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Exploring Challenges That Threaten to Impede the Academic Success of Academically Underprepared Black Males at an HBCU

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Historically, education has played a central role in the lives of Blacks. Although Blacks continue their penchant for education, Black males have not fared as well in the educational pipeline. Data for this study emerged from a qualitative investigation of factors that promote success for academically underprepared Black males at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). Although all of the participants persisted to graduation, the participants discussed challenges that threatened to impede their academic success. This article discusses those challenges and outlines recommendations for the ways in which colleges and universities can work more effectively toward preventing attrition for Black males in higher education, particularly at HBCUs.

Blacks have a long history of valuing education (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Freeman, 2005). Although Blacks continue to demonstrate a desire for education, enrollment and completion rates among Black males in higher education are dismal compared to other groups, most notably their female counterparts (Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008). According to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2007), females comprise more than half of postsecondary enrollment across all racial/ethnic groups when compared to their same-race peers; however, the gender gap is most pronounced between Black males and females, and it continues to

widen. For example, in 2004, the postsecondary enrollment gender gap between Blacks reached 28.6%, compared to a gap of just 8.7% in 1976 (NCES). Over the same time period, the gender gap was substantially smaller among other racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, among White, Asian, and Hispanic males and females, the gender gap in college enrollment was 11.8%, 7.5%, and 17.1% in 2004, and 4.7%, 8.6%, and 7.6% in 1976, respectively (NCES).

Across all racial/ethnic groups, more progress has been made by women earning postsecondary degrees when compared to men. The difference between men and women is especially pronounced among Blacks, but to a lesser degree among Asians/Pacific Islanders and Whites (NCES, 2007). In 2004, Black females received twice as many associates, bachelors, and masters degrees than did their male counterparts. Meanwhile, the share of degree holders among Asian/Pacific Islander and White females were awarded more evenly; the difference between men and women were 10% and 16%, respectively, during the same year.

Researchers have offered some perspectives to explain the lack of progress in education for Black males. One perspective is the theory of “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986), who initially introduced this theory, explained

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that Blacks have formed an oppositional culture stemming from the oppression, enslavement, and discrimination they have experienced in America. Not only does this oppositional culture act as a bulwark between Blacks and White America, it also provokes Blacks to persuade their same-race peers to devalue academic success because of its association with “acting White.” According to Lundy (2003), Blacks who subscribe to the mindset of “acting White” view academically inclined Blacks as abandoning their Black cultural identity and rejecting their own cultural norms.

Several researchers have raised criticism about “acting White” among Blacks (Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Harper, 2006a; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). According to Tyson et al., Black students are no less engaged in school than are their White peers. Cook and Ludwig argued that Blacks have a desire to attend college, spend an equal amount of time on homework, and have similar rates of absenteeism compared to their White counterparts from the same socio-economic class. Notwithstanding the criticism, some support the theory in accounting for the lack of progress in educational outcomes among Blacks in general (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008) and Black males in particular (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; hooks, 2004; Lundy, 2003, 2005).

Davis (2003) explained that Black males tend to perform poorly academically because they perceive schooling as incongruent with their masculinity. Majors and Billison (1992) agreed with Davis’s assertion. They argued that Black males have developed a cool pose—that is, a coping mechanism used to become acclimated to their environment and to communicate masculinity. According to Majors and Billison, this cool pose propels Black men to become indifferent toward education.

Other researchers (Robinson, 2000; West, 2001) explained that discrimination is another

factor hindering Black males from advancing through the educational pipeline. Specifically, Hale (2001) noted that by sending Blacks to inferior schools, resulting in inferior skills, White America maintains the oppression of Blacks. Hale believed that under the guise of freedom and opportunity, Blacks are blamed for their own plight. She noted, however, that racism is actually the culprit preventing Blacks from achieving educational parity with their White counterparts.

The educational challenges of Blacks have caused major concern among stakeholders in higher education (Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008). From this concern emerged a number of studies investigating the experiences of Black males in higher education. The purpose of this article is to extend this line of inquiry by discussing challenges (e.g., lack of financial support, pride and its impact on seeking support, and problems occurring in the home or communities and their implications on academic success) that had the potential to impede Black males at an HBCU from achieving academic success. This study is important because it informs the ways in which educational institutions shape (or reshape) policies and practices to minimize Black male student attrition in higher education, particularly at HBCUs. To contextualize the experiences of Black males, this article will provide an overview of their experiences throughout the educational pipeline, focusing primarily on their experiences in K–12, which is generally where the challenges Black males encounter begin to emerge.

BACKGROUND OF BLACK MALES IN THE EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE

The social science literature is replete with the bleak conditions and experiences of Black males in education (Davis, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Noguera, 2003;

Strayhorn, 2008). These studies discuss the dismal conditions for Black males in society and highlight their poor educational outcomes. Researchers have noted that terms such as endangered, uneducable, dysfunctional, and dangerous are often used to characterize Black males (Majors & Billison, 1992; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Strayhorn).

Research has shown that academic problems hindering the educational progress of Black males begin early, impinging their ability to complete high school (Davis, 2003; Epps, 1995; Howard-Hamilton, 1997). In elementary and secondary education, teachers and counselors are far more likely to impose negative expectations upon Black males as it relates to attending college than upon their White counterparts (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Epps; Jones, 2001; Ogbu, 2003). Black males are also disproportionately disciplined, more apt to face expulsions, and suspended longer and more frequently than are White students (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billison, 1992; Polite & Davis, 1999).

Black males are far more likely to be underrepresented in gifted education programs or advanced placement courses (Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008) and are overwhelmingly concentrated in special education (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003). Many Black males are disproportionately tracked into low academic ability classrooms (Epps, 1995; Jones, 2001). Many of the aforementioned issues impinge upon Black males' ability to finish school, resulting in high rates of illiteracy and unemployment (Hale, 2001; Majors & Billison, 1992). Black males with lower educational attainment are predisposed to inferior employment prospects, low wages, and poor health and are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Harvey, 2008).

The educational problems that Black males experience in elementary and secondary

schools are not endemic to the K–12 setting. Similar trends can be noted in postsecondary education. Although the number of Black males entering higher education increased during the late 1960s and again during the 1980s and 1990s (Noguera, 2003), Black males continue to lag behind their female and White male counterparts with respect to college participation, retention, and degree completion rates (Harper, 2006b; Strayhorn, 2008). The plethora of issues impinging college access and success spillover over to increased recidivism. According to researchers (Green, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008), the number of Black males in prison exceeds those in postsecondary institutions. A report by the Pew Charitable Trusts (2008) claims one in nine Black males between the ages of 24 and 34 is in jail. Green also noted that in 2000, there were 188,550 more Black men incarcerated than enrolled in institutions of higher education.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Although studies have investigated the experiences of Blacks in higher education, many of these studies (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004; Harper, 2005, 2006a, 2008) have examined academic success in relation to high-achieving Black college students, as opposed to delineating challenges to the success of underprepared Black college students. Furthermore, although the experiences of Blacks at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are prevalent in the literature (Bonner & Bailey; Brown, 2006; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, 2002; Griffin, 2006; Guiffrida, 2004; Harper, 2005, 2006a, 2008; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008), a scarcity of contemporary research explains the experiences of Blacks at HBCUs (e.g., Fries-Britt, 2004;

Harper, 2006c; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Ross, 1998), specifically, for academically underprepared Black male collegians (Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Data from the current study emerged from a qualitative investigation that focused on factors that promote academic success for Black males who entered an HBCU as academically underprepared and persisted to graduation. The central question that guided this research was: What factors do academically underprepared Black males, who entered an HBCU through its remedial program and persisted to graduation, attribute to their success? One of the themes that emerged from this study was the challenges to the participants' academic success. Although the participants graduated, research has shown that the challenges the participants described are traditional harbingers of attrition (Charles, Dinwiddie, & Massey, 2004; Guiffreda, 2004; hooks, 2004; Hu & St. John, 2001; Majors & Billison, 1992; Perna, 2006; St. John, 2003). Some of the factors that promoted the participants' success were social capital in the institutional community (Palmer & Gasman, 2008) non-cognitive factors coupled with institutional support agents (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008), student involvement in campus activities (Palmer & Young, 2009), and family support and involvement (Palmer & Davis, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

We conducted this study at a public, doctoral research HBCU in a mid-Atlantic state. 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 bound to the interview process but occurred throughout the entire research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000).

Participants

Participants for this study consisted of Black 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 underprepared students who do not meet traditional academic standards (i.e., grade point average, SAT scores, and ACT scores) for admission into the university. Students participating in the remedial program engage in a 6-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 Black 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 up the e-mail with a letter to their on-campus and home residences. As an incentive, we offered participants a \$20 gift certificate for participating. We also sought the help of staff members at the university whom we believed knew students fitting the study's criteria. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling (i.e., asking those who

TABLE 1.
Description of Sample

Participants (pseudonym)	Age	Classification	Major	GPA
James	20	Senior	Business	2.9
Anderson	21	Junior	Theater	2.5
Simmons	21	Senior	Business	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
Douglas	20	Senior	Business	2.5
Howard	22	Senior	Business	2.9
Chris	21	Junior	Industrial Engineering	2.7
Walter	22	Senior	Business	2.5

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. Even though participants provided those reasons, we suspected that the disengagement of Black males at HBCUs hindered our recruitment (Harper, 2006c; Harper et al., 2004; Palmer & Young, 2009). With snowball sampling and help from university administrators, we recruited 11 Black men to participate. Data were collected during the fall semester of 2006. At that time, 9 of 11 students were seniors (90 plus earned credits). Although two students were juniors, one was 1 credit short (89 credit hours) and the other was 2 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 was 2.7. Table 1 provides details about the participants.

Data Collection

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. During the interviews, we created an open environment in which we shared experiences with the participants that were relevant to the topic of discussion (Denzin, 1989). Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form and a short open-ended questionnaire to help us understand factors germane to their success. Specifically, the questionnaire asked open-ended questions about factors that played a role in the participants' success. These questions were identical to the questions asked during the interviews to establish depth and understand contextual factors. With the participants' consent, we also obtained information about their grades and grade point average from the director of the remedial program, who had tracked the participants'

academic progress since their matriculation into the university. During these interviews, we engaged participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution. 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 a African American male at this institution? and (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge? Additional questions are included in the appendix. We recorded observations regarding how the participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants to ask them to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews. We audio-taped and transcribed all interviews.

Researchers' Positionality. For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). This research was conducted by 3 Black males; 2 were affiliated with an HBCU and 1 was affiliated with a PWI when the data were collected. We were interested in this topic because of our experiences as being classified as academically underprepared upon entering higher education. We were particularly motivated to engage this topic because much of the recent literature on Black males has focused on high-achieving males. As such, we wanted to provide a voice for Black males who persisted against the odds. Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as Black males who attended, were affiliated with, and/or conducted research on HBCUs, created a unique lens and position to understand the contemporary experiences of Black male

students in a familiar context.

As researchers of the same race and gender of participants, we believe an increased level of trust and comfort was established immediately with participants. Another factor we believe facilitated the establishment of trust was our self-disclosure during the interviews. We also believe that this trust motivated participants to provide further depth regarding their experiences on campus. Research has shown that members of marginalized groups, to some extent, have an insider advantage of soliciting more detailed, candid responses (Baca Zinn, 1979).

Data Analyses

Tenets of grounded theory were incorporated into the data analysis process. According to Charmaz (2000), "Grounded theory methods specify analytic strategies, not data collection" (p. 514). We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (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 become redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories but also to understand the relationships among them. Although several themes emerged from our original investigation, in this article we discuss one of the themes—the challenges to participants' success. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants' responses verbatim to paint a picture of their 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 (Jones et al., 2006). Finally, we used feedback from three peer debriefers who were well versed in in-depth interview methods. These debriefers provided their own interpretations of the themes from the data to ensure creditability (Jones et al.).

FINDINGS

In this section, we summarize the three major themes that emerged from the interviews. The categories included: (a) financial support—participants discussed the lack of financial support and its challenges to academic success; (b) pride vs. need—participants explained the impact of pride on provoking some participants and their peers not to seek support from campus support services; and (c) the inevitable

disconnection—some participants explained the relationship between situations in their homes and communities as well as those of their peers and academic success. In the following section, we delineate each theme and present quotes from participants to preserve the essential aspects of their experiences.

Financial Support: A Major Barrier to Persistence

Seven of the 11 participants noted that the lack of financial support inhibited persistence. Specifically, Simmons, a 21-year-old football player and business major, stated that a lack of money is a major impediment to persistence. He explained that when students did not meet fiscal deadlines set by the university, their schedules were dropped and professors prohibited students from returning to class. He indicated that “financial resource[s] . . . for [many] people . . . is the reason they stop school. And . . . if you don't have your money by a certain date, the school tends to drop your schedule.”

Samuel, a 21-year-old sociology major from the suburbs, highlighted the importance of financial assistance to persistence. Specifically, he explained that because he was the oldest sibling and his parents were supporting his younger siblings' college education, he felt pressured to work. In many cases, he was unable to come up with the money, so he relied on financial aid. However, sometimes he experienced problems with financial aid, which added to the vexing situation of searching for college funding. He expressed that:

It seems like as me being the oldest . . . my parents are looking for me to work. . . . Sometimes I cannot come up [with the money] so I try to get loans, and my FASFA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] seems like it don't want to go through, which is frustrating . . . and makes me want to forget about school.

Howard, a 22-year-old business major from the city, echoed the impact that the lack of financial resources had on persistence. Surprisingly, he noted being frustrated with the amount of loans he took out to support his education, but he realized that he was investing in his future. In this sense, Howard understood the importance of delayed gratification. He seemed to value the mentality of “sacrificing today for a better tomorrow.” Specifically, he shared:

Financial aid, oh my goodness! I think I owe about maybe \$30,000 worth of loans, and that’s a lot of money. That’s money I do not want to pay back. [However] I [realized] if I want to be successful, I am going to take out these loans. I have to pay them back, but that’s just a part of life. When I say “lack of money” . . . that’s one reason . . . people dropped out.

Anderson, a 21-year-old theater major from the suburbs, explained the implications of working full time and going to school full time. He stated that many students do not perform well in school because they try to work full time while attending classes full-time. Although Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) encouraged employment, they suggested that students work on campus for no more than 20 hours per week. Hours beyond that would be detrimental to success. Walter, a 22-year-old business major from the city, expressed a similar concern about working and academic success. He stated:

More likely than not if you don’t have the money to stay here—if you’re working full time and going to school full time, one of those things you can’t do full time—you’re killing yourself if you’re doing both full time. You got to work full time because if you don’t, the hours will show and you won’t get paid as much. But you can’t go to school full time because your grades will show if you’re not [fully] dedicated.

Although Walter explained that working has a detrimental impact on students’ success, Chris, a 21-year-old engineering major from the city, said that some Blacks feel compelled to work to supplement their financial aid and provide for their educational expenses.

There are some students who work part time, and some that work full time and go to school. Working is a big factor in not being successful. . . . [Working] is the only way that many students can have money to supplement their financial aid. . . . I was working and going to school at the same time. Eventually, I had to give one of them up. . . . I shortened my work hours and increased my class load [per semester] so I could graduate early.

Douglass, a 21-year-old business major from the suburbs, stated that, even when students have the appropriate financial resources, some Blacks do not manage their money appropriately. Instead of paying tuition and other college expenses, they invest their finances in material items, such as clothes. Specifically, he explained:

The money is there. The question is what you are doing with it. Some people prefer to invest in material things—a car or clothes. . . . So spending \$200 on a pair of sneakers, or a pair of boots, or a pair of jeans, to me . . . is nonsense, because that [could be \$200] towards a book, or a bill, or something.

Pride vs. Need: The Reluctance of Black Men to Seek Support

Five of the 11 participants commented that generally Black men are hesitant to seek support for academic and social issues. Omar, a 21-year-old business major from a small town, provided some reasons precluding Black men from seeking support. He noted that some Black men have a difficult time expressing their need for support because, in many cases, they

are “the man of their household.” As such, they are accustomed to taking care of themselves and, in some cases, their families. When they come to college, it is difficult for them to rid themselves of this mentality. Consequently, they try to rely on their inner strength to solve the problems while they suffer silently. Omar noted:

One of the things I’ve learned about most Black men is that we don’t like to communicate what we’re going through. We like to think that, “Oh it’s all me. I ain’t got to tell nobody what I’m going through.” But actually, every man goes through what we go through. We just go through it in our own unique way.

Omar also shared:

Sometimes . . . certain African American men come from home situations where they had to take on the role of the man, the father, the big brother. They had to do everything. So when they come to the [institution], they feel like, “I ain’t got to listen to you,” “I’m the man. I run my momma’s house,” “I had to support my mother and my brothers, and my sisters.” Some African American men, because of their home situations, come with this attitude because they feel like they had to take care of themselves.

Although Omar was aware that some Black men find it difficult to seek support from external networks, he realized that Black men must reach a point in their maturity when asking for support is not a cumbersome task. He offered:

Another thing we have to [do] is humbling ourselves—it is just admitting I need help, and that is personally one of my issues I do not like doing. I do not like asking for help unless you could read me. And I don’t think that many people can. But one of the things I think African American men need to do is ask for help.

Anderson indicated the importance of Black men seeking support and working collectively to mitigate their problems. He also indicated that pride has precluded Black men from asking for assistance:

I mean as long as we communicate, we’ll grow. . . . That is one of the things African American men need to do is admit, “Let’s work together, even though I don’t want to do it, I’ll humble myself. I’ll swallow my pride and say can we work together,” because that is the best way to grow as a team.

Samuel and Simmons echoed the impact of pride and its implications for preventing Black men from being receptive to help. Simmons in particular explained that Black men should not let their pride hinder them from using the support services on campus. He also indicated that Black men must be cognizant of their weaknesses and seek help accordingly:

Us as African American men . . . we got a lot of pride . . . sometimes [that] pride gets in your way and it hurts you sometimes. You got to look yourself in the mirror and tell yourself if it’s a problem, you need to fix it, so pride takes over but you know what your weaknesses are.

James, a 20-year-old business major from the suburbs, supported the reluctance of some Black men to not seek support. He used a personal reference to point out the consequence of what could happen by not being proactive in using the campus support services. He noted: “Like one semester, I did not want to get help for my math class. Instead of saying ‘I need some help.’ . . . I waited until the last minute . . . [the end of the semester] and I failed the course.”

The Inevitable Disconnection: Home Environment and Academic Success

The interconnectedness between the partici-

pants' homes and neighborhood was also noted as a challenge to their academic success. Specifically, 5 of the 11 participants discussed problems in their home or community and their impact on success. Howard explained that circumstances in student's homes or communities had implications for success in college. He noted specifically that when he had problems at home he was not able to sleep at night. However, he asserted that students have to reach a point in their lives when they realize that problems at home are out of their control. He remarked:

I think a lot of that has to do with their personal lives. I think personal life influences everything . . . when I have problems at home. I have problems sleeping at night when I have problems at home . . . for me that [is] the number one reason African American males may not do well academically.

He added, however, "You have to get to a point in your life when you realize that things at home, you cannot really do anything about it if you are not there."

Participants such as Douglass and Omar supported the influence that students' homes or communities had on their success. Specifically, Omar explained that some students who attend the university where the study was conducted come from neighborhoods where violence is inescapable. Some students even have to deal with the pressure of maintaining their grades while worrying about the location and condition of a family member addicted to drugs. Specifically, he broached:

A lot of my friends come from unsafe neighborhoods. . . . It is hard to study if people are upstairs using drugs in the house where you live. It is hard to study if somebody gets shot outside every other night or if you worried about, "Is my mother coming home? Do I have to go look for my mother in the crack house?"

Other students supported the relationship between their homes or communities and success in college. Walter candidly explained how the murder of a relative, in the city where he lived before moving to the city where the institution is located, impacted his academic success. He remarked:

During my sophomore year, my cousin from the Bronx was shot dead. I couldn't focus on anything . . . school was the last thing on my mind. I got through that year with no support . . . no counseling or nothing. My grades suffered, but somehow I made it through the school year.

Similarly, Douglass noted that a situation in his home environment threatened his academic success at the university. This situation is not indicative of situations that most participants described. He noted:

A few semesters ago, my mom got sick. . . . I had to be there for her and my family. I took [a semester] off to help my family out . . . you know, working and stuff until things got better.

DISCUSSION

This study discussed challenges to the retention and persistence for Black males who entered an HBCU as academically underprepared and persisted to graduation. The aspects that the participants discussed as challenges are characterized by many researchers as predictors of attrition. Some participants noted the impact that the lack of financial resources had on their pursuit to graduate. In many cases, this served as the impetus for some to work full time while attending classes full time. This finding is not unusual given the institutional context in which this study was situated. Research has shown that many public HBCUs admit students who rely heavily on financial aid to finance their education (Allen & Jewel, 2002;

Allen et al., 2007). Although public HBCUs generally have lower tuition than do private HBCUs or their White counterparts, many, including the institution in the current study, have increased their tuition to compensate for declining state support. This, of course, has exacerbated students' inability to pay for their education. Researchers (e.g., Hu & St. John, 2001; Perna, 2006; St. John, 2003; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter 2005; Titus, 2006) have noted a relationship between inadequate financial support and attrition. Specifically, Jones (2001) stated, "The contribution to the successful persistence and graduation of African American students of adequate amounts and types of financial aid cannot be overly stressed. Financial aid is often the primary consideration in making the decision to continue or leave" (p. 9).

Some participants also noted how pride impeded their peers' ability to access campus resources (e.g., tutorial service, academic

advising, talking with professors). Majors and Billison (1992) characterized pride that Black males display as "cool pose,"—that is, a facade used to display confidence and masculinity (p. 8). Scholars (e.g., Majors & Billison; hooks, 2004) noted that Black males' sense of cool pose impinges upon their ability to be academically successful. Given the characterization in the literature on the impact that HBCUs have on Black males, one would think that Black males would be more likely to access campus support services. Historically, research has shown that Black males at HBCUs are more empowered, assertive, and competitive—outperforming their female counterparts (Fleming, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975). Certainly additional research is needed to investigate to what extent the institutional environment of an HBCU impacts this notion of cool pose for Black males, especially given the widening participation and persistence gaps between Black men and women compared with students

TABLE 2.
Parents' Educational Backgrounds and Careers

Participants (pseudonym)	Mother's Education / Occupation	Father's Education / Occupation
James	Master's / Congresswomen	High school / Police Officer
Anderson	High School / United States Postal Service Worker	Bachelor's / Teacher
Simmons	Bachelor's / Daycare worker	Law School / Lawyer
Omar	Did not disclose any information	High School / United States Postal Service Worker
Lawrence	Did not disclose any information	Did not disclosure educational information / Retired
Samuel	Bachelor's / Nurse	PhD / Retired
Wilson	Did not disclosure educational information / Minister	Did not disclosure educational information / Minister
Douglass	Did not disclose any information	Did not disclose any information
Howard	College Student	GED / Maintenance Worker
Chris	MD / Pediatrician	Did not disclose any information
Walter	Some College / Salesperson	High School / Maintenance Worker

from other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Finally, some participants characterized situations occurring in their homes or communities as a challenge to persistence. Although we did not ask about the participants' socioeconomic status during interviews or in the short questionnaire, we did ask about their parents' occupations in the short questionnaire. As shown in Table 2, based on their parents' occupations, the participants appear to come from a wide array of socioeconomic backgrounds. Although some participants provided details about both of their parents' educational backgrounds, others did not. Therefore, it was difficult to discern who were and who were not first generation college students. However, we do know that there was not a relationship between a participant's socioeconomic background and their explanation that they or a peer at the institution had problems in their homes or communities. We must point out that participants delineated a variety of problems occurring in students' homes or communities. These problems were not limited to issues of criminality; they included the need to financially support a family and other problems along those lines. The impact that students' homes or communities have on their academic performance is a phenomenon that researchers have recently begun to examine (Charles et al., 2004). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, Charles et al. reported that underrepresented minorities living in segregated neighborhoods are more likely than are White and Asian students to experience stressful events stemming from their home communities or environments. Howard-Hamilton (1997) supported this, noting that Black male collegians tend to come from homes or neighborhoods where relatives and friends are more likely to engage in criminal activity or experience violent incidents. These experiences engender stressors that are negatively linked to

academic success (Charles et al.).

Although Tinto (1993) recommended that students divorce themselves from their former community to facilitate academic and social integration into college, a strong body of research has recognized that this is not pragmatic for minority students because, in many cases, their support networks lie outside of the college community (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). This current study supports the importance of students maintaining ties to their home environments or communities, not because they risk cutting themselves off from their familial support networks, but because some of the circumstances of their homes or communities may prevent them from separating themselves from their former neighborhoods. Although the current study supports the findings of Charles et al.'s (2004) study, additional research is required to examine how minority students negotiate stress provoking problems occurring in their homes or communities while working to be successful academically.

Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, this study was conducted at one public, HBCU with 11 participants. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so others can decide the transferability of this study to their institutions. Given the number of the participants, we are unable to say that other Black males at this institution experienced similar challenges. Another limitation is that interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive. Nevertheless, we proceeded with this approach because researchers (e.g., Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love,

2000) have suggested the need for qualitative research to investigate the experiences of minority students. A fourth limitation is that our study included only students who persisted to graduation; the voices of students who did not persist were not included. Finally, we did not collect information about whether or not the participants were first generation students, hindering our ability to draw deeper comparisons.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The current study contributes to the literature on retention and persistence for Black males in higher education by discussing challenges to their success. Several implications for colleges and universities can be derived from this study. Some participants noted the relationship between financial resources and academic success. This issue is not endemic to the participants in the study (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The bottom line seems to be that cost is a major contributor in preventing Black males from persisting to graduation.

In order to weaken this barrier, institutions might examine how they can increase financial resources to support students, especially students who are low-income or first generation college students. This may decrease the amount of loans and hours that students work, allowing them to devote more time to their academics. Moreover, so that students are able to complete their education without interruption, universities might consider: (a) awarding greater levels of supplemental monies to students; (b) cultivating better collaborative relationships with local business partners to offer scholarships to deserving students; and (c) putting additional pressure on state and federal entities to increase the allocation of financial aid awarded to students. Colleges

and universities should consider instituting outreach programs for Black male students to help educate themselves and their families about financial resources available. Educational institutions should develop a plan to show these students and their families how to manage these financial resources once made available.

Additionally, connecting Black male students with faculty members in their major, to some extent, might also help ease students' financial worries. Research has underscored the importance of faculty-student interaction (Chickering & Ressler, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), particularly out-of-classroom interaction with faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini). This relationship might lead to student involvement in research or paid internships with their professors that would likely provide students with additional income, perhaps to purchase books and other educational-related materials.

Some participants in the current study indicated that they and some of their peers had difficulty seeking help when needed. They noted that this is a challenge to academic success. Institutions might think about using various measures that provide strong indicators of those students who may be experiencing trouble academically but are reluctant to speak up or voice their concerns. One assessment is "early alert." Programs of this caliber provide students with an early warning notification that they may be in jeopardy of failing a class. Once the students are identified, they are encouraged to use the campus educational support services (e.g., tutoring, academic advising, mentoring programs) to maximize their chances of succeeding in class.

Furthermore, colleges and universities might do more to enhance the supportive campus climate for Black males. This can be done by creating initiatives that weaken the notion that Black males reaching for support

is counter to their masculinity. An example of a program that one university has created, which might be an effective catalyst for normalizing the tendency for Black men to seek support, is the Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE). An evaluation of this program revealed that it has helped increase the likelihood that Black male participants will interact with institutional support agents (e.g., administrators, faculty, and staff) and prompted the participants' engagement in campus support services (Chickering, Peters, & Palmer, 2006).

Finally, research might explore in greater depth the impact that students' home environment have on their academic performance. Specifically, this research should investigate how minority students negotiate stress provoking incidences in their homes or communities, while striving to be successful academically. With the exception of Guiffrida's (2004) study, research on this issue is basically nonexistent. If more research would focus on this, colleges and universities might be better prepared to deal with the dilemmas and challenges of students' home lives and their influence on students' retention and persistence. Furthermore, additional research is needed to examine the institutional impact of HBCUs on what Majors and Billison (1992) characterized as cool pose for Black males.

CONCLUSION

Education has always played a central role in the lives of Blacks. Although Blacks continue to pursue their penchant for education, Black

males have not kept pace with their female or White male counterparts, provoking tremendous concern among researchers, scholars, and practitioners about the status of Black males. Data from this current study emanated from a qualitative study investigating factors of success for academically underprepared Black males at an HBCU.

One of the factors that emerged from this study was the challenges that threatened to impede the academic success of the participants. Although all of the participants successfully completed their degrees, the participants' described issues, such as lack of financial assistance, the inability of Black males to use campus support services, and problems in homes and communities, as factors that posed challenges to their academic success. Research has identified these factors as predictors of student attrition. The participants' voices in this study provide keen insight about some of the challenges that maybe applicable to Black males at public HBCUs. Although participants in the current study persisted, other students may not be as successful. Colleges and universities can learn from the participants' experiences. Aside from using the recommendations provided to be proactive in increasing the academic success of Black collegians, they can also use the suggestions for future research to start a new line of inquiry about academic achievement and Blacks.

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Appendix.

Sample of Interview Questions

1. What has life been like at this institution for you as a Black male?
2. How was your experience in the pre-college program?
3. What aspects of the program you found most helpful?
4. What are factors promoting African American male achievement at HBCUs?
5. When African American men do not achieve academic success in college, what are the primary factors you think make it difficult to achieve success?
6. What personal factors contribute to the academic success of African American men at HBCUs?
7. What educational factors contribute to the academic success of African American men at HBCUs?
8. As you reflect on your college experience, what stands out as being critical to your ability to graduate with the level of success you have achieved?

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