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BLACK MALES AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON FACULTY AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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This article highlights findings from a qualitative study of factors affecting the academic success of African American male students in the community college. Data was collected through interviews with 28 Black male students in a midsized institution in the southwestern United States. Findings illuminated four key faculty-initiated elements that serve to create and maintain positive faculty-student relationships: (a) being friendly and caring from the onset; (b) monitoring and proactively addressing students' academic progress; (c) listening to students' concerns; and (d) encouraging students to succeed. The intricate inter-relationship of these elements are discussed through the "voices" and first-hand experiences of student participants. Implications for practice are discussed that suggest these four elements as basic components for faculty training and evaluation.

The challenges facing African American (the terms African American and Black are used here interchangeably) male students in higher education are well documented (Allen, 1986; Cuyjet, 1994; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Mason, 1994; 1998;

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Perrakis, 2008). In general, their experiences are characterized by underpreparation for collegiate-level coursework, low enrollment rates, dismal retention, and poor degree attainment (Allen, 1992; Cuyjet, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell & Hampton, 2001, 2002). Similarly, scholars have noted the dismal persistence, graduation, and academic success (academic success refers to students' grade point averages and successful completion of classes towards their degree goals) rates of these students within the community college context (Brown, 2007; Fortson, 1994; Jordan, 2008; Pope, 2006; Stevens, 2006; Wilkins, 2005). For example, one-year persistence rates for Black male students indicate low rates of continuation in two-year colleges. (This study uses the terms community colleges and two-year colleges interchangeably to refer to public and private degree granting institutions where the highest degree commonly awarded is an associate's degree. This definition is inclusive of community colleges which offer some baccalaureate degree programming.) Black males have a 73.6% first year persistence rate, comparable to that of White (74.7%) and Hispanic (76.9%) males, but markedly lower than Asian American males (90.6%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). It should be noted that American Indian males have the lowest one-year persistence rates at dismal 53.5%. Data for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students could not be presented due to sample size limitations.

Graduation rates are also of concern. Esters and Mosby (2007) analyzed associate degree graduation rates among male students in the community college using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Their findings indicate that Black males have the lowest graduation rate among all males in every racial/ethnic category with only 16% of these students graduating in a three-year time span. Black male academic success rates (i.e., grade point averages [GPAs]) are also alarming (Perrakis, 2008). Data indicates that Black males have the lowest mean grade point average (GPA) among male students in the community college. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), Black males have an average GPA of 2.64. In contrast, the average GPAs of their male counterparts are as follows: White males 2.90, Hispanic/Latino males 2.75, and Asian American males 2.84 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). GPA data could not be computed for Native American males as reporting standards were not met.

Poor measures of persistence, graduation, and academic success have led some scholars to be critical of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Richardson, 1987). Nevarez and Wood (2010) note that community colleges cannot continue to brand themselves as institutions of opportunity while maintaining deplorable success rates

(success rates refers to the following performance measures: persistence, graduation rates, and academic success rates) for specific population groups (e.g., minorities, low-income). Further, Bush (2004) states that the community college has failed to support the upward social improvement of Black males who see these institutions as a venue to improve their livelihoods. He notes that this failure is a byproduct of education discourse which focuses on Black male students' failure in the educational system rather than the systems failure of Black male students. Moreover, repercussions of poor community college success rates are seen at successive pipeline levels, as abysmal two-year college success rates lead to low transfer rates to four-year universities (Perrakis, 2008; Pope, 2006; Riley, 2007). These issues are of particular importance given the vast majority (63.1%) of Black males enter higher education through public and private two-year colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

PURPOSE

This study was prompted by the dismal persistence, graduation, and academic success rates of Black males in the community college. Shedding light on experiences associated with these measures of success was the impetus for this investigation. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of African American males in the community college in order to identify factors that affect their academic success. This study was undertaken with the objective of presenting students' perspectives on what affects their personal success in college. Findings in this paper represent one subset of a larger study on African American male academic success. Reported here are findings relevant to the faculty drawn from the institutional factors which students' described as affecting their academic success. Findings presented address specific elements, identified by students, for the establishment and maintenance of positive faculty-student interactions.

Situating Black male academic success as a product of the institution (or its actors) as opposed to a sole focus on the individual is important. This avoids the use of a deficit approach which places the blame of poor success on the students, their families, and communities as opposed to the educational system and its affiliates (Hilliard, 1995; Kunjufu, 1989; Murrell, 2002). Bush (2004) uses a parable from the gospel of Matthew to illustrate this point. In this parable, Jesus informs his disciples that they can discern true prophets from false prophets. Jesus uses the metaphor of a tree, noting

that true prophets will bear good fruit while bad prophets will inevitably produce bad fruit. Bush uses this parable to direct researchers to “judge the quality of the fruit by looking at the tree that produces the fruit” (p. 1). He notes that failing to examine institutional factors “has allowed institutions like the community colleges to escape the responsibility for the results of their harvest (Bush, p. 2). As important actors within the institution, faculty members are indeed one important aspect of this tree.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a relative lack of literature examining Black males in the community college. The word *relative* is purposefully used here to connote that the vast majority of studies on Black males in the community college are unpublished doctoral dissertations. For example, Wood (2010) conducted a meta-synthesis of literature on African American males in the community college. He found 50 total studies on these African American males in two-year colleges published between 1971 and 2009. Of these 50 studies, 38 were doctoral dissertations, 8 were journal articles, and 4 were book chapters. In addition, Wood noted that while many of these studies, 20 in all, focus on student persistence, fewer studies examined topics such as student engagement and academic success.

Currently, the vast majority of research on African American males focuses on four-year institutions (e.g., Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2004) rather than the community college (Beckles, 2008). While similarities may exist among Black males in different institutional contexts, researchers should be cautious in assuming the uniformity of their experiences. For instance, Flowers (2006), in an examination of African American males by institutional type, found key differences related to student social integration. Specifically, he found that Black males in the community college had lower social integration than their four-year university counterparts. Additionally, he noted that community college Black male students were less likely to engage in campus activities and extracurricular programming than four-year university Black male students. With this cautious view of the literature in mind, there is a need to expand the research on Black males in order to account for factors which may be unique to the community college context.

This study is of particular importance given the limited literature on Black males in the community college. Even more scant is literature on their academic success. Wood’s (2010) meta-synthesis

identified only eight total studies conducted on this topic (see Beckles, 2008; Faison 1993; Goins, 1995; Hampton, 2002; Jordan, 2008; Mosby, 2009; Perrakis, 2008; Travis, 1994). For the most part, these studies focus on individual level attributes of students (e.g., high school grade point average, employment, family support) rather than institutional factors affecting academic success.

Extant literature on African American males and faculty in the community college generally falls into two areas. The first area focuses on the pedagogy employed by faculty members. Several scholars have noted that the teaching practices used in community college are devoid of content which is connected to the sociocultural experiences of African American males. Thus, these scholars have advocated that community college faculty employ culturally relevant pedagogical practices (see Bates, 2007; Beckles, 2008; Bush, 2004; Pope, 2006; Riley, 2007; Turner, 1990). With this in mind, Freeman (2003) advocates for continual assessment of teaching practices beyond that of course evaluations to ensure that faculty have both a theoretical and practical knowledge of culturally based pedagogy. In particular, Ihekweba (2001) has used the limited use of culturally based pedagogy to advocate for enhanced representation of Black faculty and the implementation of Afrocentric based curriculum and programming. He believes such changes will “assist in the development of self-esteem, persistence, and success of African American [male] students” (p. 268–269).

The second area of literature addresses the interactions between Black male students and their faculty. Several authors have noted that positive faculty-student interactions are integral to student achievement and success (e.g., Beckles, 2008; Bush, 2004; Jordan, 2008; Riley, 2007; Stevens, 2006; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Turner, 2000). Beckles (2008) research is representative of these studies. He states that students who talk with faculty outside of class, have ongoing interactions with them, and seek their assistance are more likely to be academically successful than students who do not. Further, both Bush (2004) and Jordan (2008) note that faculty-student interactions must be marked by a clear desire for faculty to affirm students voices and experiences. When this occurs, Beckles (2008) states that a safe environment (or safe space) is created where students feel comfortable dialoging with faculty about critical issues.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study reports on individual interviews with 28 African American male community college students. A qualitative

research method was selected in order to better understand the social processes and dynamics in action between African American male students and faculty. This approach allowed for an in-depth investigation of the unique lived realities of Black male students as articulated through their individual voices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

This study employed a semistructured interview approach. DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) stated that semistructured interviews are “generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee/s” (p. 315). The interviews were structured in a standardized open-ended format with preplanned probes (Brenner 2006). This approach allowed for comparability of data collected and minimized the researcher’s influence on the participants’ answers (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The researcher also employed unstructured concept mapping (see Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2003). In an unstructured approach, participants are given a primary concept and asked to identify issues, relationships, phenomena or factors associated with these concepts. Prior to the interview, each participant was given a blank sheet of paper and asked to conceptualize the factors that affect their academic success. Students approached the concept maps in different ways (e.g., diagrams, elaborate drawings, narratives, poems). These maps were used to help spark ideas about the topics of interest during the interview. Concept maps were collected at the end of the interview and used as supplementary data to inform the final analysis of this study’s findings.

Two primary forms of nonprobabilistic sampling were used to recruit participants: (a) convenience sampling, which is the sampling of participants who can be easily acquired (Gay, 1996). This sampling method typically exploits researchers’ social networks; however in this case, a lunchtime table and direct contact with participants served as the primary use of this sampling technique; and (b) maximum variation sampling, a sampling technique that utilizes samples with great diversity to yield patterns that cut across their differences (Merriam, 1998). Maximum variation sampling recognizes the strength of emergent themes that are developed from a diverse group of individuals. As a result, interviews purposely included a diverse set of Black males based upon participants’ age, economic status, academic standing (current and former students), grade point average, major, etc. This allowed themes to emerge from a highly diverse

group of African American males, which may better identify experiences shared by the whole.

Data Analysis

The findings from this study were analyzed using a systematic data analysis technique as articulated by Huberman and Miles (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Their approach requires the development of a set of core research goals, a list of questions, a conceptual framework, prehypoththesized codes, and a method of data analysis prior to data collection. When the researcher enters the field and collects data, the information collected is immediately noted and documented (e.g., typing up observation notes). Additionally, contact summary and document summary forms are used to collate data and reduce the information collected. This step is carried out based upon the predetermined focus (i.e., academic success) of the study. Coding of data is then completed in two phases: the first phase utilizes basic codes, and the second phase employs more advanced interpretive and pattern codes. After coding, researchers are to place memos next to important sections on documents and transcripts; these memos indicate how these sections related to the predetermined focus of the study. After all data from a project is collected, researchers are to compile the data by using data reduction techniques and visual displays in a continual process of postulating and confirming conclusions.

In order to enhance the validity of this study's findings, this study employed intercoder reliability, member checks, and bracketing. To pursue intercoder reliability, the researcher and two peers read and code selected portions of transcripts. After coding the same transcripts, theme patterns were cross-checked to ensure that there was a high rate of congruent coding. This study also employed member checks. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) member checks occur when data is given back to participants for input through "correction/verification/challenge" (p. 108). Initial results from this study were shared via a focus group format with a group of participants who are part of a campus club focused on advancing the academic achievement of male students of color. Students were asked for their input on the accuracy and interpretation of the data. Their input was infused into subsequent versions of this study. The researcher also engaged in bracketing. Bracketing is a qualitative technique in which the researcher attempts to set aside preconceived notions and assumptions about the subjects, what they will say, and why they will say it. In essence 'bracketing' themselves from influencing the research process (Ahern, 1999).

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEWEES AND RESEARCH SITE

All study participants were self-described African American males. Guidelines for participation in this study necessitated that students had to be currently or formerly (within past two years) enrolled community college students and be 18 years of age or more. Students who are dual-enrolled in high school and community college were excluded from this study. The average age of participants in this study was 24.5 years old and ranged from 18 to 58. Students represented a diverse set of majors (e.g., criminology, culinary arts, biology, psychology). Nine students were business majors, making it the most common major among study participants. Students had varying educational goals, the most common included attaining an associate's degree (5), associate's degree plus transfer (9), and transfer without an associate's degree (7). The vast majority of students, 16 in all, attended high school before coming to the community college, while a large number, 8 in all, attended another community college or technical school before coming to Star Valley Community College (SVCC, a pseudonym). The remaining students attended a four-year university.

This study was undertaken at SVCC. SVCC is a community college located in the southwestern United States. This institution serves a population of approximately 13,000 students. The college has a diverse student body whose racial/ethnic breakdown is as follows: American Indian 1%, Asian 4%, Black 8%, Hispanic 32%, White 39%, and other 16%. The college is predominantly made up of female students who represent 59% of the institution's population. Male students account for only 35% of the population—given that 6% of students did not declare their gender. While the population of SVCC is 13,000, only 148 total African American males are enrolled at this campus. Thus, Black males account for only 14 to 15% of the total Black enrollment on this campus. Further, the interviews conducted with the 28 participants represent 19% of the entire African American male population on campus.

SVCC is recognized by the federal government as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). MSI is "a term used to describe the groups of institutions that enroll a high proportion of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students" (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998, p. 5).

Overview of Findings

The role of faculty in affecting students' academic success was discussed by the overwhelming majority of students. This theme

was addressed by 23 of the 28 study participants. Sixteen students focused on the role of faculty in supporting student success, while 5 students discussed faculty as both supports and barriers to academic success, and 2 spoke about faculty as barriers. Pseudonyms are used in place of participant names to ensure confidentiality. Presented in this study's findings are important elements for providing students with personal attention that were described by students as positively affecting their academic success.

Prior to presenting these elements, it should be noted that not all students believed that faculty gave students personal attention. In particular, Gabriel and Ezra noted that some faculty members were apathetic towards students' success. For instance, Gabriel stated that "professors don't care that much, you know, whether you're there or not." In like manner, Ezra described the difference in encouragement that he received from family versus that of faculty. He noted that his family encourages him to do well in school, helps him with his homework, and constantly reminds him to stay focused on his coursework. He juxtaposes this support with that of the campuses faculty, noting that they take a "no sweat off my back approach" to him turning in homework and attending class.

Four Elements of Faculty-Student Engagement

Several students discussed the importance of receiving personal attention from faculty. Personal attention portrays aspects of the relationships between students and faculty. By giving personal attention, students described how faculty; (a) were friendly with students from the onset; (b) checked in on student academic progress; (c) listened to student concerns; (d) were proactive in addressing performance issues; and (e) encouraged students to succeed.

A Friendly Demeanor

Black males in this study cited the personal attention they received as an important factor to their academic success. They also noted that most teachers were friendly from the onset, which allowed them to feel comfortable in these interactions. Students used different words to convey this concept, referring to their professors as "cool," "nice," and "friendly." Mark noted that the friendliness of faculty was especially important for him when he first began attending college:

I was nervous, just the fact of all the things that I heard of college, but as soon as I started and got into my classes, the teachers were very

friendly. They noticed me. They remember me by name. So that kind of helped out a lot. Actually, it was a lot of fun.

The friendly personal attention given by teachers served to ease transition preconceptions that Mark held about college. Many students described the welcoming environment created by these faculty members as one of “care, where faculty illustrated a caring attitude towards student academic success. For instance, Malachi stated: “I think tea—you know, teachers want to see you do well, you know. I’ve never met a teacher so far who you know who really didn’t care about their students.”

Checking in on Student Progress

After creating a friendly environment, faculty illustrated their care by monitoring students’ progress throughout the duration of the class. This included asking students if they had any questions or concerns about the course material as well as reminding them about upcoming deadlines for papers, tests, course reviews, group work, and other assignments. Seth extolled the quality of the faculty in his interview, he provides important insight to this subtheme:

They [the faculty] just don’t just give you an assignment just to, you know, it’s okay, you’re done, let it go. They’re always asking you how you’re doing, you know, if you need, do you need any assistance, you know. Like, if you do a report and you want them to look it over before the final grade, they will take it over, look at it, you know, make suggestions, you know, to further, to better that paper. And they’ll let you know in all aspects of the course, you know, hey, you know, don’t be lazy, you know. You need to make sure you do this, make sure you to this, make sure you do that, make sure you turn your homework in, make sure you’re here for the period review. Make sure you’re here for the review test. They’re always reminding you what you need to do.

By regularly checking in with students, the faculty at this college created an environment where students felt comfortable asking questions. While regularly checking in on student progress may take additional effort for faculty, it is very important given that many Black male students in this study noted that they fear interactions with professors. Some students noted that they avoid asking faculty questions, even when they know they need help, for fear of being perceived as academically inadequate or “stupid.”

An important aspect of checking in on student progress is proactively addressing performance issues rather than waiting for students to do so. This approach was attributed to aiding students in being up-to-date with course work and more successful in the class. Malachi provides an example of this subtheme:

[Faculty] definitely want to see you do well, you know, and even like you know . . . if they pull you aside, and you know they start talking to you . . . you have to you know this is your grade, you know, this is what you need to do . . . to you know, bring it up.

Listening to Students' Concerns

When asked for help, many students noted that faculty listened to their concerns. Students noted that faculty addressed their concerns by being attentive to their needs. Jeremiah best articulates this concept:

The teachers that I have, like, you know, they listen, you know. If I have any questions to ask them, they'll listen. They're not like no teacher that pushes you off. I have to go to my next class, you know, like you're gonna have to write me something on a little email. They're nothing like that. They will you know, come to my office and we can sit down and talk about this. Most of my teachers, you know, if I want to sit down and talk to them, they give me all the time in the world, you know, to sit there and listen to what I have to say.

While Jeremiah's quote addresses circumstances where he proactively sought out faculty for course concerns, some students did not share in this approach. Sometimes this occurred when students were already behind in their coursework or had performed poorly on one or more assignments. Peter noted that he is regularly behind in his classes. However, he stated that faculty listened to his concerns, they usually address his performance issues by (a) providing him with an opportunity to earn more points, or (b) deducting fewer points from an assignment than previously deducted. Peter noted that he believes faculty members work with him because they "see the effort of me want[ing] to actually do good in the class."

Encouraging Student Success

One important element of providing students with personal attention was encouraging them to succeed. This included encouraging

students to turn in their work, focus in class, and strive for academic excellence. Several students described this encouragement using the word “push” (e.g., faculty “push you to do well,” “professors would push me.” Jared serves as a good example of this concept. He notes that he had very little motivation to succeed in school, other than to attain monies from financial aid. He states that he was missing classes, not turning in his homework, and not paying attention during class. Though Jared would later drop-out from this college as a result of personal issues, he spoke very highly about the faculty on campus and the encouragement he received from them while he was a student:

... and even though I had wonderful professors, seriously professors that was teaching the classes that I took, they really cared about me. They always, “Come here, you.” You know, “What’s going on? You’re a bright student. You know, the papers that you turn in...” Especially, you know, we have to write about our background, write about, you know, life, depends on the different topics the professors gave us to write about, and they seen, they told me they seen the talent that I had, you know, but they were asking me “why you never put it into your studies?”

Similar to Jared, Timothy noted that faculty members encouraged him, referring to faculty as “people” he stated: “I think people telling me that you can. I think people supporting me. I think people encouraging me affects my possibilities of success.” After making this statement, Timothy went on to describe how a professor worked intensively with him and encouraged him.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Altogether, the four elements associated with personal attention were attributed to positively affecting African American male student success. As made evident by the majority of quotes used, the relationship between these concepts is multidimensional and dynamic. The intricacies of personal attention provide concrete examples of how positive social relationships between faculty (institutional agents) and students serve to enhance student academic success. As previously noted, several authors have stated that positive faculty-student interactions are integral to student achievement and success (e.g., Beckles, 2008; Bush, 2004; Jordan, 2008; Riley, 2007; Stevens, 2006; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Turner, 2000). In general,

previous studies have found that faculty must “listen” to students and give heed to their experiences, perceptions, and contributions (Bush, 2004; Jordan, 2008). Beckles (2008) notes that this can serve to create a safe environment (or safe space) by which students feel comfortable dialoging with faculty and students about critical issues. However, this study contributes to the literature by explicating a more comprehensive view of the relationships needed. Personal attention—as illustrated by a friendly, caring, encouraging, and concerned attitude and reinforced by monitoring student progress—and proactively addressed performance issues are key. Concepts associated with personal attention work collectively to create an affirmative faculty-student relationship.

The primary message that can be taken from this study is that relationships matter. Faculty serve as integral actors in determining student academic success. Students who received personal attention from faculty members benefited from the establishment of positive relationships that led to greater engagement (e.g., attentiveness during class, attending office hours) in the course. This notion is consistent with extant literature on African American males in the community college.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Actions can be undertaken to encourage faculty members to invest personal attention in African American male students. Administrators must work actively to encourage the hiring, retention, and promotion of faculty members who have a track record of working with and understanding diverse student populations. This may serve to increase the likelihood that faculty will feel comfortable providing personal attention to Black male students. Prospective and current faculty who lack exposure to—and a successful history of working with—diverse students should be provided with training that allows them to more successfully interact with Black male students. Findings from this study can be used as a framework for basic elements in establishing and maintaining successful relationships with students. Again, these elements include (a) being friendly from the onset; (b) checking in on students’ academic progress; (c) listening to student concerns; and (d) encouraging students to succeed. In theory, these four elements may seem intuitive. However, in practice, findings from this study and extant literature reveal that they are not always employed. Overall, faculty members’ personal engagement with students should be integral during the tenure and promotion review process. These

items should be included on all course evaluations and be weighed with importance in the overall assessment of faculty performance.

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