# From the *Right to Fail* to the *Right to Succeed*: Black Males in Community Colleges

## Interactions with faculty are key.

By J. Luke Wood

"OPEN ACCESS" IS A CORE MISSION COMPONENT of the community college. Through this mission, public two-year colleges provide postsecondary opportunities to nearly all individuals desiring further education. However, access is not necessarily synonymous with success. Many students, including black males, have concerning levels of success, or the lack thereof, in college. With this in mind, I discuss strategies (presented at the end of this commentary) that faculty can use to improve the success of black males in the community college. While grounded in research conducted in the community college, these strategies are applicable to faculty in higher education as a whole. However, acting on the strategies presented is challenged by a philosophical notion that has historically plagued the community college.

During the 1960s and 1970s, community colleges experienced marked increases in student enrollment. Under the guise of open access, colleges admitted students but failed to provide them with the support (e.g., teaching approaches, student services, institutional environments) that they needed to succeed. These actions were part of a predominant philosophy of the time that students had *the right to fail;* in essence, a right to enter the community college without a corresponding institutional commitment to employ "all reasonable means" to advance student success.

At the time, few institutions could identify struggling students and provide them with the academic services (e.g., tutoring, mentoring) and counseling services (e.g., academic advising, assessment testing) that they needed to succeed. This unfortunate approach resulted in dismal persistence rates among many students and, starting in the 1980s, led stakeholders (e.g., educational leaders, policymakers, government entities, and local communities) to impose accountability measures designed to counter a hemorrhaging student population. While revised programming and initiatives led to general advances in the quality of education and services, not all students benefited equally from these advances.

Discussions regarding the plight of minority males are ubiquitous on community college campuses around the nation. In particular, student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administrators are concerned about black and Latino male student enrollment, persistence, achievement, graduation, and transfer. These parties have ample evidence for their concern. For instance, enrollment numbers illustrate an inequitable representation of black

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male students in relation to their female counterparts. At one institution where I conducted research, there were six black female students for every one black male. Unfortunately, this imbalance is common. Though there should be concern about the need to enroll more black males in postsecondary education, even more disturbing is how the black male students fare who do enroll. Nationally, the US Department of Education indicates that 11.5 percent of black males will drop out in their first year of college. By year three, 48.9 percent will have left the community college without a certificate or degree. Black males have the highest dropout rate among every racial/ethnic and gender subgroup. Achievement scores (as measured by GPA), graduation rates, and transfer rate illustrate similar patterns.

Motivated by these concerns, my research has focused extensively on the black male experience with primary attention to their academic achievement and persistence in community colleges. Based upon my research, I can attest to the great challenges that face practitioners who truly desire to enhance the success of black male students. Some of these challenges include: students' previous academic preparation, their difficulty balancing the demands of school and work, and their level of commitment to academic goals. In addition, outside forces, such as media portrayals, racial/gender stereotypes, and peer influences, can create difficulties for students and their instructors. However, external roadblocks, those factors that occur prior to students' experience in the community college or in their outside lives, are only one piece of the success puzzle. In fact, conversations around black males in public two-year institutions often focus on these factors, while negating the internal (institutional) roadblocks that detract from student success. Among internal roadblocks (e.g., institutional policies, support resources, programming, personnel), particular attention should be directed to the quality of interactions between faculty and black male students.

Conversations with black males illustrate that a *right to fail* perspective may be perpetuated by some community college faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom. Many black males describe an "approach-me-first" stance taken by faculty members. This stance necessitates students must first prove their interest and engagement (e.g., participation in class discussions, attending office hours) before some faculty will reciprocate their investment in that student. Further, many black males note few out-of-class interactions with faculty, even when walking by their instructors on campus. As an aside, these students describe being more apt to have conversations on academic matters with janitorial staff, groundskeepers, food service workers, and paraprofessional staff than with faculty members.

Given the number of students that faculty instruct, the fact that some of them may restrict their time and effort to students whom they perceive as being more engaged is somewhat understandable. However, what is understandable isn't always what is best. Here is an example. Many black male students describe a deep apprehension to engage in the classroom, particularly with faculty members. In some cases, this apprehension extends to interactions with fellow students in class or on campus with other academic professionals, such as tutors or librarians. Fear of engagement is typified by black male students' ambivalence toward establishing first contact with faculty, asking or answering questions in class, contributing to group discussions during class, participating in small class groups, and visiting faculty during office hours. In my conversations with students, the most worrying aspect of apprehensive behavior is the angst that results from it. Black males describe times when they wanted to ask questions, had the answers to questions posed in class, or knew they needed to attend office hours; however, their apprehension to engage counterbalanced the desire to do so.

Discussions with black male students indicate their perception that others (e.g., faculty, peers) view them as academically inferior. In fact, when describing an ambivalence to participate in class, black males repeatedly use words such as "stupid," "ignorant," and "dumb" to depict how others (particularly faculty) would regard them *if* they engaged. In this light, apprehension is a psychosocial coping mechanism, designed to shield black males from "fear" of academic inadequacy. Apprehension is also likely the by-product of prior schooling experiences, as black males are often the subject of poor treatment by pre-K–12 educators. Further, apprehension is amplified by stereotypical depictions of black boys and men in society. Through negative messages received from media outlets (e.g., television, radio, Internet, music), educational agents (e.g., teachers/faculty, admin-

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istration), and even from peers, black males face stereotypes that assume cognitive inferiority.

While faculty members have little control over what occurs in wider society or in students' prior schooling experiences, they do have control over what happens within their institutions. Black males want to learn and they want to succeed. Their very presence in the classroom should validate this assertion. That being said, apprehension will remain until faculty members take steps to curb disparate levels of engagement. These steps will transition the academic setting away from *the right to fail* (the status quo) to one that fosters *a right to succeed*. A *right to succeed* necessitates proactive action on behalf of faculty members. My research describes several "common sense" practices, identified by black male students, that faculty can employ to reduce apprehension and to facilitate positive faculty-to-student interactions with black males. These proactive strategies serve to foster an environment of success.

1. **Initiate and maintain contact**—Faculty must be proactive in initiating contact with black male students. This should occur during initial class sessions and continue (even without reciprocation) throughout the duration of the course. Faculty should avoid an "approach-me-first" stance; instead, they must illustrate an investment in the student, even before students "prove" their commitment to the course.

2. **Illustrate a friendly and caring demeanor**—Faculty must illustrate a friendly and open demeanor toward students. Through interactions, faculty must demonstrate an authentic care for students. One aspect of illustrating care is to confront verbal, nonverbal, and subtle slights toward students.

3. **Be affirming and encouraging**—Faculty must, from the onset, continually affirm black male students. Faculty should recognize that numerous overt and hidden messages from the media, peers, family, and even educators bolster stereotypes of black boys and men. To counter these messages, faculty must affirm students' academic abilities, illustrate confidence in students' aptitude for success, convey that students are valued, and provide them with honest but constructive criticism.

4. **Check in on student progress**—Faculty must monitor students' performance in the classroom on two levels: (1) they should be cognizant of their performance in academic matters and (2) they must be attentive to nuances in student engagement to ensure that participation is not being restricted by apprehension. When a student illustrates concerning behavior in either area, faculty must intervene immediately.

5. **Listen to student concerns**—In the event that a student raises a concern regarding the course material, structure, or their performance, faculty should be attentive to their concerns. When possible, faculty must pursue "all reasonable means" to enable black males' success while maintaining the integrity of their courses.

Faculty members who practice the aforementioned strategies will be taking an important step away from a *right to fail* philosophy to one that facilitates students' *right to succeed*. As institutional agents, faculty members can illustrate an institution's commitment to students, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will succeed. Like all other students, black males want to succeed. They want to create a better future for themselves and their families. However, aiding students in achieving their academic and career goals requires a shared responsibility for student outcomes, one that shares the burden of student achievement between the institution and the student. Employing the strategies provided is one component of an institution's obligation to facilitate positive outcomes of black males in college.

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Notes


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