

The Black Male Experience

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HALE Master's Pro-Seminar EAD 868

Michigan State University

November 17, 2008

Abstract

This paper entitled, “The Black Male Experience” addresses the need for higher education institutions to invest more resources in educating and creating support programs for African-American male students. “The Black Males Experience” builds the case for the necessity for institutional resources for the target population. In addition, the analysis focuses on the commonalities among successful initiatives and recommendations for more success in attracting and graduating black male students.

“The Amazing Vanishing black male is playing at a college campus near you,”
“Young Black, and Male in America: an endangered species,” “Where are all the black

men in college” are headlines of news articles or other forms of literature that allude to the low participation of black males in higher education. These titles are provocative and invoke many emotions that may lead one to consider the issue of low participation among black males in higher education an exaggeration. Regrettably, the issue of the lack of black males pursuing any form of higher education can appropriately be labeled a crisis. However, the crisis is not just limited to low enrollment in higher education, but also the overall state of young African American men in America. The experience of young African American men in America is unlike that of any other demographic, therefore, institutions of higher education have an opportunity to invest resources in programs to benefit African American males students in an effort to improve their overall quality of life.

Societal Glimpse

In 1998, Jewelle T. Gibbs explored the experience of being black and male in America and the social implications that underscore this particular demographic. Gibbs recognized the social advancement of women and immigrants progressed while that of black males declined (1998). The author’s text focuses on the period from the 1960s to the early 1970s. In 1960, it was believed that black males are more likely to be unemployed, addicted to drugs, involved in the criminal system, to be unwed fathers and to die from homicide or suicide (Gibbs, 1988, p.5).

Almost 50 years later, not much has improved in the condition of black males in America. “In 2000, 65 percent of black male dropouts in their 20’s were jobless-that is unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the share had grown to 72 percent, compared with 3.4 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts. Even

when high school graduates were included, half of black men in their 20's were jobless in 2004, up from 46 percent in 2000" (Eckholm, 2006). The ages between 16 and 24 are critical times for any group of men, as they make fundamental life changes regarding their work, schooling, vocational training and family formation (Han, Mincy, and Lewis, 2006). Yet, these are some of the most difficult times for black men. In 2005, 7.5 percent of black men ages 18-29 were college graduates or held advanced degrees, 19.5 percent ages 16-29 were unemployed, 10.1 percent ages 18-29 were in prison. In 2003, 84.6 of deaths of African American men between the ages of 15-24 were the result of homicide (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). According to the statistics, young black men receive less formal education, experience unemployment, and die from homicides more times than their same sex peers in different racial groups. These statistics illustrate the on-going issues pertaining to the quality of life for young black males. Ronald B. Mincy, professor of Social Work at Columbia University, argues that the issues related to black men can no longer be ignored (Han, Mincy, and Lewis, 2006). Regarding education, the overwhelming large majority of black males cannot attest to the benefits associated with higher education. In order to increase the number of black males that pursue higher education and graduate, collaboration among black males themselves, public policy practitioners, sociologists, and educators at all levels is essential.

Opportunities for Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions are capable of altering the experience of young black males through education and providing structured community outreach services to this population. Dr. James T. Minor, professor of Education at Michigan State

University, proclaims that attending college is one of the single most transformative experiences an individual can encounter (2008). Furthermore, his belief is that there is not another single experience that can improve the quality of an individual's life economically, intellectually and culturally. If Dr. Minor's theory holds true, then higher education institutions are positioned with the resources to help lessen the negative statistics that characterize the black male experience through demonstrating a commitment to educate and serve black male undergraduate students.

Throughout the history of higher education in America, institutions have responded to the needs of society. The establishment of land-grant institutions is one of the most lucid examples of higher education's ability to accommodate the needs of society through research and services. Initially, land-grant institutions provided research assistance to agricultural farmers (Johnson, 1981). Presently, these types of institutions provide research and services to communities in a number of fields to advance society. Just as higher education played a critical role of sustaining food supply and creating a more viable economy during the inception of land-grant institutions, the opportunity of advancing society exists via assisting in the development and educational process of black men. Enhancing the employability and educational process of black men has political and economic implications that affect society (Gibbs, 1988).

The issues that affect the participation of black males in higher education are multifaceted and a panacea does not exist. However, they require institutional resources and systematic plans of action. Many theorists and practitioners have identified that the root cause of low participation of black males is the combined result of the education process from K-12, such as attending academically underachieving elementary schools

and secondary schools, low expectations from adults and peers, financial hardships and lack of role models (Cuyjet, 1997). Therefore, the University System of Georgia (USG) and the City University of New York (CUNY) have begun to strategically address these issues through comprehensive educational and outreach programs at all academic levels in order to increase the number of African-American males pursuing higher education. Both USG and CUNY have coordinated with the member institutions to provide educational services in the form of mentoring, tutoring and teacher/faculty development at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary across Georgia and New York, respectively.

The University System of Georgia established the African-American Male Initiative (AAMI) to “enhance the recruitment, retention and graduation of black males” (<http://www.usg.edu/aami/>). The AAMI awards grants to member institutions to implement and maintain programs focused on fulfilling the mission of AAMI. As a result of the AAMI, black male enrollment has increased by 24.5 percent from 17,068 students in fall 2002, to 21,249 in fall 2007, in addition to improved graduation and retention rates (<http://www.usg.edu/aami/>). The University of West Georgia’s Black Male With Initiative (BMW), under the leadership of Dr. Said Sewell, is one of AAMI model programs. The program has been successful because it is built on the principles of living learning communities, dialogue and mentoring. During the first year, 25 black male students participate in living learning communities, they live together, take the same courses and receive mentoring. The shared environment creates an atmosphere for facilitated dialogue on relevant issues such as academics, culture, spirituality and societal values. The structure allows students to build relationships among their peers and with

school administrators. Increased GPAs are benchmarks of success for the BMWI program, the average GPA for a BMWI participant is 3.0 compared to 2.65 for African American male, non BMWI participants. Also, BMWI participant benefit from an expanded worldview gained from international visits and corporate internships (<http://www.westga.edu/~caamrsl/aboutus.htm>).

The establishment of the Black Male Initiative at the City University of New York (CUNY) system is another example of the institutional commitment necessary to reverse the trends of black males in higher education. With funds from the New York City Council, CUNY provides support for all 16 of its member institution to improve the educational experience for all males, but black males in particular. Similar to USG, collaboration occurs at all levels of the educational process to reach the desired goal of producing more Black male graduates (<http://web.cuny.edu/jobs/recruit-diverse/Retention/BMI.html>).

The Male Initiative (TMI) at York College in Queens, New York is one of CUNY's model programs, because of York's inability to retain black male students. Black males accounted for about 13 percent of the student population before the implementation of TMI. Students cited the responsibility of being the breadwinner for their families as the reoccurring reason for attrition at York College. Consequently, TMI began to offer a forum called "The Barbershop," as an opportunity for males to discuss any issues that impacted the participants' ability to stay in school ("Keeping black males in college, 2007). In the black community, the barbershop is perceived to be a place where men can talk candidly about the feelings. Therefore, the rationale behind using this moniker was the freedom to dialogue. The forum helps students to realize that they are

not alone in juggling family and academic commitments, among other responsibilities. In both cases from the University of West Georgia and York College, facilitating peer support groups is a critical method to establishing effective structures to enhance the collegiate experience of black males.

Peer support groups are necessary for the development of African-American males. Dr. Shaun Harper's analysis of high-achieving African-American males reveals the importance of establishing peer groups early on in a student's academic career. The study involved 32 well-rounded black male students and evaluated the systems of support that enabled the participants to flourish in their academic environments. Survey participants attended pre-dominantly white public research institutions in the Mid-West: the University of Illinois, Indiana University, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, The Ohio State University and Purdue University (Harper, 2006). Exploring the role of peer support in predominately white institutions and the derivative of peer support was a major focus of the project.

All of the participants referenced their friends and peers as major contributors of their success. Being active members and leaders of campus organizations were strategies the participants employed to expand their social network and gain friends. As a result of their membership, participants gained respect and encouragement to pursue leadership within those organizations and other campus groups. The learning point of this study was the importance for African-American males to be linked to their peers in order to establish a sense of belonging when they are the minority in institutions of higher learning. Group identity is a key aspect of African-American culture. Understanding this theoretical and cultural perspective is a guide to create and sustain programming aimed at

increasing the graduation rate of African-American males. Most of the leaders self-reported that their role as a leader on campus is to articulate the concerns of black male students to the administration. The majority of participants declared that their leadership commitment is to uplift their race (Harper, 2006).

What becomes of the black males student who is disinterested in campus politics and establishing leadership roles? The participants also reported that the majority of their African-American peers struggled academically, played long hours of video games and pursued romantic relationships with females (Harper, 2006 p. 348). In order to ensure the success of the majority of black male students, more attention has to be focused on the black male students that are disengaged to understand their priorities and needs to offer the appropriate resources. Students that are not directly linked to campus organizations may not experience the same level of belonging compared to their high achieving peers.

Analysis

Meaningful initiatives focused on augmenting the matriculation of black males students in higher education should include a commitment to fostering dialogue and teaching students how to build authentic relationships. The previously mentioned examples of BMWI, TMI and Harper's research project all highlight the importance of congenial peer relationships. Perhaps, students may feel less isolated when they have formed group identity. Supportive peer relationships provide social comfort and venues to improve academic performance. On other hand, peer relationships can have devastating affects if a student is being negatively influenced and surrounded by peers that are not encouraging him to do his best. In that regard, black males need interpersonal skills in order to develop the ability to assess relationships and remove

themselves from negative situations. Ideally, peer relationships are resources to receive encouragement and accountability. Peer relationships can be formed from participation in fraternities, student organizations and athletic team. Although these are traditional sources of forming relationship, I recommend that institutions of higher education develop informal support groups for men to dialogue about issues that concern them. Consistent dialogue is a focal point of each of the programs mentioned earlier.

African-American males do not have many structured opportunities to express their emotions and concerns, which is why leaders at York College named their support group The Barbershop. For many, this lack of opportunity to genuinely connect with other males causes suppressed emotions that may lead to negative behavior. Dialogue also presents men the opportunity to reflect over their experiences and socialization process. Learning more about the norms associated with one's place in society based on their race and gender can open the door to unlimited possibilities and self-awareness. Through greater self-awareness young men will have the opportunity to articulate who they are and who they want to be in the world.

Yet, it is important to create programs that can effectively accommodate the majority of Black males on campus. The BMWI program at the University of West Georgia does not adequately serve all of the school's black male populations. Therefore, more thought has to be given to designing opportunities and learning experiences for all of the members in the target population.

Mentoring is another strategy to increase the number of African-American male graduates. Young Black men should be partnered with a faculty member or administrator to receive the guidance on navigating the academic environment. There is value in

having mentees connected to other African-American males; yet, there is an equal or greater value in having students mentored by males of different racial groups. In the case of the latter, it is important that the mentor understands the Black male experience.

The lack of understanding of the culture and socialization process of black men is perhaps the greatest barrier higher education institution face. Without accurate knowledge and sensitivity of their experience, administrators will consistently encounter challenges in recruiting and retaining them. In order to overcome this difficulty, more research efforts should be dedicated to surveying black male students that are disengaged and those that leave the academic environment and to examine what could be done differently to encourage them to remain and graduate. Participation is a direct correlation of motivation, simply stated researchers, administrators and faculty need better insight into the motivation of black males.

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