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A Work in Progress: The Lived Experiences of Black Male Undergraduates at One Predominantly White University

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The enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for black male undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities in the United States (US) are indefensible. Many factors including the persistent failures of elementary and secondary schools that primarily serve African American students; efforts to eliminate affirmative action policies and remove the consideration of race as a criteria for making college admissions decisions; the absence or inaccessibility of academic, social and emotional supports for college students; and the skyrocketing tuition and lessening availability of funding for economically disadvantaged students have all contributed to declining college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for students of color (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Harris & Tienda, 2010). For black males, however, the effects of these conditions have been particularly devastating.

Arthur Levine has called the statistics on black males' matriculation in America's colleges "the shame of higher education" (Ellis, 2009, p. 92). Similarly, Ellis (2009) has characterized the retention and enrollment of African American males in American colleges and universities as being in a state of crisis. Noguera (1997) has argued that the metaphor of *crisis* may not be appropriate for describing black males' current state in that the term insinuates that the current situation is a short term emergency which was preceded by a period of stability and after which appropriate action is taken, a more stable period will ensue. According to Noguera (1997), "Not only are the problems that particularly afflict Black males persistent, but all signs indicate escalating rather than declining severity" (p. 221). As such, a more appropriate characterization might be that educationally, "African American males are in deep trouble" (Noguera, 2003, p. 431). Indeed, African American males have been in trouble educationally for some time now and the situation appears only to be worsening (Noguera, 1997, 2003; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Roach, 2001).

Recognizing these disturbing realities, the researchers sought in this exploratory study to better understand the lived academic and social experiences of current black male undergraduate students, including their perceived barriers and their strategies for persistence and achieving success. Study participants included black male undergraduate students at one university (Mid-South University). Mid-South University (pseudonym) is a southern, predominantly white, four-year, public research university. Mid-South is situated in a predominantly white state with a relatively small percentage of African American men, but black male representation in Mid-South's student body is disproportionately low. Also, the retention and graduation rates for black male undergraduates at Mid-South are currently and have been significantly lower than those of their black female, white male, and white female counterparts.

The results of this study are intended to assist Mid-South administrators, faculty, staff, and students as they plan initiatives to increase the retention and graduation rates of their black male students. Additionally, the results add to the small but growing body of scholarly literature which examines the lived experiences of black students at predominantly white colleges and universities. Struggles with adjustment to college life are common to students of all genders and racial/ethnic backgrounds, but for black males, predominantly white college campuses pose unique challenges (Harper, 2004, 2006, 2009). Further, much of the research on black males in higher education has used quantitative approaches and has produced indicators of enrollment, retention, and graduation for black men; but scholars and practitioners know much less about the qualitative lived experiences of black male college students (Davis, 1994; Harper, 2009). The results of this study, along with others that are beginning to fill that void, help to paint the picture of these students and their experiences. As such, the researchers were extremely conscientious about encouraging and allowing study participants to tell their stories freely. The researchers

sought to use this research as a vehicle for the students to tell their stories to the world in their authentic voices.

Black Male Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation

The vast majority of college-age African American men are doing something other than pursuing a degree at a college or university. Some of these young men are immediately entering the workforce and some are joining the military; others are joining the ranks of the un- or under-employed. Many of them are becoming intimately acquainted with the American criminal justice system, though most often not as workers but as arrestees, inmates, parolees, and probationers. Shamefully, it has been estimated that nearly 200,000 more black men are incarcerated than attending colleges and universities in the US (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Regrettably, the college enrollment of black male undergraduates has sharply and continuously declined since 1977 (Noguera, 2003). Currently, black men account for only 4% of the total enrollment at four-year colleges and universities in the US, which is about the same as their percentages in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). In comparison, in 2004 black men accounted for over 30% of student athletes in Division I sports—comprising nearly 55% of football teams and approximately 61% of men's basketball teams.

Among the total population of African American students, African American males' numbers lag in achievement, retention, and graduation (Noguera, 2003; Palmer & Maramba, 2011); African American females are enrolling in and earning degrees from colleges and universities and much higher rates than black males. Of the African American men who graduated from high school in the year 2000, approximately 34% of them enrolled in college compared to approximately 44% of their African American female counterparts (Palmer &

Maramba, 2011). In 2007, there were 700,000 more black female undergraduates attending college than black male undergraduates (Garibaldi, 2009).

Why are black males not enrolling in colleges and universities? There is no shortage of explanations. In fact, since the 1970s researchers have given consideration to what stops black men from enrolling in college and then what stops them from remaining and graduating. From this research, suggested explanations for black males' disproportionately low enrollments have included the following: disproportionately high school dropout rates for black male students; stressful economic circumstances for black families; the influence of popular culture, particularly the influence of hip-hop music and culture on black males; the high incidence of black males entering the military; the availability of employment after high schools; disproportionately higher levels of incarceration among black males; high rates of homicide among black males; and fear, distrust, and unfamiliarity with college environments (e.g., Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2006; Harris & Tienda, 2010; Roach, 2000, 2001).

Many of the black male students who are enrolling in college are struggling to remain enrolled and most of them are not graduating. In fact, nearly 70% of all black male undergraduate students who begin college do not graduate within six years (Harper, 2006). Black male undergraduates have the highest attrition rates among male and female students of all racial/ethnic groups in American higher education (Harper, 2006; Nealy, 2009). White men earn more than ten times the number of associates, bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees awarded to black men (Harper, 2006). Even black male undergraduates attending some of the nation's top colleges and universities struggle to remain enrolled and to earn degrees. According to a 2005 National Black Male College Achievement Study, black men at top-tier colleges had a graduation rate of only 36%, compared to 46% for Hispanic males and 60% for white males

(Harper, 2006). And as stated, a significant gender gap exists between black men and women in the number of degrees earned. In 1997, black men had a 34% full-time undergraduate degree completion rate, compared to black women at nearly 44% (Roach, 2001). In 2006, black women earned 94,341 bachelor's degrees at US higher education institutions compared to 48,079 bachelor's degrees awarded to black men (Palmer & Maramba, 2011).

Black Males and Academic Under-Achievement

The educational woes for black male students begin well before they reach higher education institutions. For decades black male students in elementary and secondary schools have been more likely than their white male and female, and black female counterparts to be suspended or expelled from school, to be placed in special education classes, to be absent from honors and advanced placement courses, and to drop out of school prior to graduation (Noguera, 1997, 2003a, 2003b; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Many black male students enter higher education institutions after having spent the majority if not all of their academic careers in environments that Harmon and Ford (2010) characterize as *hostile*—“environments that are not designed for and do not adapt, validate, or channel the ways these male children think, speak or behave into constructive learning and developmental experiences and skills” (p. 13).

Considerable research has addressed the factors contributing to the continuing, and in some instances widening, gap between the achievement scores of white and black students. The unique challenges of raising the achievement of black male students have been categorized into school, family, community, and cultural problems (Roach, 2000). Identified societal problems have included those beliefs, practices, and conditions that negatively influence black male students' educational experiences, including social justice and inequalities and “the lure of the streets” (Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 7). School factors contributing to achievement gaps include

limited participation of students of color in rigorous courses; less qualified or experienced teachers in the classrooms of students of color; teachers' low expectations of students of color; resource disparities between high-minority schools and other schools; and school climates in high-minority schools that are not conducive to learning (Harmon & Ford, 2010, p. 7).

Other suggested explanations for black males' lagging achievement scores have included a decline in leisurely reading among black males and a possibly related increase in the popularity of hip-hop music; and the possibility that young black males are more attracted to careers in sports or music than to academic pursuits (Noguera, 2003; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Roach, 2001;). According to Cuyjet (1997), in higher education a significant portion of the group of black men who enroll in college are not prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education; stemming from factors including "attending academically poorer elementary and secondary schools, lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement, peer pressure to disdain educational accomplishments and education as an outcome, financial hardships, limited educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers owing to racism" (pp. 6-7).

It is not possible, however, to completely explain the underachievement of black students with school, societal and economic background factors. The black middle class student has been something of a conundrum for researchers in that even black middle class and upper middle class students' achievement scores and grade point averages lag behind those of their white middle class counterparts (Jencks & Philips, 1998; Noguera, 2003; Steele, 1997). This leaves the observer only able to assume that beyond class, something type of racial component affects the scores of black students (Steele, 1999). Steele's (1997) research, which pointedly examines the underachievement of middle and upper middle class, and academically well-prepared black

students identifies psychological factors causing racial anxiety which may contribute to these students' underperformance. Specifically, he asserts that stereotype threat, defined as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999, ¶ 10) can impede the academic performance of black students by placing the burden of overcoming racial stereotypes. Students who do not belong to groups that are negatively stereotyped in similar ways to black students do have to shoulder this burden. Additionally, black male students in particular may be plagued by what Lee (1991, as cited in Cuyjet, 1997) called development disadvantage, defined as “those social, cultural, and economic forces that combine to keep black men from attaining traditional masculine roles and that therefore prevent them from mastering crucial developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence that, in turn, negatively affect their social, academic, and career successes later in life” (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 7).

Choosing between competing definitions of masculinity is a uniquely difficult challenge for young black males. Young black men are forced into choosing between seemingly competing definitions of manhood. Making the *wrong* decision may result in problems with socialization and acceptance in mainstream society in general and in educational settings in particular. Harris (1995) describes alternative definitions of masculinity for some black men in the following way:

Pressures to meet European American standards of manhood as provider, protector, and disciplinarian are representative of such a dilemma for African American men. Although most African American men have internalized and accepted these standards of manhood, inequities in earning potential and employment and limited access to educational opportunities prevent the expression of these behaviors. . . . For those who are unable to meet traditional standards of masculinity, manhood has been redefined to be consistent with their alienation from mainstream values and institutions. . . . To compensate for feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and shame that result from the inability to enact traditional masculine roles, some African American male youth of low-income social status have redefined masculinity to emphasize sexual promiscuity, toughness, thrill seeking, and the use of violence in interpersonal interactions. (pp. 279-280)

Kunjufu (1988) asserts that African American male students must often choose between school achievement and peer acceptance which may be gained by subscribing to these alternative definitions of masculinity.

In a similar vein to Kunju's (1988) argument, but applicable to both black male and female students, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed that African Americans have formed an oppositional culture stemming from their oppression, enslavement, and discrimination, which persuades black pupils to devalue academic achievement because of its association with *whiteness*. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986):

schooling is perceived by blacks, especially by black adolescents, as learning to act white, as acting white, or trying to cross cultural boundaries...the academic learning and performance problems of black children arise not only from a limited opportunity structure and black people's responses to it, but also from the way black people attempt to cope with the burden of acting white. (p. 201)

Fordham and Ogbu do contend that the stigma of whiteness attached to academic achievement may be greater for black males, with male students being more susceptible to the negative consequences of being academically successful than their black female. However, their argument has been called into question with later studies. For example, Lundy (2003) found that African American and Hispanic students were more resistant to school than their white and Asian counterparts; though Lundy did not find high achieving African American students' peer relations suffered as a result of their academic success. In fact, he found that high achieving black students reported more favorable peer relations than their lower achieving peers.

Black Male Students' Campus Experiences

Previous research has identified notable differences between the experiences of black students at HBCUs and predominantly white colleges and universities. Not surprisingly, black students in general usually experience more adjustment issues on predominantly white campuses

than at HBCUs. Researchers have found that black students' academic and psychological needs are better served on predominantly black campuses; with black students on average having greater academic gains and experiencing fewer adjustment issues at black schools (Flemming, 1984; Allen, 1985, 1986). On predominantly white campuses black students' most serious adjustment issues seem to center on students feeling isolated, alienated, and not supported (Allen, 1985, 1986, 1992). Conversely, on black campuses, black students have reported feeling engaged, connected, accepted, supported, and encouraged. Historically, black males on black campuses have been more empowered, assertive, and competitive (Flemming, 1984).

Despite the difficulties for black students on white campuses, many black students are able to adapt and are successful at predominantly white schools. "Typically, students who successfully adapt establish social relationships with Whites, adjust to Black-White cultural differences, and cope with college academic requirements that are more demanding than those they faced in high school" (Allen, 1992, p. 29; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Nevertheless, the value of the supportive environment that HBCUs provide for black students is noteworthy. Students, as all people, develop most when they feel valued, protected, accepted, and connected. The environments at HBCUs have been able to successfully "communicate to Black students that it is safe to take the risks associated with intellectual growth and development" (Allen, 1992, p. 40; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Palmer and Gasman (2008) drew similar conclusions after studying the role of social capital in promoting academic success at one HBCU. Black male participants in Palmer and Gasman's study "described an environment that was supportive, encouraging, and nurturing, enabling them to overcome their academic weaknesses and to graduate with a relatively strong GPA" (p. 66).

Methodology

This exploratory study employed the use of focus group interviews. Data were collected through two in-depth, audio-recorded focus group discussions, with each discussion lasting approximately two hours. A strength of using focus groups as a qualitative data collection method is that it gives group participants the opportunity to “stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their own views are” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). The researchers did recognize that a limitation of using focus groups as the only method of data collection in a study is that researchers run the risk of participants failing to share incidents or experiences that they might be embarrassed to share with a group; but because this study was an exploratory one, meant only to be a starting place for inquiry, the researchers were comfortable with the level of risk associated with this decision.

The sample of participants was obtained through purposeful snowball sampling. A black male student leader was identified by researchers and asked to assist with recruiting other black male undergraduate students to participate in focus groups discussions with the purpose of exploring the academic and social experiences of black male students at Mid-South. Any student who wished to participate was asked to RSVP with the Mid-South Diversity Office. Students were not compensated monetarily for participating in the focus groups, but they were provided with a meal before each discussion began. The same 12 students participated in each focus group discussion. All participants were undergraduate students at Mid-South. Each participant identified himself racially and by gender as a black or African American male. Participants’ grade classifications ranged from sophomore through senior; and they represented a wide range of majors.

Two black male researchers facilitated both focus groups. Before beginning each focus group discussion, the facilitators explained and discussed the guidelines for the discussion with the students. The facilitators told the student participants that (a) there were no right or wrong answers, and that purpose of the study was to understand their perspectives of student life at the university; (b) no one should feel pressured to agree with anyone else, and that because people are different, different views are expected; (c) participants should feel comfortable saying both good things and critical things about their experiences at the university; (d) participants should speak clearly and one at a time so that everyone's views could be heard and recorded; and (e) all discussions would be kept strictly confidential, with only researchers having access to the focus group discussion audio-recordings and transcripts, and participants would not be personally identified in any way in resulting reports or publications.

During the first focus group discussion, facilitators asked participants to discuss their experiences as students at the university. Following the first discussion, the researchers listened to the audio-recording of the discussion and identified several major themes from the data. During the second focus group discussion, the researchers again asked participants to speak generally about their experiences as students at Mid-South, but they also probed more specifically in the areas that were identified as major themes from the first discussion.

Following the second discussion, the audio-recordings of both discussions were transcribed by a researcher. The data were open-coded independently by two researchers; conflicts in coding were resolved using consensus coding. No a priori codes were used in data analysis. The researchers looked for emergent themes in the data and reached consensus on all codes before the final categorization of data. The researchers recognize the inherent limitations

and challenges of utilizing focus groups as tool of inquiry. As such the findings discussed here are seen as a starting point in a larger investigation.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the data: lack of diversity on campus, comfort on campus, perceptions of university administration, perceptions of institutional supports, and student coping strategies. The following sections describe the data from each theme; using the students' voices (with pseudonyms) whenever possible.

Lack of Diversity

Throughout both focus group discussions, many participants spoke of their frustration with the lack of diversity in the student body as well as with faculty and staff members. When asked what they would like to see in terms of improving student diversity on campus, students responded by saying "More blacks!" Another student comment specifically on the difficulty that the university has with retaining black students and how that contributes to the problem of attaining a critical mass of black students on campus.

I've also seen that if, say 90% of the blacks that I came in with stayed here, then there would be more blacks. If that happened per class, there's a chance that maybe our population might be about 10% on campus. But since there are so many blacks that come in and say that I want to see more Blacks and don't come back, then you face the same problem with each freshman class.

Regarding student diversity, participants talked about the psychological and emotional toll of being such an extreme minority on campus; with some students suggesting that one reason for black students leaving the university after a semester or a year is fear. As one student explained:

I honestly believe they get scared walking into a class where there's 300 people and about four black people. Now me, I went to [Jefferson Davis] High School, and that's a predominately white school so I'm used to it, it really doesn't bother me. But not everybody is... I mean you come from a school like [Booker T. Washington], you're not used to that type of situation. And, it's to the point where we have people hanging

Obama effigies, cartoons, people writing "die nigger" on doors. I mean people get scared—not everybody knows how to handle themselves in a situation like that.

Students also talked about their need to see more black faculty and staff members on campus, particularly young black men who they can relate to and who can relate to them. An upperclassman discussed for example:

We need more strong black male role models. As a group, we come into college and very rarely do you see a man who has graduated from college and is working here trying to help you along your way. So that's something that [Mid-South] itself can strive hard for; black professors, black counselors, black male counselors, so we can see that we can be there. Because, I mean, it's easy for somebody to tell you, anybody to tell you, you need to graduate—you can do it, but as a black man, we all, we understand that we are looked at differently and we have to face different challenges than other males. And it does help for someone who has been there where you've been to tell you what you need to do and how you can do it.

Overall, students' sentiments about diversity on campus were that there are not enough African students, staff, or faculty members on campus. Students felt that a critical mass of black students would help black students with feeling more comfortable on campus, especially black students who have spent their entire school careers in settings that were predominantly black. Students said that increasing the number of black male faculty and staff members was important in that it would provide black male students with living and breathing models of successful black manhood.

Comfort on Campus

The majority of student participants described the Mid-South campus climate as one that is hostile toward black students. The students described an environment where they continually encounter racial micro aggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and expressions of prejudice. Participants routinely described the university as an institution that is *not for them* and said that it is constantly communicated to them that they are not wanted at Mid-South. One upperclassman recounted a recent conversation with a student colleague:

I was just speaking with a few black freshman females that are considering either leaving [Mid-South] or transferring somewhere else and it's their first semester here. One telling me that blatantly "This school is not for us, this school is for White people." And I really couldn't argue with her too much.

Another student reported feeling similarly:

[Mid-South] has a sports mentality with African-Americans; because if you look at sports, sports suggest that you have a certain number of people, and because there are so many athletes out there now, that if you lose one you can pick up another. And I feel like that's how they are with us. I feel like we're just a number to them. And they know that if one drops there's going to be ten more willing to pick up the slack where they left off. So they're not really concerned on keeping you here because they know that it doesn't matter if you stay here or not. They can pick up another one who will be just as happy to fill your spot.

A third student spoke of his perception that the university expected black students to assimilate into white campus culture, stating:

They don't do anything to try to keep us here. They're just like, "Oh, you're here, you should assimilate to what we're doing." "You should try and be more like us." "You know, don't be your little 'hood' selves." Because that's what they think we all are. They think everybody listens to loud music, and wears their pants down to their ankles, and has no intelligence.

Students also talked about the blatant racist comments that they deal with on the Mid-South campus. There was a shared sense of both outrage and acceptance among the students about perceived racist comments and actions on the Mid-South campus. One student explained it in this way:

Everyone has their story of randomly being called a nigger on campus. And I was talking to some guys the other day at the [Drexel Center] and they were like, "Well, it wouldn't be a normal semester for me if I didn't get called "nigger" at least once." I'm like, "Really?" And, I mean, it recently happened to me and I'm just at the point where.... It happened last year—whatever—I couldn't worry about it. I guess in the initial state of it, you're like, "OK, well, I wonder what..." because it was so random. It's like I wonder what they're thinking about me, I wonder how you really feel; I wonder how you really feel. I mean, after a while, it starts to go away; but at this point it's still rampant in my head...I mean it's hard to get past that. You know you have to go to class, and you go to class, you do your best and everything, but still in your head, it's like, it's, it's hard to get past that.

Another student responded:

A lot of guys, at least the guys that I talk to, they're kind of at the point where it's common for the racist remarks and the racist comments and the stuff like that. And they're used to it, so it's not becoming that big of a shock to them anymore. They're just used to it.

Student's accounts of their experiences on Mid-South's campus reflect a shared sense that the campus environment is at the very least unwelcoming and in some instances even hostile towards them as African American students. Their interactions with other students as well as their perceptions of the overall campus climate reveal that African American men experience Mid-South's campus in a distinct way that emphasizes race and introduces elements of race-related stress into their campus experience. Explicit and implicit messages of racial hatred have contributed to a general campus atmosphere of discomfort for these students.

Perceptions of University Administration

Throughout both focus group discussions, participants expressed distrust and even disdain for the university's highest levels of administration. They talked extensively about what they perceived as incidents of blatant racism on campus, and the Mid-South administration's either failure to address the incidents at all, failure to address them in a timely fashion, or failure to address them appropriately. Specifically, participants talked about the university administration's responses to "die nigger" being written on a student's dorm room door, and the hanging of an effigy of President Barack Obama from a tree on campus. One student recounted:

I believe it was [date] because I'll never forget the day: a [racist] cartoon was published in the [Mid-South News]. [In response to the cartoon, the] president sent out an email—he sent out a damn email—and this is like one of the first times I've ever experienced blatant racism in that form. Later, about three days later, after the news coverage was on campus, umm, they interviewed different student leaders. They interviewed a [black] guy named, [Medgar]. [Later] on the fourth floor of the RA dorm, in a permanent marker, the words "die nigger" were etched across [Medgar's] front door. It took the police department over a month to get to the residence hall to knock on each person's door and ask them "do you have any clue who did this?" That was a blatant death threat, it was a terroristic threat. The police department is two blocks down the street, right off [Pine] street. How does it take you a month to get here and investigate this? It doesn't take a

month to kill somebody...He was targeted because he was on the news and I put that I might've been targeted, because people were calling me saying "Hey [Stokely], I saw you on TV!"

Another student commented:

[Mid-South] tries to put on this image that they're here for you. They'll try to tell you that they have these services for you; they'll try to tell you that they're out to do these types of things—they're trying to work for inclusion. But you never see it on a daily-on a daily basis. Every now and then I might see a small glimmer of hope. And it'll be somebody saying, "no these people aren't like that" or somebody taking a meeting with someone they never would have met before they came to [Mid-South]. But for the most part, like, they don't make those steps, and they're not teaching people to make the steps to be more inclusive. You know everybody looks at the classes, [diversity] requirements as a requirement. And they're, "oh I have to read this book so I can learn about black people" or "I have to go to this class so I can learn about Arabs," or whatever. And they're not expressing why it's so valuable; what comes with that type of thing. You know?...[Mid-South] is allowing it to happen and to stay the way it is—people aren't really forced outside their comfort zone. Sometimes you have to force people.

The collective impact of perceived racism and the perceived inaction on the part of the Mid-South University administration in response to public and reported incidences of racism has resulted in black male students choosing to socially and psychologically distance themselves from the university. The researchers asked students whether they identify themselves with the university, and if so, in what ways. One student responded:

I don't know too many [black] people in general that are like, "I'm proud to be a [Cougar]." Like they really go out for their school. Like other places, my friends, they'll go somewhere, and they'll be like "oh yeah, I'm at the games, I'm doing everything, I'm painting my face," and I'm like, "What's wrong with you?" Like, because I wouldn't do it. You know what I mean?

Participants' perceptions of Mid-South administrators' responses to racism on campus are best characterized as insensitive. Students in this study also reported feeling that the university administration has been disingenuous in its current efforts to educate the larger student body about diversity. Students indicated that current university practices intended to expose non-

minority students to diversity have been largely ineffective, and have failed to engender respect for racial differences on campus.

Perceptions of Institutional Supports

Student participants talked at length about feeling that the university “sets black students up to fail.” They said that the university has done a good job of providing scholarships to incoming black students. However, they described that same scholarship program as being “bait” that the university uses to attract black students. One student described the scholarships in this way:

They don't come here for the school, they come here for the [Houston] Scholarship; and comparing the [Houston] Scholarship to the [Marshall] Scholarship at [Mid-West University], if you look at the difference, [MWU's] requirements are a lot, ah higher, to get their minority scholarship than [Mid-South] does. So the way I look at it [Mid-South] essentially gives this [Houston] Scholarship out—I don't want to say to anybody—but it's not that hard to get the [Houston] Scholarship. So half the kids they give them out to—I don't want to say, are going to not succeed—but to some degree, you know, we'll say they're not focused. So they're giving out this scholarship to, you know, all these kids, half of them, they know aren't going to be back next semester or at the end of the year; so they just continually recycle the money. That's the way I look at it. Until you know, something is adjusted with that then.... I mean there's always going to be the kids who come in and don't come back.

Student study participants said that after the students are on campus, many of who are underprepared for the rigors of coursework at Mid-South, necessary institutional supports are not adequate for supporting them academically and socially.

In response to a researcher's question of why the attrition rates for black male students at Mid-South are so high, students responded that it was a combination of students not being focused, not having their priorities in order, students' failure to access available academic supports on campus, and a failure on the part of the university to make support services both accessible and welcoming to black male students. The following exchange between students is in response to the question why black male students do not stay at Mid-South:

Their grades! I mean, and, that honestly happened to me—I can't speak for everybody else. I mean, because my first semester here, I was in the gym faithfully. Nowadays I'm so concentrated with other stuff and my education that I'm not... I'm rarely even there. I haven't gone in there at all this semester to be honest. So it's more to the point like if we were to leave here right now and go to the gym, you'd probably find at least thirty or forty easily—black males. Just on the basketball courts that's not even going into the weight rooms and whatnot. So it's just like—(Student #2 interjects) It's no point they're all on the basketball courts. (Student #3 interjects) Flag football right now. (Student continues) Flag football, there you go! There's another example, like our priorities are backwards. I'm just saying, because like my freshman year I was more worried about playing flag football, basketball, and then until I got that letter—saying my scholarship was on probation—I didn't take school seriously.

Students' perceptions of the appropriateness of institutional supports at Mid-South were something of a dichotomy. In one sense students endorsed the notion that Mid-South University made financial and academic supports available to them as African American students. At the same time, they commented that the manner in which these supports are provided do not take into account the specific needs that should be addressed for African American male students.

Coping Strategies

Participants discussed their use of several coping strategies to persist at the university. Such strategies included disregarding prejudiced actions, utilizing confidence that stems from racial pride to bolster a positive sense of self, finding motivation from personal and family hopes, and developing a “thick skin” to counter the effects of frequent exposure to prejudice and discrimination targeted towards them. One student talked about rising above the challenges of being a black male student on Mid-South's campus and remaining focused on his reasons for being in college and his long term goals. He explained:

My mentality coming to [Mid-South] was, you know, you can say what you want to say about me, you can think what you want to think about be, but it's not going to change who I am and at the end of the day, you know, I plan on being on top. So that's the way I look at it. Sure it gets to me sometimes. Every now and then I'll be like, okay, well, you know, but I'll give it—okay, well this is [Raceville], so I guess I don't have high expectations anymore. Honestly, the mentality I take is, they gave me money, and when I graduate, I go to grad school and I'm leaving the state.

The following exchange between students expressed similar sentiments:

I'm not runnin' away from anything, because the way I look at it is they can write what they want to write and say what they want to say but by the time I'm through, somebody is going to respect me! you know? By the time I accomplish what I want to accomplish... You can look at me as, you know, a nigger—or whatever—but I'm going to be addressed as sir! (Student Interjects) Nigger-Sir!

Finally, student participants talked extensively about their use of social networks; black networks and interracial networks. The researchers found it particularly noteworthy that students generally discussed black and interracial networks separately. From black networks, students seemed to draw unconditional support and encouragement. Students emphasized the importance of black networks on campus.

Most, but not all, students talked about networking with students of other races/ethnicities in a different way. Students were in agreement that networking with students beyond their own race/ethnicity was both important to their success, to their development as people, and to the broader goals of society. Interestingly, student participants seemed to suggest that one distinction between students who have been able to successfully navigate the rigors of Mid-South are those whose networks span racial, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. One student explained:

I feel like that's where—where we, I guess in a sense we have a divide within the Black community. Some of us are comfortable sticking with Black people, only associating with Black people. And others, others, I guess us here, we understand that in order to be successful... We have to get out there and associate with White people... It's getting out there to understand their culture. It's getting out there to really understand them, but there are those people that are perfectly fine going through college not-not doing anything to better themselves... Once you get here you have to do something to set yourself apart compared to being complacent with the idea that I'm within the black community, these are my people and this is where I'm going to stay—these are the only people I'm going to associate with... This isn't a black college. You can't be successful here only associating with black people.

Another student added:

And I guess it comes from not just wanting to be involved with White people just for your own success. It comes from wanting to be involved with White people and

understand White people just for the sake of knowing them. Just for the sake of knowing people in general—without those color boundaries.

Similarly, a third student shared:

I surround myself with like-minded people. I surround myself, with you know, people who are trying to make good grades. And it does go back to the fact that it can't just be, you know, African-Americans. You have to surround yourself with intelligent people who are pushing to do better things.

Successful black male students at Mid-South have learned the power of networking; not only with other black students, but also with students of other races. Study participants recognized that social, academic, and professional networking is a powerful tool. While students treasured their relationships with other black students, they realized that limiting their networks to black students alone would be a detriment to their academic success on campus.

Discussion

Previous research has been clear and consistent; undergraduate black males are less likely to enter college with social and cultural capital sources that are commensurate with those white peers, more likely to be part of campus communities where gender disparities (both in enrollment and degree attainment) exist between themselves and African American women, more likely to perceive their educational institutions as unsupportive and “chilly,” and more likely to experience low retention and degree attainment rates (the lowest amongst all racial and gender groups) (Strayhorn, 2010). This reality further highlights the need to develop a rich understanding of black males’ collegiate experiences in order to better facilitate current efforts to develop appropriate initiatives, interventions, and programs that support their success.

Mid-South University administration officials must recognize that improving retention and graduation rates of black male students must begin with improving black male students’ overall experiences at the university. This should begin with university officials admitting and

communicating to the university community that there is race problem on campus and that immediate measures will be taken to address it. Further, the university must improve the campus climate, not only for black males, but for everyone. This should include a commitment to increasing diversity on campus, operationalized across all campus units; acknowledgement by university officials that racism is a problem on the campus; consistent and widespread communication by university officials to faculty, staff, and students that racism and other forms of bigotry are not only unacceptable, but will be dealt with swiftly and severely; and the institutionalization of formal mechanisms to routinely monitor campus climate and experiences of harassment and discrimination. The institutionalization of such mechanisms and practices is not easy, but it is essential if universities' efforts are to have meaningful and lasting effects on campus (Smith, 2009).

Increasing understanding of how campus environments influence student achievement is principally related to any strategic institutional effort designed to improve educational outcomes for students. This is particularly crucial for institutions that seek to develop welcoming campus environments, implement non-discriminatory policies and offer supportive programming that will not only create equity of opportunity but also equity across outcomes for all student populations. In diversity studies of higher education institutions, racial campus climate continues to demonstrate saliency as an environmental factor that differentially (across race and gender) influences the quality of student collegiate experiences and degree attainment; with the heaviest inequities being borne by students of color (Laird & Niskode-Dossett, 2010).

Campus climate is characterized as a multidimensional construct consisting of physical, human and organizational dimensions that interact to shape the environment that students negotiate as they become members of a college campus community (Laird & Niskode-Dossett,

2010). Researchers have broadly operationalized the construct by measuring student perceptions of environmental cues that they may use to subjectively appraise their campus environs and construct their own perceptions of the campus climate. Student appraisals of their environments may be based on their knowledge of and encounters with prejudice and/or discrimination, their perceptions of campus attitudes towards racial groups, their sense of the campus's collective cultural awareness about diverse student groups, their evaluations of campus racial tension levels, their perceptions of institutional equal treatment across racial groups and their estimations of institutional support for diversity (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Illustrating this point, Rankin and Reason (2005) surveyed a large number of undergraduate students, investigating three areas they conceptualized as being related to perceptions of overall campus climate: (a) campus experiences of harassment (personal or observed), (b) student perceptions of campus climate and regard for diversity, and (c) student perceptions of institutional actions to improve the racial climate. Data were disaggregated along racial and gender groupings. Survey results overall supported the sentiment that when compared with White students, minority college students in the sample viewed and experienced their college campuses in a much different light. They were more likely to describe the campus climate as racist, hostile, disrespectful and less accepting whereas White students typically used descriptors such as nonracist, friendly and respectful in their characterizations of campus climate. Relative to our work, empirical findings from this study indicate that African American students had the most negative perceptions of campus acceptance of difference in comparison with other students.

In a review of the literature on campus climates, Museus et al. (2008) note that campus racial climates can have a negative effect on student adjustment, persistence, institutional attachment, sense of belonging, and academic performance. They found that all student groups were affected by campus racial climates, but that each racial group perceived and reacted differently to those climates. African Americans in their study reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with their campus racial climates. Interestingly, the model they constructed indicated that African American students will likely engage in higher levels of normative academic involvement when they have more positive perceptions of racial campus climates; which in turn can positively influence outcomes such as degree attainment. Advancing our understanding of the experiences of African American male students is essential in furthering institutional strategic planning efforts designed to mitigate outcome disparities for this group of students. A “one-size” approach to diversity programming and initiatives will likely fail to be appropriate or effective.

Cuyjet (1997, 2006) argues that there are unique challenges associated with retaining and graduating black male students. He advises that university administrators that are truly concerned about retaining and graduating black men must embark on a twofold agenda of (a) providing a nonthreatening environment for black men where their higher expectations of success can be nurtured and reinforced; and (b) reeducating most of the university community about the inaccuracy of commonly held perceptions about black men. Addressing the second of these issues requires first that university leaders recognize and devise a strategy to combat the “broad acceptance and institutionalization of [the] negative perceptions of black men as threatening, unfriendly, and less intelligent than any other distinguishable segment of the American population” (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 8)

Engaging in difficult dialogues that challenge the members of an intellectual community to examine their biases and assumptions are critical aspect of creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment. The freedom of the academy must not be used as an excuse for failing to confront racist beliefs and ideologies that find their way onto campus in the hearts and minds of individuals that comprise the university. Universities must deal swiftly and severely with racism in all of its subtle and overt forms. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students who perpetrate acts of racism should be called out on their actions and not allowed to continue practices that negatively impact the ability of students to persist and achieve. While the particular action taken may take many forms i.e. dialogue, expulsion, probation, termination, public apology, required cultural sensitivity training and so forth, it is imperative that whatever action is taken clearly communicates to a campus community that such acts will not be tolerated. Unfortunately, such a stance, even in 2011, is viewed as *extreme* by many higher education administrators, faculty, and staff; but only universities that are willing to take such “extreme” action stand any chance of countering the conditions that keep black male students from reaching their potential at predominantly white institutions.

Future Research

This exploratory study has produced several avenues for researchers interested in the success of black male students to further consider. Stemming directly from this study’s findings, researchers should further examine black male students’ methods for coping in university settings with very little diversity, and the 21st century strategies that black male students employ for persisting in college in the face of blatant racism. While some research has explored students’ strategies for persisting in the face of micro aggressions and other more implicit forms of racism, few current studies examine how students of color deal with modern-day overtly racist behavior

on their college campuses. Additionally, future studies should examine the inter-racial and intra-racial networking patterns of black male students.

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