

Shaping Success among Black Males in an HBCU: A Study of Barriers and Benefits

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Abstract

Attrition for Black men is a serious problem in higher education. While researchers have explored factors of retention for Black men attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), less research explains factors underlying the success of Black men attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), particularly those men who are academically unprepared. Eleven Black men, who entered a public, urban HBCU through its pre-college program and persisted to graduation, indicated that their social networks play a vital role in facilitating retention and persistence. The results from this study are transferable to other HBCUs which seek to enhance retention among Black male collegians.

Shaping Success among Black Men in a Mid-Atlantic HBCU: A Study of Barriers and Benefits

Introduction

A recent report from the American Council on Education (ACE, 2006) indicated an increase in participation rates for African American students in colleges and universities. The report suggested that college participation for African Americans increased 42.7% between 1993 and 2003 (ACE, 2006). While this data is encouraging, a growing disparity exists between the participation rates of Black men and women in higher education. Once the provinces of men, college campuses are increasingly becoming women's territories. While gender disparity in college enrollment is not endemic to African Americans, this disparity is most pronounced among this ethnic group (Cuyjet, 2006; Hale, 2001; Polite & Davis, 1999; Roach, 2001; Ross, 1998). African American males are elusive, assuming a unique place in the K-16 education pipeline, higher education, and the broader society.

Many studies have characterized Black males as an endangered species (Cuyjet, 1997; Davis & Jordon, 1994). Research suggests this characterization has emerged for several reasons. For example, in elementary and secondary education, educators and counselors are more likely to discourage Black males from attending college compared with their White counterparts (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Furthermore, Black males are disproportionately disciplined, more likely to face expulsions, and suspended longer and more frequently than White students (Polite & Davis, 1999). Black males are also overwhelmingly concentrated in special education and are disproportionately tracked into low academic ability classrooms (Epps, 1995). Another central problem with Black males succeeding in education revolves around their academic achievement—that is, they are reported to have the lowest high

school grade point average (GPA) and score poorly on standardized tests (Hale, 2001). Pre-college experiences largely impact African American male trajectories to college (Davis, 1994).

The disproportionate ways in which African American men and women enroll in college continue to baffle researchers and challenge higher education personnel to develop interventions for African American men (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Davis, 1994; Cuyjet, 2006). In this context, we study the experiences of eleven African American men enrolled in a public, urban historically black college and university (HBCU) to understand the role a pre-college program shaped persistence among this group. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate key factors that positively impact success for African Americans males attending a Black college.

Participation Trends

The number of Black men entering college increased during the late 1960s, and again during the 1980s and 1990s (Cuyjet, 2006; Hale, 2001; Roach, 2001; Ross, 1998). Currently, Black men continue to lag behind their White and other minority male counterparts with respect to college participation, retention, and degree completion rates (Polite & Davis, 1999). Black men account for less than 5% of the total enrollment of four-year higher education institutions in the U.S. (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004). This has caused major concern among scholars, administrators, policy makers, and academicians (Jackson & Moore, 2006). More alarming, Fleming (1984) and Schwartz and Washington (2002) explained that most African American men in higher education face significant challenges to attain their degrees, resulting in high attrition for Black males (Mortenson, 2001). Researchers have also noted that more Black men are in prison than are enrolled in America's postsecondary institutions (Davis, 1999; Green, 2001). Prothrow-Stith (1993)

stated, “approximately one in four African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole . . . only one in five is enrolled in a two- or four-year college program” (p. 163).

The purpose of this study was to investigate key factors that positively impact success for African Americans males attending a Black college. One of the factors, emanating from this study, which played a critical role in many of the students’ retention and persistence was their relationships with family members and friends. These relationships inspired, encouraged, and nurtured their achievement in persistence to graduation.

Literature Review

Academic failure for African American men begins early, impinging their ability to graduate high school (Davis, 2003; Garibaldi, 1992). The inability of Black men finishing school has an impact on their literacy and employment ability (Majors & Billson, 1992). Blake and Darling (1994) speculated that some African American men reach 10th grade or even graduate high school without sufficient literacy skills. These researchers argue that African American men are disinclined to invest in education because they are less likely to yield a favorable return on their investment compared to White men. Kunjufu (2001) supported this in arguing that African American men with bachelor’s degree will earn 72 % of what White men with comparable education earn. The lack of Black men participating and persisting in education results in rampant unemployment (Gadsden & Smith, 1994). Ascher (1991) explained “high unemployment forces these men into alternative economics . . . While many are employed irregularly or not at all, others make money by selling drugs or being involved in risky and illegal work” (p. 5).

Research has shown that academic failure for African American men begins early, hindering this group’s ability to graduate from high school (Davis, 2003; Osborne, 2001).

Researchers cite that an “acting white” phenomenon adds to scholar discussions about academic disengagement among African American men in college (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Further, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) asserted that some African American men have rejected the social identity of White America because of the subjugation and oppression that they experienced. Fordham and Ogbu contended that individuals who try to copy the behavior of White Americans face opposition from individuals who embrace the tenets of acting White. For example, peers embracing this philosophy discourage their friends from investing their time in activities that support academic success. Lundy (2003) has emphasized the applicability of this theory to African American men vis-à-vis African American women.

Majors and Billson (1992) maintained that some African American men view education as incongruous to their masculinity. They argued African American men have developed a cool pose, which is a coping mechanism used to become adjusted to their environment and to communicate masculinity. According to Majors and Billson:

Cool pose is a distinctive coping mechanism that serves to counter, at least in part, the dangers that black males encounter on a daily basis. As a performance, cool pose is designed to render the black male invisible and empower him . . . Cool pose is constructed from attitudes and actions that become firmly entrenched in the black male’s psyche as he adopts a façade to ward off the anxiety of second-class status By acting calm, emotionless, fearless aloof, and tough, the African American male strives to offset an externally imposed ‘zero’ image. Being cool shows both the dominant culture and the black male himself that he is strong and powerful. (p. 5)

Cool pose, Major and Billion suggested, influences black male disidentification with education as a means of social advancement. Elaborating further, some scholars (Davis, 2003; Hooks, 2004) have noted a tendency to discourage Black males from developing a

penchant for education because of its feminine association. In fact, Hooks stated “in some Black families . . . a boy who likes to read is perceived . . . as being a “sissy.” . . . As long as black people buy into the notion of patriarchal manhood . . . black boys who are cerebral . . . will risk being ridiculed (p. 40).

The effects of the African American males' reluctance to finish school manifest in high rates of illiteracy and unemployment (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). One consequence of the lack of education for Black men, according to Ascher (1991), is high unemployment, which “forces these men into alternative economics While many are employed irregularly or not at all, others make money by selling drugs or being involved in risky and illegal work” (p. 5). Freeman (1996) and Mason (1999) echoed this sentiment by asserting that the marginalized economic conditions of African American men breed income-oriented crimes, such as drug dealing.

Experience of Black Men in Higher Education

Studies examining the experiences of Black men in higher education have centered on examining their challenges at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) compared to their challenges at many historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Research has shown that Black men have better learning experiences at HBCUs (Allen, 1992; Cokley, 2003; Davis, 1994, Fleming, 1984; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006). For instance, Fleming reported that Black students on Black campuses are satisfied, engaged, and ill-adjusted to the campus. Roebuck and Murty (1993) stated that Black students persisted at much higher rates on Black campuses than on White campuses. Black students on White campuses had lower persistence rates between freshmen and senior year, had lower academic achievement levels, were less likely to enroll in an advanced degree program, and had lower post-graduation rates and earnings (Allen). Although a large body of research has shown that HBCUs provide an

optimal environment for Black men to develop (Allen; Fleming; Jones, 2001; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella), a significant number of these universities have problems with attrition for Black male students (Harper, 2006a; Palmer & Young, 2009; Roach, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

Educational success for Black men has social and economic implications. Numerous researchers (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1994; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002) have investigated the experiences of African Americans attending PWIs in comparison to HBCUs. However, many of these studies neglect to disaggregate the experiences of African Americans by gender and achievement (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). As such, a lack of current literature exist (e.g., Harper, 2006a; Ross, 1998) to document the experiences of African Americans men at HBCUs, particularly those students who enter higher education as academically unprepared and persist to graduation. Because higher education seems ill-equipped to retain African American male students, institutions must investigate factors contributing to the persistence of African American men, especially at Black colleges.

This study contributes to the literature by assessing factors that affect the academic success of Black men at an HBCU. Specifically, this study examined factors related to the success for Black male juniors or seniors who entered a mid-Atlantic four-year, state-supported HBCU as academically unprepared and persisted toward graduation. One of the factors that emerged from this study was the impact of these students' families and friends on their ability to successfully persist to graduation.

Methodology

The geographical location of this study was situated in an urban, metropolitan city. Specifically, we conducted this study at a public, doctoral research HBCU in a mid-Atlantic

state. According to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at this university, approximately 6,000 undergraduate and 400 graduate students were enrolled when data were collected. Approximately 91% of the undergraduates enrolled at the university during data collection were African American, and their White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American counterparts comprise 2.5%, 0.9%, 0.7%, 0.2% of the undergraduate student population, respectively.

Using in-depth interviews complemented by responses to a short open-ended questionnaire, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context (Lincoln, 2002). Thus, the study's epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln). To a large extent, grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bounded to the interview process, but occurred throughout the entire research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

Participants for this study were African American male juniors and seniors who entered a public HBCU through its remedial program and persisted to graduation. The remedial program serves as an intervention for academically under-prepared students who do not meet traditional academic standards (i.e., GPA, SAT scores, and ACT scores) for admission into the university. Students participating in the remedial program engage in a six-week intensive summer preparatory program to strengthen their academic skills in preparation for college.

Participant Recruitment.

The institution's Office of Institutional Research provided us with a list of 111 African American male students who entered the university through its remedial program during the summers of 2000 through 2003. Of the 111 students, we contacted 73 students, given that 38 had graduated. We e-mailed the 73 potential participants a poster about the study and asked that they contact us if interested in participating. We followed the e-mail with a letter to their on-campus and home residences. We also sought referrals from university staff members positioned to identify students fitting the study's criteria. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling techniques (i.e., asking those who joined the study to recommend others who might meet the criteria).

Although 73 students were contacted, few displayed an interest in participating. Many students responded by e-mail to indicate that their full-time jobs and other activities prevented them from participating in the study. While participants provided those reasons, we suspect that the disengagement of Black males at HBCUs hindered our recruitment. Along these lines, scholars identify a black male disengagement phenomena in HBCUs (Harper, 2006a; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Palmer & Young, 2009). With snowball sampling and help from university administrators, we recruited 11 African American men to participate. Data were collected during the fall semester of 2006. At that time, nine of eleven students were seniors (90 plus earned credits). Although two students were juniors, one was one credit short (89 credit hours) and the other was two credits short (88 credit hours) of senior status. We kept in contact with the participants to see how they fared at the university. All participants graduated in the spring semester of 2007. The participants were traditionally-aged college students and their average grade point average (GPA) was a 2.7. Table 1 provides details about the participants.

[Table 1]

Data Collection.

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a \$20 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed two consent forms and completed a brief demographic form. One consent form allowed participants to engage in the study and the other allowed researchers to contact the director of the remedial Program, who tracked the participants' academic progress since their matriculation into the university, to get information about their overall academic performance and cumulative grade point average. We collected this information separately after interviewing each participant. During interviews, we engaged participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution. Although we used a standard interview protocol during interviews, discussions often became conversational, which allowed the researchers and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Many of the questions were open-ended. Some examples of questions asked were: (a) What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success? (b) What were obstacles to your academic success? (c) How did you overcome those issues? (d) What has been your greatest challenge as an African American male at this institution? and (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge? We recorded observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants. Specifically, we conducted separate phone interviews with five participants, which ranged from 10 to 15 minutes. Follow up phone interviews were completed during the data collection phase of the study after

consulting field notes and listening to participants' audiotapes. We conducted these interviews to ask participants to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews.

Data Analyses

We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at “all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of codes” (p. 44). Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS-ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line by line, to identify themes. The line by line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin). This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation—which is when the data becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants' responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants' voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and trustworthiness.

We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so others interested can draw their own conclusions from the data. Moreover, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants' challenges at the institution.

To ensure the data's trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could check for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006). Lastly, we used feedback from three peer-debriefers, who were well versed in-depth interview methods and active researchers on African American male and HBCUs, to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the researchers in a series of on going discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants' experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al.).

Findings

The study has identified unique student support networks not frequently addressed in the literature. The results of this revealed that students' family supported students in various capacities—indirectly and directly. Parents, grandparents, brothers, and other members of one's family circle encouraged, nourished, and inspired students to be successful. Friends were also apart of this unique student supportive network. Participants reported that their friends encouraged their persistence by displaying concern for their success, motivating them to persist, acting as an authority figure, and making academic success cool by embracing achievement as a perquisite for conformity. They also provided a special place for students to vent their frustrations, be themselves, and be invigorated to work toward their goals.

Family Support: Parent Emphasizes Education to Succeed

The importance of family support emerged as a salient aspect to student success. Family supported students in various ways. Some participants explained how various family members motivated them to persist. James, who is a business major, explained how his mother has impressed upon him the importance of an education. Her message about education promoted James to take his education more seriously than he had in the past.

My mother is so intense with education. She's been beating college in my head since I was two. I think after [hearing] her saying, 'If you graduate from college with that GPA [grade point average], you're not going to get a job.' So . . . after hearing that so much, I think one day it just really clicked. And I was like, 'let me get my act together.' [After getting that] reinforcement from my mother, [I went into my] sophomore year with a new attitude

James indicated that his mother did more than indoctrinate him with how central an education was to his future plans, she also practiced what she preached by demonstrating an unrelenting thirst for education. For example, James' mother has attained one bachelor's and two master's. By James' mother displaying a penchant for education, he realized that an education was important. James, who was a senior during the time of data collection, has since graduated with a 2.9 GPA. Ultimately, he plans to attain his doctoral degree.

Continuing, James said:

My mother was my mother, my father, my advisor. She was everything. My mother went to school when I was young. I saw her still going on, that's how I saw how important education was. She graduated, got her bachelor's degree, went back to get her master's degree, went back to get another master's degree.

Mother's Fortitude Becomes Students' Motivation

Simmons, a sociology major, also discussed how his mother motivated him to succeed. She did not support Simmons in the formal sense by sharing advice, knowledge, time, or financial resources, but watching his mother struggle to provide for him and his siblings, Simmons was motivated to do well in school. While Simmons' mother did not have the level of education as James' mother, she was strong and determined to raise her children on her own. This fortitude served as the impetus for Simmons to stay focused on completing his baccalaureate degree. He stated, "My mother is a very strong woman. There are seven of us in our family. My father died when I was one, so she raised all of us by herself. So every time I needed help with something, she [might not] knew the work, but it's . . . the advice she gave me, and it motivated me to [succeed]." Simmons indicated oftentimes when he was faced with an adverse situation or what seemed like an insurmountable obstacle, he encouraged himself to persevere by thinking of his mother. He would say to himself, "I'm gonna do good for you ma. I love you." This mantra invigorated and inspired him to put his best foot forward.

Simmons also indicated that his mother would encourage him to persist toward attaining his degree by trying to help him see the full implications of what a college degree meant for his future. Specifically, Simmons said:

[my mother would say] read my Bible, pray.' [She would tell me] that being in the schools - you might not like it, but in the end, it's going to be very beneficial to me.

So just . . . positive stuff [she would tell me] and [it would] make me focus.

Simmons' motivation and persistence seems to have paid off academically, as his cumulative GPA was a 3.1. Like James, he aspires to continue his education beyond the baccalaureate degree. Other participants agreed with James and Simmons' sentiments about how their

mothers influenced their persistence. For example, Omar, who has a learning disability, indicated that his mother, who is a pediatrician, encouraged his persistence by reminding him to be appreciative of his uniqueness and experiences. Omar said: “my mother inspired me to persist. My mother always told me there’s always somebody who has it better than you and there’s always somebody who has it worse than you, so don’t feel sorry for yourself. Omar continued by stating that his mother emphasized hard work and discipline as qualities to surmount barriers. Omar said: “despite my disability, my mother enforced upon me hard work and determination to overcome any obstacle. She is one of my greatest role models.”

Samuel also spoke of how parents motivated him to succeed. While James, Simmons, and Omar talked about one parent positively impacting their academic success, Samuel, who lived off campus with his parents, both of whom are college educated, explained that they provide encouragement and support system. Perhaps more importantly, his parents helped him to realize that his successes or failures lies in the palm of his hand by pointing out that he could do anything he put his mind to it. Samuel stated:

I can honestly say my mom and my dad [encouraged me to achieve]. I don’t stay on campus so, when I go home, I always have an encouraging [words] - pat on my back- [letting me know] I can do it. They both graduated from college, and it’s not that they pushed me to do [to achieve success in college, but [they remind] me that I can achieve anything I put my mind to. So my mom and my dad has been that the [support system].

While many participants indicated a parental figure and how they supported, guided, and inspired their academic success, Anderson, a theater major, explained that his brother, Harry, who graduated from the university before Anderson attended the school, was instrumental

to success. Harry provided some advice, which positively impact his academic success and influence his social integration into the campus. Anderson stated:

[As a result of] my brother, I consider myself a lucky student [because I knew] what to do and what not to do. See, he had no example when he came to school he made all the mistakes and corrected them, and made everything right. When I came in, I knew what not to do – I didn't have to make the mistakes that he made, and so I knew where to go, where not to go. 'Don't go to parties on the weekday [because] you won't be able to go to class the next morning.'

Extended Family or Family Circles are Viable Factors in Students' Persistence

While some participants did not have a nuclear family, the support that they received was not compromised. The participants' extended family helped to mitigate this perceived loss of support and guidance. For example, some participants, such as Wilson indicated his mother and grandmother were indispensable to his academic achievement. For example, Wilson's mom and grandmother gave him advice, which was fruitful to his persistence and to overcoming obstacles. Specifically, he said:

When I came to college, [my mom and grandmother] told me to 'aim for the top, because the bottom is overcrowded.' Ever since [they] said that, I've been trying to aim for the top, you know, trying to be away from the bottom.

Lawrence, whose parents died in car accident, echoed Wilson's sentiment about his grandparents' importance to academic success.

I went through a situation in my life where I had to fend for myself. A lot of things were not available to me. So, it is an obligation for me to do well. I had no choice in [terms] of pushing and applying myself for the good of my well-being. My grandfather, [though] he wasn't academically successful, he served as a great

motivational factor by pushing and encouraging me to press when I did not feel like it.

Douglass, another participant, explained that family was a significant factor in his success. He explained

I look [to] family members . . . some of them have tried to branch off and have their own personal businesses. Some have incorporated companies for years and have climbed all the way up the corporate ladder, and made it to pretty good positions . . . One of my uncles got his master's degree at 42 . . . By looking at my family, I am inspired to excel.

While Chris' motivation stems from his family, unlike the other participants, his motivation for succeeding academically emanated from a desire to be able to financially provide for his family. He expressed, "My father is a maintenance worker, and my mother, she used to work, now she is injured. She could still walk but she has back pain. I want to help them out. Once I graduate from school, I want to definitely make them proud. I want to leave school with a good GPA. . . . I want to buy my father a car." He added, "My uncle who has diabetes, I also want to help him out . . . and my two sisters, they've got into college. I also want to help them out as well."

Aside from family having direct or indirect impact on student persistence, friends were another important component of students' social network. Participants reported that their friends encouraged their persistence by displaying concern for their success, motivating them to persist, acting as an authority figure, and making academic success cool by embracing achievement as a prerequisite for conformity. They also provided a special place for students to vent their frustrations, be themselves, and be invigorated to work toward their goals. For example, James cited his peers as a variable that positively affected his

success. He explained that because most of his friends are serious and driven. Their assiduous mentality fueled his desire to do well:

Peer group is definitely [important] 'cause most of my friends . . . they have a goal there, they're ambitious, they have . . . that drive. So, I try to keep people like that close to me and I think that's how that's changing me, because I kind of emulated them in a way, it's kind of made me become more focused." He elaborated, "If I didn't surround myself with people who are hard working, intelligent, and ambitious, I think it would be difficult because I believe that you feed off your friends. Who you choose as friends is very important.

Anderson explained how creating a positive peer circle influenced his diligence and tenacity. He also talked about how his group of peers created an environment where he feels pressured to do well.

If you got a whole bunch of friends pressuring you to do well, you don't really have a choice if you want to stay with that group to do well, and peer pressure might sound very elementary but it's true. I don't care how old you get, it's very true. I was pressured into doing well by myself through others.

In a sense, his circle of peers made succeeding popular. If Anderson is going to maintain his sense of coolness then he has to work hard to get good grades.

Many participants commented on how their peer groups encouraged and motivated them to succeed academically. Specifically, Simmons explained that peers must be unwavering in their pursuit to push their friends when they are floundering academically. In such cases, friends must exhibit a sense of dedication and take on the personality of an authority figure to keep their peers on the track of success.

One of my good friends, he had like a 0.7 [GPA] [his first semester]. In his situation . . . if somebody is down like that, [peers] have to encouraging them Even though they might be of age, you [have to be a] father [figure] like, ‘Did you do homework? Do you have homework?’ By [talking to him], the next semester he got a 2.5 [GPA].

Omar supported Simmons’ assertion of peers and persistence. In particular, Omar noted that many times he got discouraged when some of his peers progressed academically and he had not. His friends kept his spirits alive. By supporting him, they helped maintain his desire for academic prominence.

I found two of my best friends through the pre-college program . . . we forged a friendship, and we just encourage each other, like don’t give up. I mean, it’s the good support system that Black men need.” He added, “Some of [my] buddies . . . really challenged me to not be discouraged [when some of [my friends] are graduating early [and I’m] still stuck in that one class.

Douglass emphasized how his friends motivated him to work to his potential.

Because of his friends, Douglass is challenged to work hard to maintain his grades.

Having friends that have the same common goals as I do inspire me to push myself to go even farther, so ‘cause they all have personal achievements, and it’s not a competition thing. It’s all about uplifting one another, and pretty much have all your goals set.

Chris summed up the importance of peers and academic success. He stated that peers provide a support system, which enabled him to relieve stress in a healthy manner, enjoy good times, and have another option of support and empathy. In short, “Chris’ friends are his heart and ears.”

They help you stay in school. They give you another reason to stay in school, you know, cause a lot of people they commit suicide 'cause of stress, [and because] nobody loves them. I didn't realize how important friends are. Friends are important, 'cause you're going to need their support.

Chris's statement is critical because while peers may enhance success in college, they also make the experience in college memorable and enjoyable. They provide a special place for students to vent their frustrations, be themselves, and invigorated to work toward their goals.

The voices of these students illustrate the vitality of peers to academic achievement. The participants of the study reported that their friends encouraged their persistence by displaying concern for their academic success, motivating them to persist, acting as authority figures, and making academic success cool by embracing academic achievement as a perquisite for conformity. One could only surmise that these students' academic success might have been hampered had their peers not been there to offer support, encourage, and guidance.

Discussion

This study's finding of family relationships as a factor in retention and persistence for African American males is consistent with earlier research (Herndon & Hirt 2004; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Moore, 2001; Taylor, Hinton, & Wilson, 1995). Herndon and Hirt indicated that family support African American students by providing financial and moral support. Moreover, Moore asserted that both European and African American students tend to rely on their family for guidance, encouragement, and assurance regarding college success.

The link between peer interaction and academic success noted in our findings is also consistent with earlier research (Astin, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2006b; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Thomas 2000). Davis, Jenkins, Hunt, and Page (2002), authors of *The Pact*, attributed their cohesive relationships with each other as helping to successfully navigate medical and dental school. Furthermore Astin (1993) stated “student interaction with peers can positively influence overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, analytical and problem-solving skills, and self-esteem” (p. 45). Astin (1999) also found that the greatest source of influence on cognitive and affective domains is the student’s peer group. Additionally, research from Thomas suggested, “those students with a proportion of ties outside of their peer group perform better academically and are more likely to persist” (p. 609). He explained that a portfolio of relationships improves persistence by providing access to academic and social resources. At the HBCU in this study, peers provided a social network for students to access for support, encouragement, and motivation.

While the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) impinge on the extent that universities are able to work collaboratively with parents or guardians to promote student success, universities should work within the legal parameters to involve parents or families in their child’s educational success. For examples, many universities have developed newsletters that are distributed to the students’ family to inform them of key events occurring on campus. Furthermore, some universities have family day, which illustrate that those institutions recognize that student’s families are an important aspect of their students’ lives and educational goals. Additionally, student affairs practitioners should walk the delicate line developing programs that create the feasibility of student parent or family interaction

while ensuring that students mature psychologically, emotionally, and cognitively as young adults.

Although peers are important to academic success, many colleges or student affairs practitioners do not seem proactive in promoting the interrelatedness between the two variables. While scholars have devoted attention to this topic, it warrants greater examination and applicability to affect student success. For example, student affairs practitioners might encourage students to make healthy choices in selecting peers. Students might be encouraged to select friends based on their convictions. Keeping in mind the adage, “Birds of a feather flock together,” student affairs practitioners might also impress upon students that their friends are a reflection of them.

Granted, while colleges and student affairs practitioners cannot dictate who students should befriend, they may try to impress upon students the interrelatedness of peers and academic achievement. One of the ways that college or student conscious practitioners can do this is through the hidden curriculum. Giroux (1983) defines the hidden curriculum learning not openly acknowledged by the learners. By this method, university administrators might decorate various aspects of the campus students most frequent to explain the importance of peer interaction and academic success. Faculty might also rely on more collaborative learning to help students strengthen their peer portfolio and residence hall staff might explore creative ways to help students foster supportive relationships with other members of the campus community.

Conclusion

Educational attainment has consequences for social mobility, future earning opportunities, and marketability. Although more Black males are entering colleges, many universities are fraught with difficulties in retaining African American males. Furthermore,

despite the marginal increase in the number of Black males in higher education, they continue to lag behind their female counterparts. The problems of retaining Black males have many social and economic implications. This article discussed a study on factors of academic success for African American men who entered a Black college as academically unprepared and persisted to graduation. Participants indicated that family supported them in various ways. They encouraged, nourished, and inspired students to work hard to be successful. Participants also reported that their friends encouraged their persistence by displaying concern for their success, motivating them to persist, acting as an authority figure, and making academic success cool by embracing achievement as a requisite for conformity. They also provided a special place for students to vent their frustrations, be themselves, and be invigorated to work toward their goals. We hope that student affairs practitioners will find these factors helpful to promote student success and help students to get the most out of college.

Table 1.

Description of Sample

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Classification	Major	GPA
James	20	Senior	Business	2.9
Anderson	21	Junior	Theater	2.5
Simmons	21	Senior	Sociology	3.1
Omar	21	Senior	Business	3.5
Lawrence	21	Senior	Sociology	3.0
Samuel	21	Senior	Sociology	2.7
Wilson	21	Senior	Physical Therapy	2.6
Douglass	20	Senior	Business	2.5
Howard	22	Senior	Business	2.9
Chris	21	Junior	Industrial Engineering	2.7
Walter	22	Senior	Business	2.5

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