

# **Role of an HBCU in Supporting Academic Success for Underprepared Black Males**

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## **Abstract**

*Both predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are experiencing low academic persistence rates of Black males. While researchers have focused on factors facilitating the retention and persistence for Black males at PWIs, a paucity of contemporary research has focused on the academic and social experiences of Black males at HBCUs. We used in-depth interview methods to investigate the academic and social experiences of 11 Black males, who entered a public HBCU through its remedial or developmental studies program and persisted to graduation. Although several themes emerged from this study, special attention was placed on the impact of an HBCU helping to facilitate Black male academic achievement. More specifically, participants in this study credited the university's racial composition, support from peers, faculty, and role models in helping to increase their propensity for learning and academic success.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, a plethora of academic literature has focused attention on the experiences of Black males in higher education. Researchers have argued that compared to their female counterparts, relatively few Black males are attending college. While this growing gender imbalance is not unique among Black students, it is reported to be more severe when compared to other racial and ethnic groups. For example, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that in 2004, the postsecondary enrollment gender gap for Blacks

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reached 28.6%, compared to 8.7% in 1976 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). Over the same time period, the gender gap was substantially smaller among other racial and 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%, respectively (NCES). Harper (2006a) noted that 67.6% of Black males, who enter college, do not persist to graduation within six years. According to Strayhorn (2008), of the 15 million undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States, fewer than 5% are Black males. Further he indicated that their enrollment in higher education is roughly the same as it was in 1976.

The status of Black males in higher education has served as an impetus for researchers to investigate the collegiate experiences of Black male collegians and focus on factors facilitating their retention and persistence. For example, in a qualitative study with 14 Black male undergraduates, Nathan (2008) explored critical factors believed to contribute to their academic success. She found that extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics were responsible for the academic success of these students. More specifically, she explained that their relationships with friends and family were factors used to enhance their retention and persistence in college. Also, students reported that they were personally responsible for their collegiate success. McClure (2006) explored the impact that a historically Black fraternity had on the college experience and academic success of 20 of its members. According to her study, engagement in a fraternal organization created a sense of community and helped to engender a supportive environment thereby increasing students' academic success and satisfaction with their college experience. Similarly, Harper and Harris (2006) purported that fraternal engagement of Black males facilitated leadership, cognitive development, and racial identity. Although not focused exclusively on Black males, Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) measured the impact of faculty-student mentoring with 554 Black students and found that establishing a meaningful mentoring relationship with a faculty member enhanced college satisfaction for Black students.

In a recent chapter published in Cuyjet's (2006) book on Black college men, Brown (2006) emphasized that Black males are disengaged on campus. As such, he conducted a qualitative study with 25 Black male undergraduate students to identify out-of-the-class activities that positively impact involvement for Black males. He concluded that Black males were more likely to get involved in events sponsored by the Student Government Association, although holding formal positions was difficult for them. Brown also determined that Black males were more inclined to engage in intramural athletics and viewed the student union as a positive place to facilitate involvement among male collegians. Furthermore, Harper and Quayle (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 32 high-achieving Black male student leaders. Findings from their study emphasized the important role that predominantly Black and mainstream student organizations have on the experience of Black males in higher education. Specifically, Harper and Quayle found that Black male engagement in student organizations facilitated their identity development, provided a venue for out-of-class engagement, served as a platform for racial uplift and the advocacy of issues germane for racial and ethnic minority students, facilitated the development of cross-cultural communication skills, engendered care regarding disenfranchised groups, and instilled concern for social injustice.

Other scholars have also contributed to the discourse on the experience of Black males in higher education, with specific attention focused on factors important to their retention and persistence (Harper, 2005, 2006b, 2008; Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, in press; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Sutton, 2006; Watson, 2006).

These scholars' research has provided information to encourage the success of Black male collegians. But, their work focuses exclusively on Black males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and ignores other institutional contexts (e.g., HBCUs). Still according to Harper and Gasman (2008), both institutional types—PWIs and HBCUs are experiencing low retention and persistence among Black males.

Interestingly, numerous studies on HBCUs have focused on comparing the experiences and outcomes of Black students attending HBCUs compared to their PWI counterparts (Allen, 1986, 1987, 1991, 1992; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Cheatham, Slaney, & Coleman, 1990; Cokley, 1999; Davis, 1994; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Kim 2002; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Watson & Kuh, 1996). This research has consistently shown that compared to PWIs, HBCUs provide better learning environments that nurture, support, and that are family oriented. Further, other research on HBCUs has focused on the experiences of White students at HBCUs (Closson & Henry, 2008; Hall & Closson, 2005; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009), faculty governance (Minor, 2005, 2008a), desegregation (Brown, 1999, 2001, 2002; Minor, 2008b; Stefkovich & Leas, 1994), resource disparities with their PWI counterparts (Palmer & Griffin, 2009), and advocacy for the continued relevance of HBCUs (Brown & Davis, 2001; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Kim, 2002; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Palmer, 2010; Perna, 2001; Wenglinisky, 1996). Despite the important contribution of this research to researchers and policymakers, contemporary research on the academic and social experiences of Black males is lacking (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). In fact, to date there has been few contemporary studies that have provided insight into the academic and social experiences of Black males at HBCUs.

Some of the contemporary research on Black males at HBCUs has highlighted trends of on campus involvement. For example, whereas previous research has shown that Black males were more involved on campus than their female counterparts (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984), a quantitative study, involving 1,167 Black undergraduate students at 12 four-year HBCUs, who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement, revealed that gender gaps in on campus engagement has narrowed in recent years at HBCUs (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). Further, other research on the experiences of Black males at HBCUs has shown that the conservative institutional climate of HBCUs has a negative impact on student retention and persistence. For example, Harper and Gasman's (2008) study of 76 undergraduate Black males at 12 HBCUs revealed that the institutional climates of these institutions were too conservative, which resulted in an unwelcoming environment. Consequently, some students transferred to other institutions or discontinued their higher education studies. Finally, research on Black college males at HBCUs has investigated factors promoting the academic success of male collegians. More specifically, using qualitative research methods, Ross (1998) explored salient factors important to the retention and persistence of 37 Black males at a private HBCU. Her study revealed that (a) relationship with parents, particularly, the mother, (b) support from family, (c) access to positive role models, and (d) religious beliefs were significant to their success. Given the scarcity of research on the experiences of Black males at HBCUs, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) suggested that while "much of the national attention [is] being placed on issues facing Black students at predominantly White institutions ... the quality of life at HBCUs for [Black American] students—especially [Black] men—has gone virtually unnoticed" (p. 190). Additionally, recent research on Black males has focused on high achievers, albeit at PWIs (Harper, 2005, 2006b, 2008, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Notwithstanding, we decided to explore the contributions of HBCU's to the academic success of Black males. Specifically, the

central question that guided this study was: What factors do academically underprepared Black males, who entered an HBCU through its remedial or developmental program and persisted to graduation, attribute to their success?

## **Method**

We conducted this study at a public, doctoral research HBCU in an urban metropolitan city in a U.S. mid-Atlantic state. According to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at this university, approximately 6,000 undergraduates were enrolled when data were collected. Approximately 91% of the students were Black, and their White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American counterparts comprised 2.5%, 0.9%, 0.7%, 0.2% of the undergraduate student population, respectively.

Using in-depth interview methods, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a specific group of students situated in a specific context. Thus, our study's epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln, 2002). To some extent, grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bounded to the interview process, but occurred throughout the entire research process and included the continuous asking of questions, the use of research notes, and the exploration of hunches (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### ***Participants and Program Context***

Data for this current study emerged from a research project that investigated success factors for academically underprepared Black males at an HBCU. Specifically, the participants for this study were 11 Black men who entered a public HBCU through participation in a university summer program and persisted to graduation. The summer program was designed to facilitate the transition from high school to college for students whose high school grade point average and performance on standardized tests (e.g., SAT or ACT) suggest the need for early intervention to improve their potential for success in college. Students in this six week summer residential program took three developmental courses to enhance their background in English, mathematics, and reading comprehension and vocabulary development. They attended classes from Monday through Friday, between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. In the evenings, between 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., students were offered supplemental instruction through peer tutorial services as well as a variety of academic, personal, and leadership development seminars. Approximately, 300 students, divided into cohorts of 20 participated in the program. While students within a specific cohort attended the same classes and tutoring sessions together, all students attended seminars as a whole. In order to complete the program successfully, students were expected to: (a) attend all scheduled academic classes and sponsored activities, (b) complete all required academic assignments, (c) pass all courses with a letter grade of "C" or better, (d) participate in all mandatory seminars, workshops, and activities, and (e) adhere to the university's Code of Student Conduct. While there is no charge for in-state residents for participating in the program, out-of-state residents were charged for meals only.

Once students matriculated into the university by way of participating in the program, there was no specialized support provided to them. Students took similar classes and had the same resources available to them as students admitted through the regular admission process. During the study's data collection period, the average age of the participants was 21 and the average grade

point average (GPA) was 2.7. (Appendix A shows a listing of students by name (pseudonyms), age, classification, major, and GPA).

Seven participants provided information about their fathers' occupations (i.e., United States Postal Service worker, teacher, lawyer, police officer, minister, and maintenance worker), and educational attainment; it ranged from a GED to professional and graduate school. Two participants indicated that their fathers were retired. Eight participants provided information about their mothers' professional roles. Their mothers' jobs and roles included a salesperson, pediatrician, minister, congressional representative, daycare worker, United States Postal Service worker, nurse, and a full-time college student. Participants' mothers' educational attainment ranged from a high school diploma to a graduate degree. Seven participants were raised in the suburbs, three were raised in a large city, and one was raised in a small city. Participants generally came from two-parent households. Most reported that they planned to further their education beyond their baccalaureate degrees. Specifically, four participants planned to obtain doctoral degrees, six planned to obtain a master's degree, and one participant did not have plans to further his education.

### **Data Collection**

The lead author conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a \$20 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed two consent forms and completed a brief demographic form. One consent form allowed participants to engage in the study and the other allowed researchers to contact the director of the program, who tracked the participants' academic progress during their matriculation at the university, to retrieve information about their overall academic performance and cumulative GPA. The lead author collected this information separately after interviewing each participant.

During interviews, participants were asked about academic and social factors promoting the success of Black males at the institution. Although a standard interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix B), discussions often became conversational, which allowed the lead researcher and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Additional questions included: (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 Black male at this institution? (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge?<sup>2</sup> In addition to the individual interviews, the lead researcher conducted follow up phone interviews with five of the 11 participants. Follow up interviews ranged from 10 to 15 minutes and were necessary to gain clarification of statements participants made during the initial interview. Although, an interview protocol was not used for the phone interview, questions to clarify data were asked.

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 one credit short (89 credit hours) and the other was two credits short (88 credit hours) of senior status. The lead author kept in contact with the participants as they matriculated at the university. All participants graduated in the spring semester of 2007.

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<sup>2</sup>Observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview were recorded throughout the process of data collection.

### **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). While the lead author conducted all the interviews, all authors were involved in data analysis. The lead and secondary author identify as Black American males while the third author identifies as Filipina American. One author was affiliated with an HBCU and two were affiliated with a PWI when data were collected. All authors' research interests are similar, to some extent, in that they assess campus climate across institutional types, investigate factors promoting the success of minority students, and examine racial and ethnic disparities in college student outcomes. Specifically, the lead author has published articles and book chapters on the experiences of Black males at HBCUs. Similarly, the second author has published articles and book chapters about the experiences of Black males at HBCUs and PWIs. Finally, the third author's publications have explored the matriculation of non-White students in PWIs, with a special interest in Asian American college students.

We believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as non-White researchers 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. While our experiences and research may have helped us to better understand the contextual environment of HBCUs and the experiences of students at these institutions, they may have biased how we structured the questions and our interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our biases. Member checking and peer debriefing also enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

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

## **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description<sup>3</sup> so readers can draw their own conclusions from the data. Furthermore, we engaged in member checking (Jones et al., 2006) by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review transcriptions for accuracy and clarity following the interviews. Specifically, participants were invited to add, delete, or otherwise comment on the transcriptions. We used their feedback to enhance the integrity and preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices. Lastly, we used feedback from three peer-debriefers,<sup>4</sup> who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on Black males and HBCUs, to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the lead researcher in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants' experiences throughout the research process. This debriefing process challenged or confirmed the researcher's interpretations of the data.

## **Findings**

Themes that emerged from this study included challenges, which had the propensity to impede (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009), and to contribute to the participants' success. Challenges to their success as well as the role that the remedial program had on them (Palmer & Davis, in press) included non-cognitive variables (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008), student involvement (Palmer & Young, 2009), and family support (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, in press). Additionally, the impact of racial homogeneity, HBCU's community, and peer groups had on motivating and encouraging participants to achieve academically emerged.

## **Challenges and Contributions to Participants' Success**

Various challenges that had the potential to interfere with success were discussed by students. They reported that their challenges were related to insufficient financial aid, pride that prevented them from seeking academic help, home and local community problems, and their ability to interconnect with academic success. For example, 7 of the 11 participants explained how the lack of financial aid posed a challenge to them. In particular, Simmons, a 21-year-old football player and business major, stated that a lack of money presented a major challenge to persistence. More specifically, he explained that "financial resource[s] ... for [many] people ... is the reason they stop school. And [at the university] if you don't have your money by a certain date, the school tends to drop your schedule." Five of 11 participants discussed pride and its impact on academic achievement. For instance, Omar, a 21-year-old business major from a small town, explained that pride impeded Black males' ability to seek support. Specifically he stated that "[Black males] are accustomed to taking care of themselves and, in some cases, their families. Therefore, when they come to college, it is difficult for them to rid themselves of this mentality." James, a 20-year-old business major from the suburbs, supported Omar's assertion, by explaining that although he needed help in the mathematics class, he did not seek it until it was too late. In

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<sup>3</sup>According to Creswell (2003), thick description is the process of providing rich details about the phenomenon under investigation so readers can better understand the study's context and decide on its transferability to other environments.

<sup>4</sup>A debriefer is a professional peer who challenges the researcher when he or she feels that other interpretations should be considered (Jones et al, 2006).

particular, he noted: "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." Five of 11 participants explained how problems within their home environments or communities had the potential to hinder their academic success. Specifically, Walter, a 22-year old business major from the city, explained how a shooting of a family member that occurred in his home neighborhood threatened his academic success. Specifically, he said:

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.

Aside from the challenges, participants discussed how the university's remedial program helped to increase their likelihood of academic success. Specifically, 8 of 11 participants discussed that the program facilitated their academic and social integration into the university. For example, Anderson, a 21 year old theater major from the suburbs, commented that the remedial program enabled him to become academically integrated into the university by connecting him to university personnel. Specifically, he noted: "I got to meet other students, administration, and faculty staff. So when school started, I was a freshman, but I wasn't, because I knew some of [the university members]." Lawrence, a 21 year old sociology major from the suburbs, emphasized that by participating in the remedial program he became socially integrated by developing a supportive network, which played a key role in his motivation to perform well. He stated: "Through the remedial program, I forged supportive and encouraging relationships. I'm very appreciative of my best friends, they have encouraged me through those times when I wanted to just drop out of [the university]."

Furthermore, 7 of 11 participants discussed the critical role that non-cognitive variables (e.g., motivation, persistence) had on their persistence. For example, Chris, a 21-year-old engineering major from the city, mentioned that the ability to focus enhanced his ability to succeed. He indicated: "I would say ... focusing on school work ... [and] basically having a strong mind, ... I would say that leads to success." Samuel, a 21-year-old sociology major from the suburbs, discussed the importance of time management and its relationship to academic success. Specifically, he acknowledged that: "Although managing one's time is simple, it's related to success. ... Managing your time ... just being prepared for the little things like studying for your exams, studying for your finals, not waiting until the last minute" [is important to success].

While 9 of 11 participants discussed the significance of involvement on campus and its impact of their success, some participants observed that many of their male peers were disengaged on campus. For example, James noted that he did not have a strong affinity for the university upon attending, but by becoming involved on campus, he developed a commitment and appreciation of the university, which contributed to his success. In particular, he explained:

I hated the [university] when I first came here. I did not like the school ... but once I realized that [I am] here to stay, let me make the best of it. I don't want to lose credits ... so that's when I became really active. That helped me a lot, because I felt that I was a part of the university. The thing that was critical to my academic success was simply being involved.

Interestingly, while James explained the critical role that involvement played on his academic achievement, he noted that most males at the university were not involved. More specifically, he explained: “Mostly women are involved not men ... I definitely need to get Black male involvement in school activities, not even just like SGA [student government association] but like get involved with your major.”

Nine of 11 participants also credited their family for playing a role in their success. The participants explained that family members provided messages of encouragement and support, which helped them to focus on succeeding academically. More specifically, Samuel, who lived at home with his parents while attending college, explained: “I can honestly say my mom and my dad [encouraged me to achieve]. I don’t stay on campus. So when I go home, I always have an encouraging [word] ... [letting me know] I can do it.” Simmons also noted that his family motivated him to succeed by constantly encouraging him to do his best. He noted that they would occasionally inquire about his grades and academic assignments. Specifically, he indicated: “Family, ... they push me, ... I told one of my family members that I was not doing my homework ... and they got on my back.”

### ***Black College Racial Homogeneity***

Eight of 11 participants commented that the university’s racial homogeneity facilitated their willingness to excel and demonstrate a desire for academic success. Specifically, Anderson, Omar, and Lawrence explained that having access to a cadre of Black students who are motivated and focused on attaining their baccalaureate degrees influenced their motivation to succeed. Simmons elaborated: “It’s like most of the Black males here are ... striving for one thing – to be successful, and that makes me want to be successful.”

The racial homogeneity of the college provided a positive frame of reference for the participants as they were able to interact and to have a visible representation of Black students who valued learning and academic success. Because of their experiences at the university, exhibiting a penchant for learning became popular as the university’s environment had impressed upon the participants the importance for Blacks to engage in learning and demonstrate a proclivity for education.

Omar provided insight about his interpretation of society’s depiction of Blacks. His HBCU experience, however, challenged this depiction by showing the diversity that exists amongst Blacks. He seemed amazed to be in an environment where a diverse group of Blacks embraced education and were driven to succeed. This, of course, seemed to motivate him and provide a sense of self-efficacy. Specifically, Omar explained:

Seeing other Black people [makes] us want to succeed too. Like so much of society, they show us as scavengers ... they show us as not intelligent. Corporate America shows us what they want us to see, and they show people what they want us to be thought [of as], and I don’t like that. But when I came to the [university] ... I saw Black people. I saw Trinidadian people. I saw people from all shades of Black ... who [are] motivated [and] driven for success.

Further, Lawrence indicated that the environment created by the omnipresence of Blacks was not only positive but comfortable as well. He explained that being in a predominantly Black environment sustained his motivation and reinvigorated his desire to succeed. Specifically,

Lawrence stated that “[this HBCU] makes you want to do better [be]cause you’re at an institution with a majority of your race, and you don’t want to be a failure. You want to succeed.”

Samuel explained how having commonalities (i.e., socio-economic status and race) with individuals who attended this HBCU increased his motivation to become academically successful. Samuel specifically stated:

After my first couple of semesters of being [at the university], I found out how many famous people went to this school, and they were like in the same situation as I was ... having this knowledge strengthened my ability to succeed.

Overall, participants responded that having similar characteristics with the members of this HBCU increased their willingness and motivation to perform well.

### ***HBCU Community and Support***

Seven of 11 participants discussed the linkage between helpful and encouraging faculty members and academic success. Faculty encouraged their students to excel academically and tried to help students maximize their potential. James explained that some of his Black professors tried to maximize his potential because they realized that he is capable of excelling academically. James noted:

Most of [the faculty are] Black, which I do appreciate because what I learned now is that the teachers who are not Black usually ... water things down. So I feel like the Black professors are usually harder, because they know that you have the potential and they’ll push you, and drive you.

Like James, Lawrence supported how faculty supported and encouraged his potential and intellectual prowess. Lawrence responded that one faculty member in particular gave him the opportunity to do research with him, which enhanced his confidence and self-efficacy. He explained: “Dr. Charles [gave me] the opportunity to do research with him ... without him I don’t know if I would be doing anything. This helped me realize my potential [to succeed in college].” Omar supported the encouragement faculty gave students by stating: “[faculty] are helpful, but yet they will push you to get all they can out of you.”

Many participants described their university’s environments as a supportive and caring environment. Anderson noted that it is hard to identify just one factor at this HBCU that has enabled him to succeed. However, he credited both academic and student affairs personnel (i.e., faculty, administration, and staff) for providing a source of support, motivation, and words of encouragement. Specifically, he said:

It’s just the environment that the [university] fosters. When I came here, it’s so hard to pinpoint one thing that really got me to this point. ... I think it was the administration and the faculty and the staff that helped me out. From talking to maintenance staff who tells you to stay in school because an education is important to talking to a doctoral student, telling you to file your taxes.

James mentioned that social support systems at the university helped him to raise his GPA:

“The social aspect is completely different at Black colleges, which I’m very thankful for. I probably wouldn’t have the grades I have [elsewhere].” He indicated that professors are available and demonstrate a willingness to build relationships with students:

Here, it’s more ... personal, it’s more relationship-building ... it’s very easy for you to go to your teacher and be like [sic], Listen, I’m not understanding, and half the time they will take time out to help you. So, I think that’s what it is – it’s the smallness of the classes, and the close feeling – you can really get to kind of know your teachers. ... They talk to me and encourage me to succeed.

In addition to faculty support, many participants explained how accessibility to role models and mentors emerged as a significant factor supporting academic success. While James noted the importance of having access to someone who has been successful and its impact on success, Anderson explained that having some commonalities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, educational background, socio-economic status) with the successful person can foster a sense of self-efficacy. Recalling a visit by Frank, an alumnus and successful lawyer, Anderson explained:

I think it’s ... a male seeing another male doing something that he wants to do. Frank is [on] the university council, and he came down to my [residence hall] one time. A lot of people said I want to be a lawyer. I want to be a doctor, but you don’t see any Black lawyers, you don’t see any Black doctors, how feasible [is it] to ever reach that goal if you don’t see anyone that ... [is Black] like you? So when he came down, that guy is young, man. He’s a lawyer really, in actuality that’s instant inspiration because you’re like, If he could do it, I could do it, he ... [is Black] just like me. So I think males on campus, Black males in general, on a college level, if you see someone doing something that you want to do, it will inspire you to do it.

Anderson added:

The inspiration you can get when you see another [Black] man doing what you want to do, there’s nothing like it. When I came [here] I met a [number] of males who were doing positive things. I met lawyers. I met scientists. I met guys who were successful. ... If he could do it, hell I could do it! That was very inspirational to me.

Anderson’s comment is profound. Many Blacks, particularly males, raised in the inner city lack contact with positive Black male role models. Anderson’s attendance at this HBCU, provided a cadre of positive male role models, which increased the likelihood that he would encounter individuals who motivate, nurture, support, and encourage his desire to strive for academic excellence.

### ***Peer Groups and Academic Success***

Nine of 11 participants explained that their peer groups significantly influenced their desire to perform well academically. As such, peers played a fundamental role in impressing upon their fellow collegians the importance of an education. James cited his peers as a variable that positively affected his success. He explained that most of his friends are serious and driven. Their assiduous mentality fueled his desire to do well:

Peer group is definitely [important] [be]cause most of my friends ... they have a goal there, they're ambitious, they have ... that drive. If I didn't surround myself with people who are hard working, intelligent, and ambitious, I think it would be difficult because I believe that you feed off your friends.

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

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

In a sense, his circle of peers made succeeding popular. If Anderson was going to maintain his sense of self-assurance then he had to work hard to get good grades. While success in college is contingent upon a number of factors, students' peers exerted a powerful influence on their retention and persistence.

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

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

Omar supported Simmons' assertion about the connection between peers and persistence. In particular, Omar noted that many times he became discouraged when some of his peers progressed academically and he had not. His friends kept his spirits alive. By supporting him, they helped maintain his desire for academic prominence. They provided a shoulder to lean on and helped him cultivate the fortitude to persist when he was not able to muster the energy. He said: "I found two of my best friends through the [remedial program] ... we forged a friendship, and we just encouraged each other. ... I mean, it's the good support system that Black men need."

Douglass, a 21-year-old business major from the suburbs, emphasized how his friends motivated him to work towards his potential. Because of his friends, Douglass was challenged to work hard to maintain his grades. He commented:

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

Peers proved indispensable to their fellow collegians' academic success. The participants reported that their friends encouraged their persistence by displaying concern for their success,

motivating them to persist, acting as an authority figure, and using peer pressure to encourage and popularize academic achievement.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Data from the current study emerged from a qualitative investigation of Black males who entered an HBCU as academically underprepared and persisted to graduation. Several themes emerged from this study. One theme focused on challenges to the participants' success. In particular, participants described concerns about the availability of financial aid, their pride and its impediment to seeking support, and how problems occurring in their homes or communities pose a challenge to persistence (Palmer et al., 2009). A body of research (Perna, 2006; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter 2005; Titus, 2006) has noted a relationship between inadequate financial support and student attrition. Research has also shown that pride can impinge upon Black males' ability to seek support (hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992). Almost two decades ago, Majors and Billson characterized pride that Black males display as "cool pose" (p. 8); a façade used to display confidence and masculinity. They asserted that Black males adopt a cool pose to project control to others even when they are in need of assistance or guidance. Furthermore, research has shown that problems occurring in students' home or neighborhoods can be a barrier to success (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). In particular, the impact that students' homes or communities have on their academic performance is a phenomenon that researchers have recently begun to examine (Charles, Dinwiddie, & Massey, 2004). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, Charles et al. explained that minorities living in segregated communities are more likely to experience stressful events stemming from their home communities, which negatively impacts their persistence.

In addition to challenges, the role that the remedial program played in impacting participants' academic and social integration into the university was discussed and supported by Palmer and Davis, (in press), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Swail, Redd, and Perna's (2003) research. Also, earlier research (Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Schwartz & Washington, 2002; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985), similar to this study addressed how participants used non-cognitive variables to facilitate their persistence to graduation. Further, involvement in campus activities as discussed by the participants revealed that many of their Black male peers were disengaged on campus; a cause for concern since Astin (1985) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have shown a positive relationship between student involvement on campus and persistence. Although studies (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002), have shown that Blacks are involved on campus at HBCUs, other studies (Harper et al., 2004; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Roach, 2001) have shown that Black females are more involved than Black males. Additionally, participants' discussion about how family support facilitated their academic success is consistent with other literature findings (Guiffreda, 2005a; Ross, 1998).

Another theme that emerged from this investigation was the impact that an HBCU community had on helping to enhance success for these participants. Specifically, similar to conclusions by others (Fleming, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Roebuck & Murty, 1993), they emphasized the role that the institution's racial composition, peers, role models, and faculty had on facilitating their persistence to graduation. Freeman (2005), in particular, noted: "studies show that [Black] students who attend HBCUs experience higher intellectual gains and have more favorable psychological adjustment, more positive self-images, stronger racial pride, and higher aspirations" (p. 84).

According to researchers (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996), this supportive context differs from other environments. In other words, many of the factors that participants in this study identified as contributors to their success (i.e., faculty, role models, peer support, and racial uplift), are the very same factors that are absent for Black students at PWIs who have less favorable experiences and outcomes.

While this current study confirms previous research about HBCUs, it also provides insight into how one HBCU fostered a supportive campus climate for academically underprepared Black males. Specifically, these males indicated that all segments of the university community played an important role in their persistence to graduation. Additionally, we suggest that HBCUs create an institutional community whereby everyone in the environment works collaboratively to support and encourage Black male academic success. Doing so may bridge an unintentional schism between academic<sup>5</sup> and student affairs<sup>6</sup> on campuses. On a larger level, institutions can encourage everyone in the college milieu (e.g., faculty, administrators, staff, and peers) to go beyond their prescribed roles and focus on promoting the success of Black male collegians.

On a smaller level, educational institutions might consider creating an organization that embodies synergy between the various agents of the institutional community to engender academic success. An effective program to peruse for a model is the Morgan Male Initiative on Leadership and Excellence (MILE) (2009). MILE was implemented to reduce attrition among Black males at an HBCU; participants in MILE engaged in a variety of leadership and teambuilding activities on and off campus. An evaluation of MILE revealed that it was successful in its intended goal (Chickering, Peters, & Palmer, 2006). One of the things that increased the efficacy of MILE, according to focus group data, was that the university community (faculty, administrators, staff, and peers) was actively involved in the organization as well as its events. Thus, participants had a wide range of support to increase their success.

Furthermore, participants in this study found the racial homogeneity of the university to be encouraging, motivational, and an important factor in promoting their success. Similar to other research on HBCUs (e.g., Freeman, 2005; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gurin, & Epps, 1975), this study confirms the positive impact of HBCUs' homogeneous racial climates and their ability to engender academic success for Black students. Thus, student affairs practitioners at HBCUs might consider using the racial homogeneity of Black colleges to foster academic success among Black male collegians. They might do this by encouraging these males to consciously think about being immersed in an environment where many of their peers strive for success. Student affairs practitioners might also use creative slogans and phrases about the HBCU's racial environment to encourage critical reflection that will foster a mindset of determination and a resolved will to succeed. Such a reflection might be beneficial to underprepared Black males, as they may not have been exposed to many Black role models.

In addition, participants in this study credited their professors for encouraging them to believe in themselves and work toward their full potential. Research has shown that positive student-faculty interaction is linked to academic achievement and success for all students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While research supports this relationship between faculty interaction and success, researchers (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) indicate that generally Black students lack close contact with White faculty at PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Guiffreda,

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<sup>5</sup>Academic affairs are primarily concerned with students learning in the classrooms.

<sup>6</sup>Student affairs practitioners are focused on student development and their learning out of the classroom.

2005b). Other researchers argued that students have close, supportive relationships with both Black and White faculty at HBCUs (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Academic achievement was reported, by the participants, as a requirement for group conformity; these males relied on each other. This finding however, is not consistent with previous research (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lundy, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1992) regarding the impact that Black males with peers of the same race have on academic success. Specifically, research has shown that Black males with same-race peers tend to dissuade their friends from engaging in activities that support academic success. However, the finding from this study is consistent with Harper's (2006b) study of 32 high-achieving Black males at six, large, public research PWIs. Specifically, Harper found that Black male peers encouraged academic success for their same-race peers. Despite the similarities between the two studies, it is important to note that Harper focused on high-achieving students whereas all participants in this current study entered college academically underprepared. While Harper's findings are noteworthy, the selection of his participants do not account for Black male students who relied on academic support to ensure their success in college. Therefore, it is possible that many of Harper's participants entered higher education well-prepared and would have succeeded with or without peer encouragement.

Black males who surround themselves around similarly-minded, academically-driven peers seem to encourage and popularize academic success. To this end, HBCUs might consider using support mechanisms that actively engage peers to influence student success. One pragmatic way for doing this is to create a learning community for Black males where they live together in the residence halls and attend classes as a cohort. With this learning community, universities can promote and enhance academic success, foster peer accountability, and encourage learning outside as well as inside the classroom. Campus officials, who work in this community, can initiate dialogue that addresses the contemporary issues and successes that Black males encounter on and off campus. Doing so may serve as a bulwark against some of the issues hindering Black male academic success as well as illuminate positive images of Black males in higher education and beyond. Although not restricted by gender, many universities have learning communities for honor students. Such, a learning community consisting of only Black males could serve a similar purpose in that it may greatly strengthen the academic and social support that the university provides. Finally, while this study supports the positive impact that HBCUs continue to have on Black students, future research could investigate students' perceptions of alternate approaches to remediation and retention at HBCUs. While not mentioned by participants in this study, participants in a study by Harper and Gasman (2008) led them to conclude that conservative policies (e.g., policies that inhibit student self-expression) engendered an unwelcoming environment, which was the antithesis of the environment that participants described in this study.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Description of Sample**

Name	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
Douglass	21	Senior	Business	2.5
Howard	22	Senior	Business	2.9
Chris	21	Junior	Industrial Engineering	2.7
Walter	22	Senior	Business	2.5

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol**

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1. What has life been like at this institution for you as a Black male?
  2. How do you define success (academic and in general)?
  3. How has that definition of success changed overtime?
  4. What are your long term professional goals?
  5. What has been the most significant experience of your senior year?
  6. What leadership experiences have you engaged that you believe has helped you to be successful at this university?
  7. How important is campus involvement to your academic success?
  8. When Black men do not achieve academic success in college, what are the primary factors you think make it difficult to achieve success?
  9. What personal factors contribute to the academic success of Black men at HBCUs?
  10. What educational factors contribute to the academic success of Black men at HBCUs?
  11. Who has played a significant role in your ability to become academically successful?
  12. What role has mentoring played in your life to be academically success?
  13. What role or impact did your parents/guardians have on your academic success?
  14. How was your experience in the pre-college program?
  15. What aspects of the program have you found most helpful?
  16. What are factors promoting Black male achievement at HBCUs?
  17. 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?
  18. What motivates you to do your best?
  19. What information or insights would you share with other Black males entering this university, or any other public HBCU, to help them overcome barriers and achieve academically? How are these things different than what you would tell any student?
  20. What would be the one thing to succeed without during your collegiate years?
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