

Setting a New Agenda for Student Engagement and Retention in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Chapter 12

Motivational Factors for Academic Success Prospectives of African American Males at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the motivational factors affecting retention rates of Black males at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In particular, this research is focused on identifying factors that Black male HBCU attendees described as facilitating their continuation in college. Data from this study was derived from a sample of 109 Black male students attending the following institutions: North Carolina Central University, North Carolina A&T University and Winston-Salem State University.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, much attention has been placed on success outcomes of Black male students in post-secondary education (Palmer, Davis & Maramba, 2011). While gains in postsecondary enrollment have occurred, the gap in college completion rates of African American males is the largest among all racial

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and ethnic groups (Jones, 2001). This is true at the associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degree levels. In attempting to understand the rationale for degree completion, scholars have looked at a myriad of factors, including background characteristics, institutional climate, academic preparation, identity, and academic experiences (Wood, 2013).

Among other salient contributors to success, scholars have identified motivational factors as being critical to enhancing retention and success rates of Black males at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Much of the investigative literature pertaining to this topic not only reveals the validity of this claim, but also evidences the connection between motivational factors and retention rates among Black males (Wood, Hilton, & Hicks, 2014). Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this study is to determine motivational factors influencing the persistence of Black males attending HBCUs, from their perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data (2010), African American men were awarded only 3% of total bachelor's degrees, despite accounting for a significantly larger proportion of college students. At 66%, African American college men have the highest attrition rates across all racial/ethnic groups (Mortenson, 2001). More specifically, every two out of three African American men who attempt a baccalaureate degree do not complete their respective programs. Given the disparities between increasing college enrollment trends, but low completion rates of baccalaureate degrees, the motivational factors affecting retention rates of Black males at HBCUs is a subject that demands further examination.

Numerous studies on HBCUs have focused on comparing the experiences and outcomes of African American undergraduate students attending HBCUs to those attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). An investigation of such research reveals that when compared to PWIs, HBCUs provide better learning environments, are nurturing, supportive, and family-oriented (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). In addition, other studies on HBCUs have focused on the social and educational experiences of African American males (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer & Young, 2009), resource disparities with PWIs (Palmer & Griffin, 2009), student engagement (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), specifically among African American males (Palmer & Young, 2009). Outside of the important contributions of these studies, research pertaining to motivational factors that affect retention rates of Black male undergraduate students at HBCUs is limited. In fact, many higher education scholars may have inaccurately assumed that the research on undergraduate students at HBCUs (all students combined) defines the experiences of African American male undergraduate students at HBCUs.

Furthermore, the importance of such research is highlighted within articles in local and national newspapers (Abdullah, 2008; Dechter, 2008; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2007), as these sources continue to question the need for HBCUs and frequently discuss the inferiority of the education received at these institutions. An example of this can be seen within an article published by Jason Riley (2010) in the *Wall Street Journal*, which criticized the Obama Administration's decision to invest \$850 million in HBCUs over the next decade. Riley suggested that providing such resources to HBCUs might prove to be an unreasonable decision. The reasoning behind this conclusion was based on the fact that HBCUs are viewed as being obsolete, lacking academic quality, grappling with low graduation rates, and gradu-

ates of HBCUs are not financially compensated equally with their peers who graduated from PWIs. Despite the negative perceptions that critics may harbor about HBCUs, very little, if any research, has investigated the motivational factors affecting retention rates of Black males at HBCUs. Therefore, this study will help clear up any past or present misconceptions on this subject by exploring the lived experiences of undergraduate male participants, as well as the motivational factors that affect their retention.

Motivational Factors

Prior studies on Black undergraduate males found several motivational factors relevant to academic success. These motivational factors include career goals, proving any pessimist wrong about their ability to earn a degree in higher education, creating a better future for themselves and/or their family, making their families proud, and improving these students' overall interest in their academic coursework. As a result of the study conducted by Wood, Hilton, and Hicks (2014), 24 out of 28 Black male community college students indicated that these motivational factors played an integral role in their academic success. Furthermore, these students also described how each of these motivational factors was derived from an internal locus of causality, as well as from external motivation.

Whereas all of the motivational factors mentioned played a significant role in the academic success of African American males, the primary motivation for success proved to be the notion of creating a better future for oneself and one's family. These findings reveal a disparity between the themes portrayed in the media, as such items showcase African American males as being hedonistic, uncaring, and apathetic individuals (Wood & Hilton, 2013). The reality is that their outcomes indicate African American males are actually motivated by ethically caring for themselves and others. As such, in this quantitative analysis, we assume that similar relationships will be uncovered for Black men who attend HBCUs.

Theoretical Framework

An analysis of the motivational factors affecting Black undergraduate males at HBCUs provides foundational evidence for the relevance of this study. Furthermore, this theoretical framework provides beneficial evidence associated with motivational factors that must be included in the attempt at investigating such factors.

Self Determination Theory

With this in mind, Self Determination Theory (SDT) assesses individual level(s) of motivation in light of personality integration. More specifically, this theory examines how individuals are motivated towards activities, values, and behaviors to fulfill inherent psychological needs (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick & Leone, 2006; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). SDT posits that three psychological needs affect and motivate human behavior; and these factors include competence (understanding how to obtain desired outcomes and the ability to perform functions which can attain such outcomes), relatedness (the importance of developing and sustaining social bonds that promote feelings of safety, support, and satisfaction), and autonomy (the capacity and aptitude to control one's action). When examining SDT in educational settings, it provides a better understanding of individual student interest and value for education (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). In addition, SDT has the capability of promoting positive self-efficacy within students lived experiences.

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SDT advances psychosocial research on internalized motivation by distinguishing between self-determined and compliant factors and processes. Researchers have made a case that students with internal motivation learn more effectively and have greater initiative than students with an external motivation (Utman, 1997). Griffin (2006) used SDT to investigate explanatory models useful in understanding the academic motivation of high achieving African American college students. Her study revealed that students were more internally motivated by external phenomena.

Socio-Cognitive Theory

Socio-cognitive theory is also used in the study's theoretical framework, as it examines the relationship of self-efficacy and academic motivation. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons' (1992) study makes a case for socio-cognitive theory. In their hypothesis, students' goals are connected to their motivation and achievement. Zimmerman et al. underscored the importance of self-efficacy among all learners, as the concept of self-efficacy is impacted by goals and the student's inherited ability to obtain a specific goal. Collectively, educational researchers have concluded that unfamiliar situations impact learners' motivation, as well as future success strategies, thoughts, and emotions (Perry, Hechter, Menec, & Weinberg, 1993). Similarly, how students come to understand certain life occurrences (illness or fortune) ultimately shape their motivation and expectations.

The research on the motivation of African American college students has emerged within several literary sources (Garibaldi, 1992; Van Laar, 2000). African American students were understood to make academic and psychological gains from external motivators and attribution patterns. Thus, there is evidence that both internal and external sources affect the academic motivation and achievement capabilities of African American college students.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to the theoretical framework incorporated within this investigation, quantitative research is the method utilized within this study. In particular, this research was interested in identifying factors that Black male HBCU attendees described as facilitating their continuation in college. Data from this study were derived from a sample of 109 Black male and female students attending the following institutions: North Carolina Central University, Winston Salem State University, and North Carolina A&T University. The institutions were selected based on the researchers' established rapport with colleagues at the institutions, as well as one of the researchers being a former employee within the UNC System. The respondents completed an online questionnaire focused on factors influencing their motivation to attend, continue, and achieve at an HBCU.

The survey was based on a review of research focused on factors that motivated each student's success in college and was greatly influenced by Wood, Hilton and Hicks (2014). The focus of this study is on the students' responses to their motivation to continue in college. The survey was distributed to participants using Qualtrics, an online survey distribution system. College partners distributed the questionnaire via email to respondents and provided three follow-up emails to encourage participation. The survey remained open for two weeks to allow respondents ample time to complete the instrument.

Data from this study were analyzed in two primary stages. The first stage focused on descriptive statistics of the men. Specifically, background characteristics and patterns among the motivational variables were examined to gain an understanding of the data patterns. These data are presented using percentages.

The next stage used principal component analysis, which was conducted to reduce the total items and to collect them in groupings. Tests were conducted to see if there were differences in scores between the grouped items.

RESULTS

Descriptive Characteristics of the Population

Prior to conducting the analyses, the researchers examined the descriptive characteristics of the sample. This information provided insight into the ‘type’ of Black men who had responded to the online survey. Of these respondents, 63 identified as a man; 42 as a woman; two as gender non-conforming; and two respondents did not indicate their gender identity. This analysis was restricted to those respondents who identified as a man.

In terms of this population, 39% were very low income, reporting that their annual income was under \$20,000 per year. Another 15.3% of these men were low income, with an income between \$20,000 and \$29,000 per year. The vast majority of the respondents identified as heterosexual (85.5%), with the remaining identifying as follows: gay or same gender loving (4.8%), bisexual (6.5%), and non-conforming individuality (3.2%). Additionally, many of the students had been academic achievers at prior levels of education. Specifically, only 13.1% of the men had high school GPAs of 2.4 or less. The remaining men had GPAs between 2.4 and 2.9 (26.2%); between 3.0 and 3.4 (34.4%); and 3.5 or above (26.2%). In terms of academic degree goals, 32.8% sought to earn at least a bachelor’s degree, while 41.4% sought to earn a master’s or professional degree. A significant contingent of men had degree aspirations to earn doctoral degrees (25.9%). In all, 74.1% of the sample had post-baccalaureate degree goals. Many of the men in the sample were first-generation college students. For example, of the respondents’ fathers and mothers, 73.7% and 77.2%, respectively, had not earned a bachelor’s degree.

Motivational Factors

Table 1 presents data on the range, mean, and standard deviations of the motivational factors. The top five motivational factors that emerged in this analysis are as follows (in rank order): career aspirations ($M=5.60$, $SD=.82$); creating financial security ($M=5.56$, $SD=.93$); proving one can do it ($M=5.47$, $SD=.95$); a desire to make one’s family proud ($M=5.44$, $SD=1.03$); and a desire to be a role model to others ($M=5.37$, $SD=1.204$). These primary motivations span personal and other centered/communal interests. Students were motivated by their intrinsic desire to pursue their career aspirations, but also to secure basic needs and financial stability. Also evident, was an intrinsic desire to prove that they have the ability to be successful in achieving their goals. A desire to make their families proud, and to be role models to others as external influencers to their family and peers, was similarly a recurring motivator in the survey responses.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of motivational factors

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. D.
Career Aspirations	1	6	5.60	.819
Proving Other Wrong	1	6	4.48	1.576
Creating Financial Security for Oneself	1	6	5.56	.934
Creating financial Security for Immediate Family	1	6	5.31	1.110
Authentic Interest in Academics	1	6	5.34	1.007
Desire to be a Role Model	1	6	5.37	1.204
Desire to Make Family Proud	1	6	5.44	1.034
Prove One Can Do It	1	6	5.47	.953
Better Able to Give Back to Community	1	6	5.26	1.186
Continue Legacy of Elders/Ancestors	1	6	4.45	1.606
Co-Curricular Activity Involvement (e.g. clubs, fraternities)	1	6	4.32	1.702
College Friends	1	6	4.34	1.619
Instructors/Faculty	1	6	4.52	1.411
Mentors (On Campus)	1	6	4.53	1.533
Mentors (Off Campus)	1	6	4.63	1.632
Staff Members	1	6	4.28	1.473

Note: Valid N (listwise)

The researchers were also interested in motivational areas where there appeared to be a common disagreement among the respondents. Based on the standard deviation, these areas included: involvement in co-curricular activities (e.g., clubs, fraternities), mentors (off campus), college friends, the wish to continue the legacy of family elders or ancestors, and the desire to prove others wrong. These items produced the greatest dissonance in participant perspectives, and also represented areas that were not among the most salient motivational contributors to persist. Given the inconsistency among all of the answers by surveyed participants, it is likely that these factors served as core drivers for success for some, but not all, of the respondents.

Guided by this understanding, the researchers were also interested in how participants' views differed. A principal components analysis was conducted to determine the total number of factors evident within the data source. Using a one-criterion eigenvalue, the researchers identified three primary groupings of variables, which accounted for 71.7% of the cumulative variance. The data were subsequently rotated, using a maximum likelihood procedure with Promax rotation (due to the interrelationship among the study variables). Two determinable factors were identified, as previously defined in SDT: the first appeared to focus on the interrelated concepts of autonomy (the capacity and aptitude to control one's action) and competence (understanding how to obtain desired outcomes and the ability to perform functions which can attain such outcomes); while the second factor was relatedness (the importance of developing and sustaining social bonds that promote feelings of safety, support, and satisfaction). These constructs were termed intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Table 2 presents the structure matrix for the rotation depicting loading of .500 or above. One item, proving others wrong, did not rotate on a factor, while involvement in co-curricular activities rotated on its own factor. The scores for each factor were then summed and

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Table 2. Promax structure matrix

Career Aspirations		.746	
Proving Other Wrong		-	
Creating Financial Security for Oneself		.836	
Creating financial Security for Immediate Family		.680	
Authentic Interest in Academics		.818	
Desire to be a Role Model		.596	
Desire to Make Family Proud		.666	
Prove One Can Do It		.877	
Better Able to Give Back to Community	.628		
Continue Legacy of Elders/Ancestors	.624		
Co-Curricular Activity Involvement (e.g. clubs, fraternities)			.999
College Friends	.707		
Instructors/Faculty	.940		
Mentors (On Campus)	.949		
Mentors (Off Campus)	.914		
Staff Members	.933		

standardized to enable a comparison of scores between the two composite scales. Both the construct for intrinsic motivation ($\alpha=.89$) and extrinsic motivation ($\alpha=.93$) demonstrated strong reliability. A dependent t-test demonstrated that although respondents had higher mean scores for intrinsic motivations, there was no significant difference in mean scores between the two constructs ($t=.193, p=.847$). This suggests that participants are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, though they are slightly (yet not significantly) more likely to be motivated by intrinsic motivators.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Incorporating the insight from only Black, male undergraduate students provides a more concentrated analysis of motivational factors that affect learners in institutions of higher education. Outside of the beneficial information gathered through this study, there proves to be additional recommendations for further research. One such proposal would be to expand the inclusion criteria utilized in selecting the participants for the questionnaire sessions to include Black, male undergraduate students from private HBCUs.

In addition, utilizing information gathered from Black, male undergraduate students attending HBCUs in North Carolina provided an analysis of students within the southeast region of the United States. Expanding the scope to include additional HBCUs from other states could yield critical insight into motivational factors affecting Black, male undergraduate students from a different demographic, potentially yielding even more useful information to help further enhance their education. Incorporating the perspective and insight from Black undergraduate males attending PWIs could also strengthen this type of research.

LIMITATIONS

In discussing the limitations for this study, one of the major areas relates to the population utilized within the survey process. Whereas the incorporation of Black, male undergraduate students from disparate institutions of higher education yielded beneficial information, a larger scope might provide even more valuable insight. Incorporating the thoughts and opinions of Black, male undergraduate students enrolled in all colleges and universities in North Carolina would provide additional data to review, analyze, corroborate, and utilize.

Another limitation related to this specific study was that of the institutions identified for the survey. It is important to note that there are 105 accredited HBCUs within the United States and that this study only incorporated information related to a select few public institutions within one state. Including institutions only within North Carolina provides insight from Black, male undergraduate students specific to this state; however, expanding the parameters would result in additional information and/or a more definitive result.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As mentioned, this study yielded beneficial information related to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. In further detail, the data emphasized the importance and relevance of several intrinsic factors, including the interrelated concepts of autonomy (the capacity and aptitude to control one's action) and competence (understanding how to obtain desired outcomes and the ability to perform functions which can attain such outcomes). Additionally, one extrinsic factor surfaced as the most common factor among the individuals polled, which proved to be that of relatedness—or the importance of developing and sustaining social bonds that promote feelings of safety, support, and satisfaction.

This research yielded five common motivational factors that were recorded as being the most prominent factors influencing the undergraduate experience for Black, male undergraduate students attending HBCUs. Career aspirations proved to be the initial motivational factor noted by the Black males included in this research. As mentioned, career aspirations revolved around each of their career goals and passion for accomplishing such goals. Wood, Hilton, and Hicks (2014) provide a clear connection between career aspirations serving as a motivational factor in determining academic success of Black males in their work and Black male community college students. According to their research, career aspirations proved to be one of the most prominent motivational factors for their success.

This finding signifies the importance colleges should place on career advising. Specifically, colleges should consider integration of career advising into all academic programs to ensure that students are able to make clear connections between their major goals and career goals. In the classroom, faculty can also facilitate such connections by providing externship and service-learning opportunities that enable students to explore different fields of interest to them while simultaneously engaging in course learning. This can also lead to a greater intrinsic interest in course learning.

Ascertaining financial security proved to be the second most prominent motivational factor revealed in this research (the desire to become financially stable and independent upon graduating from college). According to Price, Spriggs, and Swinton (2011), the concept of achieving financial security proves to be a common theme in research related to undergraduate students who attend HBCUs. Data from the National Survey of Black Americans (2011) determined that undergraduate students who attend

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HBCUs gain relatively superior, long-run returns when compared to students who attend non-HBCUs. Researchers also emphasized that employment market outcomes were greater for HBCU graduates when compared to those who did not attend an HBCU.

Given that males are socialized to perceive being a provider or the main source of income as a key component of their identity, this finding is expected. Moreover, given the chronic financial challenges facing communities of color, gaining financial security is a worthy, yet challenging, goal. Faculty should consider discussing the financial benefits of applicable career options as part of their curriculum. However, this must be done carefully, in a manner so as not to encourage students to select academic and career pathways based solely on financial factors but instead encouraged to choose those which align with their sense of purpose.

A third motivational factor that proved prevalent among the responses recorded in this study relates to proving others wrong. Each exhibited his own barrier to achieving goals during the undergraduate experience. In many cases, students did not receive external support from family, friends, or others, but instead proved to be the target of negativity. Moore, Madison-Colmore, and Smith (2003) provide critical insight into the concept of proving others wrong through their research focused on Black engineering students. The authors were able to determine that when these individuals encountered resistance from a majority of their peers, they tended to become more assertive and resilient rather than giving up. This result helps to not only provide context for the motivational factor of proving others wrong, but it also validates it as an important motivational factor indicated by the Black males partaking in this study.

Students expressing a desire to make their families proud was another motivational factor that made a strong showing in this study. According to the research gathered by Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009), this concept proved to be a major factor in determining the academic success of Black male students attending HBCUs. Through a qualitative investigation focused on identifying the factors that promoted success for academically underprepared Black males at HBCUs, the desire to make one's family proud played an integral role in motivating and promoting academic success within such students.

The desire to make family members proud is a factor that can be readily leveraged throughout students' academic careers. During orientation, Student Affairs staff can encourage students to reflect on being a representative of their family in college, asking them to consider the kind of legacy they want to leave. Similar messaging can take place when students interact with Student Services and academic professionals on campus. For example, during one-on-one conferencing with students—particularly with those who may not be directing the maximum attention toward their studies--faculty can ask students to reflect on why they are in school and encourage them to consider the legacy they are leaving for their family and greater community. Given the community-focused nature of HBCUs, this recommendation may already be in alignment with current practices taking place so an alternative could be to situate students as role models for others, which is the final motivational factor revealed.

The desire to serve as a role model to others and one's community is cited by Wood, Hilton, and Hicks (2014). In their article pertaining to the factors that determine academic success of Black male community college students, they describe serving as a role model as a support mechanism of motivation to goal achievement and graduation. Similarly, Griffin (2006) also refers to the desire to become a role model as both a support mechanism and prominent factor in determining the success of Black males. Her qualitative study focused on nine high-achieving Black male students at a large public university.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the relevance and importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors in determining the success of Black male students in postsecondary education. As a result of this research, recommendations are provided to higher education practitioners and scholars to help promote increased motivation among Black, male undergraduate students so they can not only accomplish their short- and long-term goals, but ultimately persist in graduating.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Black: African Americans and Blacks are used interchangeably to refer to the descendants of African slaves in the United States (Wood, Hilton & Hicks, 2014).

HBCUs: “Black academic institutions established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of Black Americans” (Roebuck & Murty 1993, p. 3).

Motivational Factors: Critical items that may enhance retention and success rates of students (Wood, Hilton, & Hicks, 2014).

North Carolina: Public HBCUs from the state of North Carolina were utilized in this study. These institutions were as follows: North Carolina Central University, North Carolina A&T University and Winston-Salem State University.

Retention: Remaining enrolled within an institution of higher education until completion of a degree.