

Predictors of Academic Success among African American Students

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Abstract

This study focuses on the academic success of African males although it has increased, many African-American males continue to fall behind the academic achievements of their Caucasian male counterparts.

Academically successful African American males have been marginalized in research studies that primarily focus on reporting deficit that hinder and not promote academic growth. The purpose of this study is to identify the environmental, social, and socioeconomic predictors of academic success among African-American male college students. The expectations of low academic performance and historical references of low-grade Point Average (GPA) and drop out among African-American males are prevalent still in American society. Unfortunately, too many African-American students lack the support structure needed to provide a high-quality curriculum that would prepare them for academic success in post-secondary education.

Keywords: African American males, academic success, higher education

1.0. Introduction

The success of African-American men in secondary and post-secondary Institutions have been minimal or nonexistent in situations where environmental, social, and socioeconomic factors have hindered the academic achievement of African- American men. Scott, Taylor, and Palmer (2013) identified the need for pinpointing challenges in the lives of African-American males. Recognizing these challenges was needed to facilitate the construction of a support framework that prevents high school dropouts and encourages post-secondary enrollment. Certain environments African- American men encountered were potentially harmful to their academic success in college, identifying that members of the student body (Ellis, 2002) and faculty members both held negative beliefs about the academic abilities of African-American students (Ellis, 2002; Robertson & Mason, 2008). Ellis (2002) concluded that low expectations of academic performance and historical references of low performing. African-American men have continued in American society. However, Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008) indicated obtaining an education was fundamental to the “financial, personal, and social success in American culture” (p. 997).

Cokley, McClain, Jones, and Johnson (2011), stated the academic persistence of African American students is challenged and marked continuously as a conflict indicator for performance achievement.

When students are not involved in the academic process, academic persistence and motivation become weakened, and education is devalued (Dancy, 2011). According to Tinto (1997), “What is needed and what is not available is a model of institutional action that provides guidelines for the development of effective policies and programs that institutions can reasonably employ to enhance the persistence of all students” (pp. 6-7).

2.0. Review of Literature

An extensive review of the relevant literature showed there were numerous entry points in African-American history of education. Nevertheless, the cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 emerged as the two main thought-provoking historical findings associated with the academic experience of African-Americans. The attempt of the government to use legal action to abolish segregation after the separate but equal doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 was a crucial moment in African-American history that attempted to academically integrate equal educational opportunities for members of diverse groups. The *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 has been viewed “as the single most important court decision in American educational history” (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005, p. 70) and “one of the greatest achievements of the American judicial system” (Merritt, 2005, p. 51). The landmark decision legally ended the separate but equal clause instituted by the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Although the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision preceded *Brown v. Board of Education*, it set the stage for the forthcoming decision to end legal segregation.

Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal clause was a sweeping decision, originating in Louisiana, that legally separated Caucasians and African-Americans in all aspects of life (Smith, 2005). Smith stated that the ruling was not limited to the legal segregation of the races in education institutions but included the separation of Caucasians and African-Americans at restaurants, courts of law, hospitals, churches, train stations, restrooms, drinking fountains, parks, sporting events, public housing, and many more facilities associated with public use. As a result of the decision, the justices declared that although there was a separation between the two races, African-Americans were perceived to have equal facilities (Smith, 2005). Unfortunately, facilities provided to African-Americans were inferior to facilities provided to Caucasians (Hoffer, 2014). The result of the decision exacerbated the established Jim Crow system of laws designed to create racial segregation in all public facilities among African-Americans and Caucasians. Hoffer stated that the racial stereotypes of Caucasians being better than African-Americans was publicized in the media, popular writings, and advertisements.

Although the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision argued that African-Americans were provided with separate but equal facilities, cases such as *Murray v. University of Maryland Law School* (1935), *Sipuel v. Board of Regents* (1948), *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education* (1950) (Greene, 2015; Smith, 2005) proved otherwise. Smith (2005) stated both Oklahoma and Texas built separate law schools for African-American students in order to separate them from the Caucasian student body. Ada Sipuel and Herman Sweatt, students of the University of Oklahoma and the University of Texas respectively, never attended the separate law schools. By refusing to attend, based on their belief that the separate schools built for them were unequal to the established schools, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that the separate schools were not equal, and the students were eligible to attend the white colleges. Both cases were key decisions that led to the final decision of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (Smith, 2005).

Almost sixty years after the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the decision to end the legal separation between African-American and Caucasians was achieved by *Brown v. Board of Education*. Blanchett et al. (2005) stated the *Brown* decision overturned the separate but equal decision of *Plessy* and guaranteed African-Americans equal constitutional rights stated within the 14th Amendment. Smith (2005) indicated:

The sentence in the Brown decision stating that “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” makes it unequivocally clear that no matter how good educational facilities and resources are if they support racial segregation, they are forever unequal - and cannot ever be made equal because they are separate (p. 25).

As a result, African-Americans were no longer legally segregated from schools. Merritt (2005) stated that after the *Brown* decision, courts began to use the Constitution as a means of affecting social change. Merritt also asserted that the *Brown* decision sparked the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Even though the *Brown* decision ended the legal separation between African-Americans and Caucasians, Blanchett et al. (2005) indicated that not all African American parents agreed that African-American schools were inherently inferior.

Blanchett et al. argued that some parents were against desegregation. Those parents wanted a better distribution of resources and a more inclusive environment for their children with Caucasian children. Also, parents proclaimed that the schools their children attended were staffed with educators who were more than capable of teaching any race and even more so African-American students.

The Brown and Plessy landmark cases were instrumental for providing an opportunity to enhance educational opportunities for African-Americans. Greene (2015) posited that for African-Americans, there were vastly different educational outcomes for children who lived “at the dangerous intersection of race, language, class, employment, housing discrimination, and the criminal justice system” (p. 132). Greene suggested society was unable to effectively analyze the influence race has on achievement based on these factors. Consequently, Greene indicated “race is an imprecise lens through which to focus on educational equality” (p. 132).

3.0. Problem Definition

The constant fluctuation of the job market impacts the African American community the most (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). The distress of downward slopes in the market demonstrated by the last recession, which lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, led to a record high unemployment rate within the African American community, leaving this population worse off than it had been before the recession (Woolf, Jones, Johnson, Phillips, Oliver, Bazemore, & Vichare, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2011), African American unemployment jumped to 13.4% since the recession began in December 2007, when the nation’s unemployment rate was 8.5%. With these high unemployment rates among African Americans, the likelihood of African American males pursuing a college degree had become even lower as a result of the need to become providers for their household (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007). Addressing the social and economic needs of the African American community has become the focus rather than exploring issues of educational success and school experiences (Daire et al., 2007). When the nation’s unemployment rate increases, crime, and educational failure rise among the African American community, particularly among African American males aged 15 to 24 years old (Donnor & Shockley, 2010). To improve their socioeconomic circumstances, African American males must perceive higher education as an opportunity for advancement (McMilliam, 2003/2004).

The general problem related to the academic achievement of African American male students in higher education are at a higher risk than their counterparts of facing adversity, inequality, and subjective claims because of misunderstood cultural interchanges or economic status (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006). To face such challenges, it is difficult for at-risk African American males to believe they can change their future out of poverty or successfully complete postsecondary education without racial disparity (McCarter, 2009). According to a study conducted by the Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board, Olympia (2001), African Americans may achieve at a higher economic status; however, they will continue to experience discrimination or some type of racial judgment. The specific problem is that poverty continues to influence African American males’ abilities to encounter access into higher education systems as well as their determination to pursue higher education opportunities (D’Andrea, 1995; Mistry, 2002; Swain, 2006).

4.0. Main Hindering Factors

Some of the main factors hindering the progress of African American males towards academic achievement beyond secondary education include the lack of parental guidance and inadequate academic preparation that would contribute towards academic success (Battle, 2002). The culture of violence and disengagement from the school environment is another barrier to attaining educational opportunities for minority male students (Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002). African American males experience more challenges to educational attainment or barriers to receiving higher educational opportunities than any other culture (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). For African American male students, the educational outcome is declining; their opportunities to enter into postsecondary education are challenged by teen pregnancy, illegal activities, and socially destructive behaviors (NCES, 2018). Identified causes for the extremely high dropout rate among male African American students were, poverty, impoverished family factor, and length of residence in the same school district. The high dropout rate among African American students is driven by the problems of underachievement, low academic performance, and low academic aspirations (Donnor & Shockley, 2010).

Furthermore, post-secondary educational access for minority male students is limited by criminal activities and U.S. drug policies that restrict the chances of entering into higher education using student aid (Swain, 2006).

African American male youth account for 48.8% of juvenile drug arrests, while their White counterparts only account for 4%. Juvenile arrests of Latinos are 13 times more frequent than of Whites. The U.S. Department of Justice (2011) asserted that over one-third of African American males within the United States are incarcerated or have experienced incarceration. It appears African American males are at an overall disadvantage in terms of opportunities in the workforce and successful educational experiences. The 1998 Higher Educational Act passed by the U.S. Congress denies federal aid to students with a misdemeanor or felony drug offense (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Given the numbers of African American and Latino youths arrested and convicted from drug offenses in the U.S., opportunities to higher education access are impacted; these students become susceptible to dropping out of high school, engaging in criminal activities, or displaying aggressive behavior because a college education appears to be unachievable (Schlesinger, 2005). The negative implications of the socioeconomic barrier's minority males face impact their attitudes and, therefore, diminishes aspirations for continuing higher education beyond high school.

The lack of motivation and academic preparedness increases aggressive behavior among minority males, particularly African American males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008). According to the CDC, homicide among African American males aged 10 to 24 doubled since 2010, which is a higher increase than that of any other male population. African American males' involvement in some type of aggressive offense on school property lessens achievement capabilities and makes them more likely to be unwilling to participate in the school culture (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008).

Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005) identified factors that may hinder student success in higher education and stated that instructional support and student support services are leading factors for successful outcomes. These factors should be considered when attempting to understand the impact of institutional practices affecting the persistence and successful outcomes among minority students. Institutions not implementing practice strategies that would help African American males persist and remain in college would result in low student persistence and low graduation rates. D'Andrea (1995) explained how the issues of poverty, lack of educational opportunities, racial disparity, and unequal access to educational opportunity prevent academic success for student development and impact academic performance. Identifying challenges hindering academic progress among African American males in higher education will expose positive aspects to assist those students to remain in higher education and possibly increase the likelihood of postsecondary education completion.

5.0. Correlates of Academic Success

According to Davis (2007), identifying correlates of African American males in higher education, increase their Grade Point Average (GPA) and reduces the achievement gap between African American males and their school peers. It is noteworthy, that the literature resources are limited regarding best practices and approaches to retain and graduate minority male students. According to Wyatt (2009), educational institutions are endeavoring to identify influences that increase campus engagement and decrease dropout rates among African American male students. The following discussion will focus on the main correlates of academic success of African males endeavoring to succeed in post-secondary education.

5.1. Professional Mentoring Programs

Wyatt (2009) found professional mentoring programs targeting minority students increase academic success and achievement levels among African American males and other minority groups. ACT Inc. (2010) recently conducted a national survey on student retention strategies. This study found professional mentoring programs increased the number of Black students retained in community colleges and universities. Additional results found assigning professional mentors to minority student's enhanced social growth and increased aspirations to continue beyond a two-year program (ACT, 2010). Furthermore, minority students being placed in mentoring programs improved in their educational environment and showed higher percentages of career placement than those who were not (Wyatt, 2009; Patton, 2009). Studies conducted on self-efficacy among African American students link mentoring as aiding support for minority students and empowering throughout their college experiences (Carson, 2009). Additional literature stresses the importance of mentoring under-represented students to provide support in their academic environment (Edman, 2009).

Professional mentoring positively impacts African American students and influences socialization and learning experiences. Institutions implementing mentoring programs can help African American students with self-identity and understand their roles as college students (Kingsbury, 2007).

Racial identity is an important aspect among African American students. It encourages a sense of belonging and membership within an environmental setting (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Harper and Quaye (2007) explain professional mentoring programs help foster students' attitudes toward their campus and reduce social barriers students may face. Under-represented students may lack efficacy and incompetence; therefore, a professional mentor could prevent dropout and hence create a greater number of available career options (Davis, 2007).

Baker (2007) analyzed cross-cultural relationships within higher institutions and found mentoring programs impact the campus climate, student persistence, and college completion regardless of race. For Black students, professional mentoring could increase a sense of connectedness to the college campus and retention (Carson, 2009). Empirical studies conducted on mentors of African American students found mentoring programs increase student retention and increase academic results at higher levels (Davis, 2007). Barker (2007) stated mentoring relationships increased student-faculty interactions and enabled additional access to resources related to career placement. Studies conducted on African American male college students' experiences after participating in mentoring programs found these students to be more tolerant of racial adversity and resilient to obstacles challenging their lives and learning experiences (Warde, 2008).

5.2. Financial Support

According to Pascarelli and Terenzini (2005), financial support affects persistence for community college students, particularly among those with the lowest income. Financial aid is essential to persistence and retention among minority students in higher education (Bettinger, 2004). The rising cost of higher education tuition has increased a substantial amount from 1975 to 2005, at a rate surpassing those of household income and inflation levels (Collegeboard, 2006a). Financial aid cannot keep pace with the rising cost of college tuition, which surpassed family income levels from the past decade. Hurtado, Saeny and Dar's (2006) study concluded that financial support does enable minorities and students of color gain access to higher education and persist beyond educational levels. Minorities and students of color can persist in higher education if funds are available to cover their college costs and tuition needs.

According to Collegeboard (2006b), the primary need-based financial aid resource for low-income and minority students is a federal program called Pell Grant. In 1975-1976, the maximum award distributed by Pell Grants was \$5,064. By 2005-2006, the Pell Grant decreased to \$4,050 because of inflation (Collegeboard, 2006). Because low-income and students of color depend on financial aid to afford college, persistence and retention then become a challenge to continue education (Collegeboard, 2006a; 2006b).

5.3. Family Support

Other literature suggests parental and financial support helps African American male students persist in higher education (Moore, 2001; Hrabowski, Collegeboard, 2006a). Studies conducted on parental support among first-generation minority college students conclude lack of family involvement affects academic performance. Choy (2002) stated parents of first-generation, low-income students are less likely to understand the importance of a college education than non-minority students. First-generation African American male students are particularly difficult to retain in college because of expectations of supporting the family's income or their parents not valuing education (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010).

First generation students lacking parental support have difficulties in emotional and social environments (Hurtado, Laird, & Perorazio, 2003). Other than facing academic and social pressures in higher education, first-generation students experience financial barriers because of a lack of guidance to secure financial support. According to Hurtado et al. (2003), parents of first-generation students may not have the knowledge to assist with financial resources to help students continue in college. Most colleges and universities have resources to assist first-generation, low-income students with financial resources; however, the students must seek and apply for funds to continue in college. Because parents of first-generation students have not completed higher education, studies show their children may lack preparation for college enrollment (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). Owens et al. (2010) conclude enrollment trends among first-generation students are minimal. Success rates among first-generation students whose parents did not attend college are challenged by the lack of support for learning and student finances. Student achievement among first-generation students can be attained by the interaction between African American males and supportive parents of post-secondary education opportunities beyond high school (Perry, 2004). Owens et al. (2010) emphasized that parents valuing education and instilling the importance of educational achievement as do other racial groups help their child develop strategies to overcome negative stereotypes.

5.4. Educational Aspirations

According to Warner and Phelps (2008), educational aspirations have a tremendous impact on academic achievement to pursue advanced degrees. Studies conducted on African American males' educational aspiration in community college conclude influence and sense of belonging enable them to excel beyond expectations regardless of their socioeconomic status. As minority students are known to have a profound need for financial support in four-year institutions as well as two-year programs, institutions are re-evaluating remedial curricula to determine the connection between college preparation and financial assistance (Owens et al., 2010). To effectively address successes and failures of minority student's performance in remedial curricula such as reading, math, and science, institutions are shifting toward cost-effective methods to lessen the need for corrective programs to degree completion. Intervention methods include remedial programs that encourage social interaction among students and faculty within the remedial curriculum (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). Not only would this method improve retention outcome, but also promote academic improvement among minority students on a cost-effective level.

Although institutional practices seek to enhance academic and student development, African American male's completion rates continue to spiral downwards. In fact, Perrakis (2008) stated completion rates among African American males are reporting higher in two-year programs than four-year programs using supportive practices. It is evident from various researchers that there is a great need for supportive practices such as culturally competent teachers, in-school support, and prevention services to ensure educational success, especially when there is no family and community support (Owens et al., 2010).

5.5. Extended Family Support

Herndon and Hirt (2004) described family and college administrators as fictive kin or extended family members. Extended family members serve as role models for African American male students while providing emotional and spiritual support throughout their enrollment in higher education. Extended family networks can be an important source of social support and help identify appropriate services for African American males in higher education (Warner and Phelps, 2008). Moreover, Owens et al. (2010) described Extended family members as kin or non-kinship. Non-kinship refers to individuals not related by blood. They can be established into aspiring friendships and strong social networks by teachers and African American students. This development, according to Stewart, could also enhance students' learning experiences through the influences of non-kinship bonding. Anthropological concepts reveal fictive kinships among African American family's date back to slavery when Black children addressed adults, not of kinship as relatives (Fordham, 1992). This concept theorizes using social integration among Black children to strengthen adult/child relationships within other cultures and communities. African Americans place a high value on family and kinship. This type of bonding relationship helps integrate social behavior and establishes communal obligations when coping with other cultures. Fictive kin models accept the concept of "it takes a village to raise a child" to ensure student success.

6.0. Implications to Practice

Identifying various educational practices that promote the success of African American male students will help improve not only there but also other minorities' educational outcomes and college experiences (Hughes, 2010). To further increase enrollment and retention among African American males in higher education, Owens et al. (2010) and Collegeboard, (2006a; 2006b) maintained the development of intervention programs based on cultural influences and academic encouragement will improve student achievement levels among African American males and minorities in higher education. Findings from the current study suggest faculty interaction, peer interaction, and familial support are leading correlates that influence African American male students in higher education. Outside influences that impinged on African American male students was underscored by attitudes of others, such as personal relationships and being underprepared in secondary education.

Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of African Americans male's academic potential play an integral role in determining their educational success. The way African American males are perceived by their teachers affects their learning process and motivation to succeed in higher education. Although Hughes, (2010) theorized minority students become academically successful using teachers of their own race, the present study reflects how the overall teacher perception can affect African American male students if their influence is encouraging. After class mentorship and encouragement from instructors can only inspire academic success among African American males and contribute to their academic development.

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