Today's Urban Black Male: The Importance of Finding the Right College to Realize Maximum Success

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Abstract

When it comes to higher education, finding the right school is only one obstacle in the lives of most African-American males. Studies show that even out of the number of enrolled African-American males in the nation, about one-third of them will actually complete an undergraduate degree. A lack of experience in higher education may affect the decision-making process when shopping for the right school. The decision selecting the right school may be predicated on circumstance rather than outright choice, and may depend on the prospective student's physical location or residence, whether they are urban or rural, and whether they are a first, second or third generation college student in their family. One solution to overcoming these and other obstacles in the college decision-making process for African-American males is to enroll in an institution where they will be supported and nurtured.

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"Without education, there is no hope for our people and without hope, our future is lost."

—Charles Hamilton Houston

Charles Hamilton Houston is possibly one of history's most influential Black men. Growing up in urban Washington, D.C., in the early 1900s, he was educated at Harvard University, ultimately becoming a powerful attorney. Houston broke racial barriers by becoming the first Black editor of the *Harvard Law Review* and member of the *Harvard Law School Journal*. Inspired and motivated by his experiences dealing with prejudice and discrimination during both his military service and time at Harvard, he became chief attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the mastermind who directed the legal battle against U.S. Jim Crow laws, and ultimately played an effective role in virtually every Civil Rights case before the Supreme Court between 1930 and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Furthermore, he was the first African American law professor at Harvard Law School, ultimately assisting in the training of dozens of famous Black lawyers, including the late Justice Thurgood Marshall (Linder, 2000).

Houston was well aware that education served as the great equalizer. Prior to entering the military and applying to Harvard Law School, he attended an all-White private liberal arts college, Amherst in Massachusetts (Linder, 2000). It was not a common occurrence for a Black male during this era to attend college; thus, Houston's options were limited. In fact, his options at that time compared with the contemporary options afforded to contemporary students in general, and Black urban males, in particular, were virtually nonexistent. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2010), there are a total of 4,495 post-secondary institutions in the United States today, which breaks down to 1,721 2-year colleges and 2,774 4-year colleges. Of the 2,774 4-year schools, more than half are private, non-profit colleges and universities with the balance being public institutions (NCES, 2010, Table 275).

With so many post-secondary options, how does one select an institution that will enhance the learning, growth, and development of today's urban Black male collegian—leading to successful matriculation and graduation? The operative word in this question is "graduation" because for the urban Black male to strive for a better future, he must first earn his college degree. Department of Education data reveal that, as expected, Black students who earn a 4-year college degree have incomes that are substantially higher than Blacks who have only some college experience but who do not earn a degree.

Most important, Blacks who complete a 4-year college education have a median income that is near parity with similarly educated Whites (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2006).

More than 61% of all males are enrolled in degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the United States, but only 12.7% are Black male students dispersed among the myriad institutional types spread across the nation (NCES, 2013). This equates to 1,065,000 Black males (NCES, 2013) in college out of a total U.S. population of 308.7 million people (Mackun & Wilson, 2011). Although that sounds good, consider that only 31% or 330,150 of Black males actually graduate annually (NCES, 2014). The data can be parsed in a number of different ways, yet the facts remain consistent in revealing that Black males are being surpassed significantly by their White and Hispanic male counterparts as well as by Black female cohorts in earning 4-year college degrees. These dismal statistics reveal the critical importance for Black males to select institutional contexts that support their academic and social integration. For the urban Black male, his negotiation of the post-secondary context is a complex congeries of factors, external and internal to the institutional environment, that make for a challenging and unique experience.

Across the higher educational landscape, one can choose to attend a public, private, or a for-profit institution. These are broken down further into 2-year (community college and vocational/technical) and 4-year institutions (liberal arts, universities, special focus, arts, religious, single sex, etc.). Black males navigate the college-going process like their peers; however, because many within this cohort are first-generation college students, they have the added pressures of being the first from their families to attend college.

A viable option for students who find themselves overwhelmed by the college-going process, however, is the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) which offers a nurturing, supportive, and family-oriented environment (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Statistics show that minorities who attend a HBCU have augmented student achievement and success. In fact, a 2010 report published by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights titled "The Educational Effectiveness of Historically Black Colleges and Universities" states,

> . . . for some young African-Americans the development that occurs at HBCUs might have a profound influence on their lives. For example, African-American graduates of certain HBCUs, such as Xavier University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College, successfully gained entry into graduate, medical, engineering, law schools and other fields, in percentages and numbers equaling or exceeding those of African-American students that attended wealthier, longer established, and predominantly-White institutions . . . suggest that

faculty members' dedication to teaching, a supportive social environment on campus, faculty and staff members' encouragement of students to explore leadership roles in their chosen careers, and the general availability of faculty role models helps explain HBCU success. (p. 3)

The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reports that 16% of Black males earned their degree from an HBCU, and the average 6-year graduation rate for Black males from urban HBCUs is higher than that of rural HBCUs. Urban HBCUs are able to provide students with more faculty and staff support, same-race peer support—vital to Black male student achievement. In addition, these institutions also provide a closer connection to the diversity of key metropolitan areas. Also, public urban institutions provide the opportunity for Black males to return to their home communities to serve and meet the needs of its inhabitants (Duderstadt, 2009).

In addition to college selection, researchers in the book, *Black Males in Post-Secondary Education: Examining Their Experiences in Diverse Institutional Contexts* (Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012), identified a number of outside factors that affected student success. Characterized as "the impact of people, places, and things," these outside influences were centered on such issues as socio-economic status, unemployment rates, discrimination, poor college preparation, high school dropout rates, and disparate graduation rates among White and African American students. Through student interviews, researchers unearthed even more subtle dynamics that could potentially lead to a student's inability to adjust to college life, such as choice of major, inadequate K-12 preparation, faculty expectations for students of color versus White students, financial aid accessibility, possible language barriers, and faculty interaction and availability.

Furthermore, as many inner city Black males are first-generation college students trying to navigate the academy, the path to graduation can be unfamiliar territory; therefore, having adequate advising, knowing institutional policies and procedures, and being aware of the various student support services available are integral for student achievement. More importantly, to foster their success in college, a strong core of Black peers on campus that functions within key clubs and organizations is also a major support for Black students in facilitating an easier transition into college life (Hilton et al., 2012).

It is evident that this introduction makes the case for Black urban males to not only attend HBCUs but to also attend these institutions that are located in urban settings to increase their likelihood of graduation. However, we are cognizant of the fact that Black urban males can be successful in other institutional types. In *Black Males in Post-Secondary Education: Examining*

Their Experiences in Diverse Institutional Contexts, researchers used a theoretical framework based on "The Aspiration Theory" to gauge the likelihood of student success. This framework measured an individual's psychosocial process of setting goals and making choices that will produce desired outcomes. Moreover, after interviewing students and taking into account their college selection processes as well as other external influences and other subtle factors, researchers discovered that whether students had certain goals, and if there was a willingness to achieve said goals coupled with a strong sense of motivation, students could be successful in any institutional context they elect to attend (Hilton et al., 2012). Still, it is evident that this introduction makes the case for Black urban males to not only attend HBCUs but to also attend these institutions that are located in urban settings.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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