainment rates are prioritized over social programming.
5. Initiatives are grounded in published research on college men and masculinities in general, and on black male undergraduates in particular.
6. Efforts are enhanced by insights from black male student achievers.
7. Institutional agents are engaged in honest conversations about racism and its harmful effects on black male student outcomes.
8. At every level, institutional agents are held accountable for improving black male student retention, academic success, engagement, and graduation rates (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

The University of Louisville employs these standards in their African American Male Initiative (AAMI). Since its implementation in 2011, the 4-year graduation rate for the participants showed a 10.3% increase, from 9.3%, to 19.6% (Bates, 2014). Similarly, the 6-year graduation rate for the 2004 cohort showed an increase of 14.1%, from 34.5% to 48.6% (Bates, 2014). The AAMI includes an early arrival program, which brings first-year students to campus three weeks prior to the beginning of the semester, to acclimate them to the collegiate environment. The program is designed to provide participants with the opportunity to visualize their individual journeys from their freshman to senior year. The AAMI also has an advisory board that allows participants to comment on the effectiveness of the initiative and offer suggestions for program improvement (Bates, 2014).

The institution researched in this report has recognized the need for programming designed to assist African-American men. In the winter of 2013, the institution instituted its BrotherHOOD initiative, a program similar to the University of Louisville's African American Male Initiative. The BrotherHOOD Initiative's mission is to engage, empower, retain and graduate more first-generation, low-income and culturally underrepresented male students. Positive response to the BrotherHOOD was immediate. Participants stated: "I feel more connected with black men here on campus"; "If not for the BrotherHOOD, I wouldn't talk to half the dudes that I do on campus and I probably would stay in my room and not interact with people at all"; "The BrotherHOOD provides a safe space were we can be ourselves, share our successes and our struggles without being judged. We truly become brothers."

It is evident that more educators, administrators, policy-makers and foundations that support higher education are recognizing that improving the achievement of black undergraduate men demands a serious investment of institutional energies and resources (Harper, 2012). The systematic and ongoing assessment of the African-American male experience at predominantly white institutions must be an institutional priority in order to support the success of this population.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors that contribute to African-American men matriculating successfully through college at predominantly white institutions (PWI), and in particular, a PWI in a Midwestern state in the United States. This study also discussed what some predominantly white institutions are doing to promote academic success in this population, and which programs are most successful. Conducting focus groups with African-American men assisted the researcher in identifying the particular challenges faced by this population. With the national six-year graduation rate of African-American men at only 33.9% (NCES, 2011), it is critical that institutions of higher learning evaluate what must be done to increase the academic success of this population.

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*African-American Male Inclusion, Involvement, Perception  
and Achievement at Predominantly White Institutions*

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