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GET YOUR EDUCATION: FAMILY SUPPORT FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Lanita Sledge

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ABSTRACT

On predominately Caucasian campuses, African Americans face the common hardships of college life and the strain of racism and discrimination. Often these students have fewer support systems that encourage them to accomplish their higher education goals. When issues arise for these students, turning to family members they trust is usually the first response. This literature review offers an examination of current research on family socioeconomic status, structure, and available emotional, financial, social, and academic support for African American students in a four-year college/university. Ultimately, family involvement throughout the student's life and constant support during higher education increases the chances of persistence, while strengthening the student's resolve to help others in the community.

INTRODUCTION

The decision to attend college after high school is a big step for many Americans. With this choice come factors that influence relationships between loved ones. The transition from secondary education to higher education dramatically affects students' lives. When it comes to completing a university degree, the race/ethnicity of a student does have some effect on his or her experience (Barnett, 2004; Herndon and Moore, 2002; Tierney, 1999). How does cultural background influence their decision to go to college? Research has shown that an increasing number of college freshmen do not remain in school after the first year. With the increase of

racial diversity among college students, are fewer African Americans completing their first year and even fewer graduating? The dynamics of this issue involve many people, either as part of the problem or the solution. Past studies on the negative effects of African American socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, college administrators and racism have yielded depressing troubling results (Barnett, 2004). This literature review discusses the role of family involvement in African American college freshmen's lives in their persistence in higher education. It is expected that the family's beliefs, attitudes and levels of education, including what type of support is given to students, will enhance retention and academic success for African Americans in higher education.

Family Structure

The 2008 U.S. Census reports that an estimated 41.1 million African Americans live in the United States. Biased ideas about family structure have a negative influence on African Americans. The 2010 Census holds that 43.5% of African American children live in two-parent, married households, while there are 29.3% single-mother-parent African American homes (U.S. Census, 2010). With this number steadily increasing, the missing father figure is often seen as the dominant reason for African American youths' shortcomings in discipline, academic success, and psychological health.

The Male-Model hypothesis asserts that a father figure is needed for certain socialization to take place (Heiss, 1996). In contrast, Heiss deems that traditional, biological-parent household creates little disadvantage for students raised in single-parent homes when compared to the other economic and social challenges African American students face on a regular basis. Fathers' level of involvement determines the extent to which African American youth are affected, according

to Heiss, 1996; Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998; Gilford and Reynolds, 2010. Depending on living arrangements and parental involvement, Heiss' Stress Theory suggests that psychological distress of parental separation causes students to underperform (Heiss, 1996). Compared to Caucasian fathers who didn't live in the same household as their children, African American fathers were more likely to be absent from the home, but visited their children more often (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998). A two-parent household is seen as more effective in improving the lives of African American youth. Parental support for students' academic and social skills helped decrease risky behavior, such as peer pressure and skipping school. Parents who maintain firm, yet accepting authority encouraged positive behavior and attitudes in their children (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). While having both parents in the home lowers the risks of low academic achievement in grade school, other factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) and the level of education of the family contributed to their children's completion of secondary school and acceptance into a college/university (Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998).

Family's Socioeconomic Status

Social background and academic achievement are considered the most important factors in children's academic success (Coleman et al, 1966; McCarron and Inkelas, 2006; Stewart, 2006; Ma, 2009). Most African American first-year university students are first-generation students and come from low-income families (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). Families with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) have often achieved a higher level of education and have enriching experiences outside of academics. In one study, Lucas describes two kinds of advantages given to students whose families have a high SES: *quantitative*, or level of education,

and *qualitative*, or the content of education (Lucas, 2001; Ma, 2009). Families with a higher SES may travel or offer more educational enrichment to their children than those with a lower SES. As more people attain university degrees, the quantitative advantage is less effective, but the qualitative advantage still prevails. In research on students choosing a particular major based on race, SES, parental involvement, and gender, Yingyi Ma found that students from a lower SES chose majors more extrinsically profitable in the long-run than the variation in students with a higher SES, who chose a from a wider range of majors.

Parentification

In the case of single-parent households, SES was lower than in two-parent or extended family households (Heiss, 1996). The constant economic challenges for single parents become staggering if there is more than one child. In such cases, an older sibling may be called upon to assist the parent with younger siblings. This phenomenon is called *parentification*. When an older sibling takes complete control of the household, seeking academic success in higher education becomes more challenging for the child. A recent study of college-bound African American women taking the role of provider for the household examined a “push-pull” syndrome in which they wanted to leave their families and pursue a degree, while feeling drawn toward remaining with the family and supporting their loved ones (Gilford & Reynolds, 2010). In some instances, the well being of family members and assisting them with financial problems forced the student to prioritize personal and family obligations. To minimize the challenges of parentification for African American students, relying on extended family members has proven effective (Heiss, 1996; Gilford & Reynolds, 2010).

The number of African American households that include extended family members was 21.2% in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2010). From slavery to the Civil Rights era, African Americans have been apprehensive about trusting those outside of their families. Relying on family and close friends for support and guidance has been a tradition. When it comes to unknown and potentially uncomfortable situations such as going to college, African American students look to extended family for emotional and social support (Tinto, 2007; Parade, Leerkes & Blankson, 2009). Extended family members include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and church members. Extended families share households and share in the upbringing of the children (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Family Education

As stated earlier, the majority of African Americans college students are considered “first generation.” The initial push to attain higher education may have come from family, but success in higher education requires self-motivation. Families with more education lift the chances of academic achievement over those with less education (Stewart, 2006). Lack of family education is noted when immediate family members have no high school diploma, GED, or completion of secondary education. Families of first-generation students may have less academic knowledge, lower self-esteem, and may not know how to support their children in a higher education setting (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Along with family education, higher SES improves the academic achievement of students. When family members know, firsthand, about the academic experience, they instill that knowledge in their children and offer them financial assistance in their endeavors. For instance, providing a computer, books, academic field trips, and dual enrollment increases the likelihood

of higher grades and educational aspirations for students (Stewart, 2006). Deciding factors for the families' strengths, weaknesses, skills and interests have some influence on a student's way of life, and especially the student's educational choices (Ma, 2009). For example, family members who became doctors encourage young people to study medicine. Conversely, families with low SES and education may require students to get a job to help out with the family, which may negatively affect the students' attitudes toward education.

Academic Environment

The academic environment is another major factor in African American student success. Schools are considered effective when they have average or above-average standardized test scores, a sense of community between the students, family and staff, and hold high expectations for students' success (Stewart, 2006).

A case study in 2007 by Engstrom and Tinto found that creating a positive learning community increased the chances for all students to want a college education. In schools, creating a safe place to learn makes it easier for students to express themselves without feeling judged or seen as different. Allowing an open atmosphere helps a student feel part of a learning community where s/he is accepted as an individual, while respecting others in the same manner. Along with individual accord comes openness to a support network of learning. In the relationship between students and staff, grade school teaches the social skills needed for success in life, and also offers children the chance to build positive relationships on a personal and academic level. Students can demonstrate these skills when working collaboratively or by switching the roles of teacher and student. This gives them a sense of responsibility for own learning and that of their peers. With a supportive network comes other resources for student

betterment. When safe environments and support groups are established, self-assurance and students' capabilities increase. Students approach their studies with confidence in their potential academic success. This brings out their commitments and motivation to keep up the skills and mindset needed to stay focused on their education.

African American grade school students are influenced by their perception of the amount of support given from teachers, which influences, in turn, their self-concept concerning success (Stewart, 2006; Benner & Mistry, 2007). Low-income African American urban high school students were studied for their academic aspirations compared to parental and teacher expectations. When teachers' expectations were high, the students' educational expectations were also raised, regardless of their parents' expectation. Conversely, if parental educational expectations of their children were high, teachers' expectations were not needed for students to feel capable of succeeding. Students with both high parental and teacher expectations were 64% more likely to attend college (Benner & Mistry, 2007). Teacher input affects academic success, but positive family involvement increases the chances of a student's self-motivation to reach higher educational achievement (Stewart, 2006; Benner & Mistry, 2007).

Family Preparation for College

The amount of family involvement in the school indirectly affects academic success, while directly affecting how students feel about their studies (Stewart, 2006). Family influences start with the moral values students learn at home and apply to life decisions, including their educational choices. Families discussing issues such as race, discrimination and being a minority in American culture is essential for African American students to understand such challenges in the university setting.

Choice of University

Many African American students attend a predominately White university. Their perceptions of the educational climate may be different than that of their White peers. Researching the number of minority students and staff accepted into the university may also influence a student's decision to attend. The student's perception of racism, discrimination, and prejudice at the university, as well as how the university deals with diversity issues, is important. Discovering the number of student organizations and diversity events on campus is another factor used by minorities when choosing a university (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999; Herndon & Moore, 2002).

According to Tierney, a strong sense of cultural integrity is necessary to obtain a successful college career. Staying true to one's culture is sometimes an issue in the Black community. Some Black college students are challenged by people at home who are uncomfortable with how they've changed (Gilford & Reynolds, 2010). Going to a predominately white university with few African American students often requires assimilation. Depending on these students' self-esteem, knowledge of culture and sense of identity, the process of assimilation might be successful (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Other research shows that the concept of *bicultural socialization* is important when African American students have to assimilate on campus while continuing to stay connected in the Black community (Peters & Massey, 1983; Barnett, 2004).

When an African American student faces the dilemma of being the only Black in a classroom, finding people who share the same race, values, and life struggles is a way to not feel alone. Building a community with people of the same race is fundamental in sustaining support

on a predominately white campus (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). This type of community leads to a fictive kinship relationship, where friendships become as serious and influential as family members. Before college, African Americans depend on a community of neighbors, teachers, and church members for support. Working together to help a student succeed academically enhances the idea that leaving a person's cultural identity is not necessary to do well in a university (Tierney, 1999).

Family Connection

Families that are supportive and reliable before students go off to college should maintain a close connection throughout the students' college careers. The earlier children gain a sense of comfort from family, the more confident they will be when building relationships with others. Secure attachment between a child and mother increases the chances of acceptance and security with others, and these students experience less conflict in relationships (Parade, Leerkes & Blankson, 2008). In contrast, children with less secure attachments to family are more likely to engage in unhealthy relationships and experience social anxiety. For African American college students, dealing with racism on a predominately white campus is a stressor. Strong family support may alter the way students deal with racism, and can increase their persistence toward academic success. African American college students' parental attachment is correlated to social anxiety and ease of making friends. This finding, from a study conducted by Parade, Leerkes, and Blankson, gives insight to the importance race has on the psychological well being of minority students.

Knowing about one's culture is the starting point on a long road of self-exploration and growth, which is an important part of the college experience. A student's identity should

resemble his/her family relationship. Affirming some form of cultural identity before and during college increases the students' chances for graduating (Tierney, 1999). Personal goals are also influenced by self-esteem. In American culture, being a minority often creates obstacles to succeeding in life; to be a woman and a minority is a double-edged sword many first-generation African American female college students face. Families can also play a vital role in helping students prepare for such obstacles. Academic, emotional, social, and financial support are the four categories that give insight into the relationship of family and retention for African American college students (Herndon & Moore, 2002; Herndon & Hirt, 2004)

Academic Support

When students are in grade school, family members are more likely to be able to help with homework. As a student reaches a higher grade level, parents and family continue to want to help the student, but can sometimes no longer grasp the material because of its difficulty. Once students arrive at a university, the family has less direct control over the student's academic success. Even if they do not have a degree, African American parents tend to stand by their children, and try to give them all the tools needed to complete college (Barnett, 2004). The measure of positive family involvement in academics during and after grade school suggests an increase in students' academic achievement through higher education. Family support profoundly affects the students' chances of educational achievement by being either positive, non-involved, or negative (Herndon & Moore, 2002).

Taking an interest in students' academics and encouraging their success is part of *positive involvement* in their academic experiences (Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Herndon & Moore, 2002). Allowing students to venture into their desired field of expertise gives them assurance that

their family supports the decisions they make. Also, using support services on campus helps students with particular academic problems. The core concern from families is the level of academic achievement students should seek (Barnett, 2004). With involvement, a student experiences the importance of studying and always asking for help throughout his or her life.

Family members who do not help with students' academics are taking a *noninvolved* approach. Parents who have not attended a university may not know the proper way to handle an academic situation. Some may fear giving incorrect information to students, making matters worse. This does not mean the family does not want the student to succeed, or cares any less than those family members who take a different approach to academics (Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Herndon & Moore, 2002).

Parents who insist that students duplicate their own interests while studying are engaged in *negative involvement*. This connects with domain-specific parental involvement. Negative involvement can impede students' self-motivation — particularly if persuaded to study a subject that does not interest them (Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Herndon & Moore, 2002; Ma, 2009).

Emotional Support

In a 1993 study African American students reported that they receive a great deal of family support during their studies. Students reported that they also need support geared toward minority students from the campus environment. During students' moments of success, failure, or apprehension, family members provided encouragement and reassurance (Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Herndon & Moore, 2002). Family support was also shown in home visits, phone calls and spiritual practices.

In a 2002 study by Barnett, African American college students reported visiting family no fewer than four times a semester, when possible. The number of phone calls with family ranged from two to three times a week. The issues of roommates, academic challenges, feeling left out, perceived discrimination, social success, personal dilemmas and changes in the lives of family members were a few of the subjects students broached with their families. When African American students feel uncomfortable, they tend to turn to family. Successful African American college students say their parents are their friends. As in cases of bicultural socialization, many parents change from concerned parents to close friends when dealing with their college students. Building a close relationship with parents early and continuing to share experiences creates an emotional support system that students rely on in times of need.

In many cultures, spiritual practices provide personal emotional support. African Americans are more likely to pray and seek spiritual support from family members than Whites. Some students report they seek spiritual guidance from parents and feel better after stressful times (Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Herndon & Moore, 2002; Barnett, 2004). Many times emotional support from family is why students continue their education (Barnett, 2004). Parents, extended family and friends play an important role, psychologically, in students remaining in college.

Social Support

Social support is feedback that validates students. This type of support can come in many forms, for many reasons. Social support given by friends and social networks provides students with feelings of being loved and cared for. Social support networks that share and express the students' values improve their self-esteem. Another kind of support is a network that builds on

mutual responsibility and helps to create a community (Herndon & Moore, 2002; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Examples of social support networks in higher education include student organizations, family and friends, professors, classrooms and sports teams.

The best social support given by family members depends on the time students need it most. First-year students need social support for the transition from high school to college, which helps them combat homesickness, feeling uncomfortable and being unsure in their new surroundings. African American students at predominately White campuses need social support from family for issues regarding their minority status, while Blacks at predominately Black universities rely on themselves and show more independence (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). This difference could depend on the increase of social integration at predominately Black universities and the shortage of social integration for minorities at predominately White institutions.

Financial Support

An essential aspect of the decision to go to college is whether a student is able to afford it. High school graduates generally have either never held a job or worked only part-time. When attending college becomes a reality, students often find the cost higher than what they can afford. Getting assistance for college from the state and federal levels is sometimes not enough to cover tuition, books, room and board, or living expenses, and students look to other reliable sources. Families play a vital role in making college affordable for students with their financial support. Yet, for some African American families, paying for college tuition can be a burden.

The average White household income is almost twice the household income for African Americans (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). This affects the amount families are able to contribute before sacrifices must be made. In Barnett's study, an African American college student recalled

her parents making financial adjustments by changing their lifestyle. There was never a moment when her parents stated that money was going to be an issue, because they were determined to get her to college no matter what it took. Most incoming college freshmen depended on their parents for financial support first, and then ventured to other family members if the financial need was not met.

Family Involvement Implications

As research indicates, positive family involvement is important for students to grow and build solid foundations to achieve personal and academic success. Certain propositions are pivotal in the successful transition from high school to college, and African American college students at predominately White institutions, researchers Herndon and Moore encourage families to:

- Create a plan with the student to set out the expectations for academic success. Family and student opinions are expressed to establish the guidelines both will try to adhere once in a university setting.
- Instill positive morals and values for students to uphold and use when making decisions about their future. This also gives students a social foundation to build their beliefs on for the lives they want to pursue.
- Discuss an academic career for their student with teachers and staff at school. Getting involved in their student's success by learning academic options for which he or she qualifies provides a head start for higher education.
- Pay close attention to the kind of influence on race that can rub off on the student. For students wanting to attend a predominately White university, being able to communicate effectively and cordially with persons of a different race is significant for a successful academic and social experience.
- Give constructive, helpful guidance to students when coping with issues of stereotypes, alienation, or self-doubt. In times of need, students look to parents and other family members for advice. Think about the short-term and long-term effects of what the student may do.

- For problems that cannot be solved by family, identifying sources on campus that could be influential lets the student explore help on campus. Staying up-to-date on the latest news at the student's university promotes family involvement for the student to stay motivated and feel in control of their success. Concurrently, the student should also seek help from other resources than their families.
- Continue the push for academic success with the student by suggesting means of furthering his or her education (e.g. McNair, Honors College, etc.). To ensure students get the most of their education, being part of student organizations and getting involved on campus is a great way to learn outside of the classroom and form relationships with people of similar interests.

The help families provide for college students is expanded with another type of support system geared to help students: the institution. The resources and staff of the college community are there for any help students may need throughout their careers, and can foster a home-away-from-home feeling for students. Feeling connected to the school gives students pride and responsibility for what is happening on campus. As previously noted, African Americans may have a more difficult time than others because of race and the school's efforts at creating an open, diverse community on campus.

Effects of Family on Student Persistence

Parenting styles show the many faces of successful students. In college, African American students who reached the classification of Junior and beyond had major connections with their families and families involved in the academic realm. Some students were aware of the challenges of being a minority. Involvement in extracurricular activities kept students engaged and attached to their campus community, and regular contact with home and an open relationship with family played an intricate part in the retention of African American students in predominately White institutions (Barnett, 2004).

Student Motivation

The family and institutional support students receive is critical to their success, but the central, driving force is the student, the motivation a student has within herself to go after an education. With anything in life comes struggle, and hard work is needed to achieve a goal; to attend a four-year university takes self-motivation and self-motivation is influenced by the home and school environment (Stewart, 2006). Obstacles such as family issues, personal issues, and school climate may interfere with dreams of success, but how students react to these problems can also create the will for accomplishment.

Motivation comes in external and internal forms. Using family members as external motivators to earn a college degree is enlightening for family involvement in education. Some students who are in college do it for others, perhaps for a parent or family member who was not able to go to college. Wanting to go to college, being accepted and completing a higher education is a dream some have to live through others. Another external, motivational factor involves the students' perception of college life. The expectations people have about college vary and, for some, the chance to partake in student organizations, clubs, support groups, Greek organizations and living in the dorms motivate high-school students to get good grades and be accepted in an institution.

Once in college, students' involvement in personal interests while studying strengthens their motivation for being involved on campus (Herndon & Moore, 2002; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Gilford & Reynolds, 2010). Moreover, negative, external motivators turned positive can also help students attain their college degrees. People in close social networks may not have the best interests of students at heart, and some students know people who are not supportive or understanding, and may not want them to succeed in all aspects of life. These students, however,

have been able to turn those negative thoughts into a powerful rationale to do what is not expected of them, and more (Gilford & Reynolds, 2010). A look at African American female students attests to doing more than is necessary by working to achieve Master's and Ph. D degrees.

Role Models

College students who reached no less than junior status experienced another key factor for resilience in higher education: they had role models (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Mentors offer younger students one-on-one guidance and a different perspective on finding what works best for the student. If talking to family or resources on campus seems uncomfortable, a mentor can be the next best thing.

Going to a university expands networking opportunities with thousands of people from all over the world who have different backgrounds. Being an active member of the campus community often leads students to seek additional assistance and leadership roles in helping others. A student finding professors or upper-classmen to seek advice from and build personal and/or professional relationships with helps motivate them to succeed. The mentor can also be a safety net to help students make good decisions. Students serving as mentors for younger students may also motivate them. Students have to make sure they do well in their studies while maintaining social communication in order to be seen as someone worthy of emulation.

In African American culture, male role models are lacking. Black college students report the powerful effects female role models, mostly mothers, have over male role models (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Bringing African American students around positive male role models in college would give access to the scarce supply in their community. Having a positive female and male

role model gives a child insight into what it is to be a man or woman in society, and to work together in both professional and personal settings. Researchers Herndon and Hirt suggest that if every black college student mentored a black student in grade school, the increase in African American college graduates would be dramatic.

DISCUSSION

Family involvement in retention for African American college students notes factors needed from family members to persist in predominately White institutions. The more assistance given to students throughout their lives, the greater their chances for college acceptance and persistence toward a degree.

This literature review explores previous research on the family's structure, socioeconomic status and education. Accurate information on the diversity of African American families lacks in research findings. The idea that all Black families are poor and live in single-parent households is not true, and such stereotypes can be damaging. Many African Americans in college are first-generation, but others come from middle-class, two-parent families that can offer their children effective educational support.

Before attending college, African American students learn a strong sense of cultural identity. Family involvement in the pre-college years is critical to student success. The greater the family participation, the better students are prepared to cope with the challenges of college life. Future research should detail different types of family upbringing and their effect in regards to education and race.

Parents bring their own memories of the educational experience to their attitudes regarding their children's education. The effect of the parents' grade school experiences, and

how they foreshadow their perceptions of their students' education, deserves greater research. Many people went to school during dramatic and sometimes traumatic eras in American history. African American family members may have been in grade school during segregation, when being Black brought major fears of discrimination. Their memories and views on education could influence their attitudes toward the college experience. Learning what issues family members may have had in school and how to overcome negative experiences could be very useful in understanding the African American support system.

Self-motivation and the presence of role models are significant in many researchers' findings. Creating a community service background by helping other people, especially adolescents, was found to promote unity, along with personal growth for the mentor and mentee. I find it very interesting that giving and receiving help can be a determining factor in how a person perceives him or herself on a personal and academic level. Giving back to the community and having a desire to help others shows amoral character. Since African Americans depend on parents and extended kin (cousins, aunts, friends, neighbors), the type of mentoring they provide for students throughout their adolescence also relates to the academic success of middle, high school and college students.

In African American society, positive male role models are lacking compared to other races. The benefits of having a mentoring relationship with supportive adults shows in the behavior and communication between male and female students. Children need loving and supportive families to help mold them into functioning members in society, but the absence of a positive male figure is particularly meaningful for young men. Children who have one parent may feel as though they are inadequate, and may blame themselves for the other parent not being in their lives. Many African American students do not have both parents, and the development of

self-motivation and high self-esteem is more difficult for them than for children who have both parents in a stable family home. Further research on the effects of African American children's self-esteem as it relates to family structure could give insight on children's internal foundation, and how it relates to education. This, in turn, will offer evidence that mentoring from both males and females is highly needed by African American students.

CONCLUSION

The makeup of a person's family contributes to his or her success in life, and the person s/he truly becomes. Whether families praise, acknowledge and accept students for who they are and what they can accomplish, or whether they deny, alienate, and abuse students, the end result is undeniable. Education is a powerful measure of stability and betterment for an entire family. People who are able to obtain valuable support from family to reach their highest dreams will get there faster than those who do not.

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