

Supporting High-Achieving Nontraditional Black Male Undergraduates: Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

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To address deficit-oriented discourse about Black males in higher education, researchers have begun to focus on high-achieving Black males. Despite this focus, there is limited research on high-achieving nontraditional Black males (HNBM). The purpose of this article is to urge the start of a new scholarly conversation focused on investigating the experiences of HNBM collegians in order to develop programs and policies to support the retention and graduation of all nontraditional Black males. To begin this conversation, I first examine the challenges that nontraditional Black students face in higher education to contextualize the need for studies that focus on HNBM collegians. Second, I discuss the current literature which explores the experiences of high-achieving Black male students and how focusing on HNBM fills a gap in the scholarly discourse. Lastly, the article concludes with implications for theory, university policymakers, and practitioners.

Keywords: Black males, nontraditional, higher education, high-achieving

Over the past fifteen years, institutions of higher education (IHEs) have witnessed a dramatic increase in their nontraditional student population (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). The NCES, for example, predicts that between 2011 and 2021, the nontraditional student population (defined as a student age 25 and over) will increase by 14 percent. As the nontraditional student population continues to increase, it is also important that IHEs address the needs of their Black nontraditional student population as the National Urban League (NUL; 2014) found that approximately 65 percent of Black college undergraduate students identify as nontraditional, which they defined based on the students' financial independent status. Regardless of definition, researchers contend that nontraditional students often bring an array of experiences to campus and the classroom including but not limited to: having maintained full-time employment, taking care of children, and being financially independent (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; NUL, 2014). However, juggling these various responsibilities also serves as a barrier to their degree attainment (Gast, 2013).

While scholars have focused on nontraditional college students generally, there has been limited scholarship on nontraditional Black male undergraduates (Goings, 2015a). Investigating the plight of Black males in higher education is paramount as they have a 33 percent six-year graduation rate (Harper, 2012). Unfortunately, similar to studies focusing on the barriers for nontraditional college students, the struggles Black males face in higher education have been studied in great detail (Harper, 2009). If educational stakeholders seek to help nontraditional Black male students overcome the obstacles they face, I argue that researchers and practitioners must begin to ask those high-achieving nontraditional Black male (HNBM) undergraduate students how they succeeded. To date, there is limited research highlighting the experiences of HNMBs (Goings, 2015a,b). Given the call from policymakers to diversify the workforce particularly in the science, technology engineering, and mathematic (STEM) disciplines, HNMBs have a unique opportunity to fill this void. Moreover, Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse (2007) found that focusing on ensuring the success of Black males will provide additional tax revenues and limit public health care and criminal justice costs. Thus, ensuring the academic

success of Black males will have not only an impact on higher education, but also the society at large.

The purpose of this article is to urge the start of a new scholarly conversation focused on investigating the experiences of HNBM collegians in order to develop programs and policies to support the retention and graduation of all nontraditional Black males. To begin this conversation, I first examine the challenges that nontraditional Black students face in higher education to contextualize the need for studies that focus on HNBM collegians. Second, I discuss the current literature which explores the experiences of high-achieving Black male students and how focusing on HNBM fills a gap in the scholarly discourse. Lastly, the article concludes with implications for theory, university policymakers, and practitioners.

Challenges in Higher Education for Nontraditional Black Students

To date, there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of nontraditional Black students (Drayton, Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, & Guy, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood found that many of their 19 Black adult participants credited their lack of maturity, sense of career trajectory, and strong desire to seek real world experience as the reasons they did not succeed in college during their first attempt. While the participants in this study overcame these challenges and succeeded in college, they also noted that race and gender bias served as barriers in their interactions with faculty. This trend is alarming and confirms other studies that have found Black students experience racism and discrimination on college campuses (Banks, 2010).

Sealey-Ruiz's (2013) case study on Black college reentry mothers found that participants were stereotyped because of their status as Black mothers. As one participant (Lisa) stated, "Why Black women gotta have just one story? . . . It's like if one Black women does something negative, suddenly all Black women do that thing" (p. 13-14). Lisa's sentiment underscores a larger issue where Blacks continue to be stereotyped and looked at as the problem. Lisa's narrative reinforces the notion that African Americans are continuously depicted by negative stereotypes and deficit thinking in society (Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry, 2012; Strayhorn, Johnson, & Barrett, 2013). Similar to nontraditional Black students, Black males face many obstacles on college campuses.

Although there has been limited literature on Black male nontraditional students, a recent volume in *New Directions for Adult Education* entitled, *Swimming Upstream: Black Males in Adult Education* provided some insight into the experiences of nontraditional Black male students and the challenges they face (Rosser-Mims, Schwartz, Drayton, & Guy, 2014). For instance, Rosser-Mims, Palmer, and Harroff (2014) found that having limited access to financial aid and other monetary resources, role models, and maintaining a work-life balance served as barriers to Black adult male students' success. While the studies in that volume explored the experiences of nontraditional Black males, none of these studies examined the experiences of HNBM. In fact, in the concluding chapter, Drayton et al. (2014) stated:

A reoccurring theme in this volume is the harmful impact of the negative stereotyping and the pathological construction of Black male identities. Expanding research on high achievers to diverse educational settings would not only disrupt this construction but also offer strategies for overcoming difficult situations. (p. 90)

Therefore this article and others (Goings, 2015a,b) are timely given Drayton et al.'s (2014) call for researchers to focus on high-achieving Black males. Important to understanding how Black males succeed in higher education, I will first discuss the challenges they face in college in the next section.

Challenges of Black Male Collegians

The challenges that Black males face in college have been well documented. One of the prominent challenges researchers contend Black males face is attending underperforming K-12 schools, which leaves many underprepared to attend college (Bianco, Leech, & Mitchell, 2011; Ford, 2014). In particular, Black males are overrepresented in special education classrooms and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Ford & Whiting, 2010). In Scott, Taylor, and Palmer's (2013) analysis of college scholarship essays from Black males, the researchers found that the limited access to culturally competent teachers, high educational expectations, mentorship, and family and community support served as obstacles for their high school completion. Consequently, for the Black males who do overcome these obstacles, they may also face challenges in college.

On college campuses, researchers have found that Black males encounter a plethora of challenges that impede their academic success which include but not limited to: academic underpreparedness (Robinson, 2013), racial discrimination (Banks, 2010), underutilization of campus resources (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006), and lack of access to financial aid (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). These barriers in conjunction with the K-12 barriers previously mentioned have contributed to only 5.43% of Black males enrolled at a degree-granting institution, only a 0.86% increase since 1976 (Wood & Palmer, 2014).

While the challenges Black males face in college are serious and worth investigating, scholars such as Harper (2012) have established a line of research that examines the academic and social experiences of high-achieving Black males. Within this research, scholars seek to disrupt deficit narratives about Black males and examine how these students are successful in higher education. Interestingly, this work has been focused on traditional college-aged Black males. Thus, there is a void in the literature on the academic and social experiences of HNBM collegians.

Investigating High-Achieving Nontraditional Black Male Collegians

Exploring how Black males are successful in college is necessary given that researchers have traditionally concentrated on their struggles and deficits (Goings, 2015c; Harper, 2014). In the literature on high-achieving Black males, researchers have found that these men have been successful for a variety of reasons such as: peer support (Fries-Britt, 2000; Harper, 2006), ability to develop stereotype management strategies (McGee & Martin, 2011), supportive faculty (Bonner et al., 2009; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), and family support (Freeman, 1999; Maton et al., 1998; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). In my dissertation research (Goings, 2015d) the nine high-achieving Black male students attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU) also cited intrinsic motivation and spirituality as an impetus for their academic success. Although this study sought to investigate the experiences of high-achieving Black male HBCU students, a subgroup of nontraditional students emerged. These men had achieved academic success despite managing full-time jobs, raising children, and their academic work.

While scholars have investigated the academic and social experiences of high-achieving Black males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; e.g., Harper, 2006) and HBCUs (e.g., Bonner, 2003; Goings, 2015c), there has been limited discourse about the experiences of HNBM college students. Learning from the experiences of these highly successful students will inform colleges on the academic and social needs of their nontraditional Black male student population.

The Future: Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

In order to understand the experiences of HNBM students it is paramount that researchers examine their experiences from a strength-based framework to avoid the dissemination of studies

that only focus on the deficits of Black males (Harper, 2007; Harper & Davis, 2012). Adult education scholars contend that Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy has been widely used as a theoretical framework for researchers studying adult and nontraditional learners (Merriam, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Andragogy is defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Andragogy is grounded in the following underlying assumptions about adults: a) the preference for self-directed learning; b) having significant life experiences and knowledge that can enhance the learning experience; c) a thirst for knowledge that is based on the need to know something; d) a need to apply learning to solve problems; and e) an intrinsic motivation for learning. While andragogy provides a foundation to understand adult learners, scholars such as Henschke (2011) contend that a more "world-wide perspective" (p. 36) beyond the seminal work of Knowles will enhance the discourse on andragogy. Through this work, it is also important for researchers to use theories and concepts that are culturally appropriate and sensitive to the populations under study to capture their educational experiences (Tillman, 2006). This is especially important to ensure that Black males are discussed from an asset-based perspective.

Although several frameworks can provide a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of high-achieving Black males such as critical race theory (CRT; e.g., Jett, 2011), African American male theory (AAMT; Bush & Bush, 2013), and the anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012), one promising theoretical perspective that has remained relatively unexplored in both the high-achieving and nontraditional literature is Whiting's Scholar Identity Model (SIM; see Whiting, 2006, 2009 for a more detailed description of SIM). Whiting (2009) defines scholar identity as "African American males perceive[ing] themselves as academicians, as studious and as intelligent or talented in school settings" (p. 227). Moreover, the SIM is comprised of the following nine constructs: 1) self-efficacy; 2) willing to make sacrifices; 3) internal locus of control; 4) future oriented 5) self-awareness; 6) need for achievement; 7) academic self confidence; 8) racial pride; and 9) masculinity (Whiting, 2006). Through the application of SIM, andragogy, and other adult learning theories, researchers may be able to provide a more comprehensive analysis of how nontraditional high-achieving Black males succeed in college settings and the ways in which racial and ethnic identity impact their experiences.

With the increased attention to supporting the matriculation and graduation of Black males, researchers and practitioners have an opportunity to make data-driven decisions to support these men. However, universities must become more vigilant in documenting the retention and graduation rates of their nontraditional student population. Gast (2013) noted that 77% of IHEs currently do not track data such as retention and graduation rates for their adult/nontraditional student population. Creating national policies on documenting the retention and graduation rates of nontraditional students will provide federal and state policymakers with information to potentially increase funding for IHEs to support their nontraditional student population. As well, IHEs have an opportunity to identify strengths and opportunities to better support their nontraditional student population generally, and their Black male nontraditional population specifically.

Addressing the needs of nontraditional Black students has financial implications, as universities have the opportunity to increase revenue if they have strong reputations for supporting this growing student population. Also, given President Obama's 2020 goal for the United States (US) to become the world leader in the proportion of citizens with a college degree (US Department of Education, 2011), increasing the graduation of nontraditional Black male undergraduates will help toward this goal. To inform this work, research is needed on how nontraditional Black males succeed in higher education. Given that many of these students may

work full-time while completing their degree, this research can also help employers develop targeted educational incentives for their employees to return to college. Increasing the number of employees with college degrees not only serves employers' needs, but can provide a boost to the US economy (Levin et al., 2007).

Lastly, there is a need for university officials to develop transition programs that help Black men become acclimated with campus resources including, but not limited to: financial aid, tutoring, academic advising, child care, and career services. In recent years there has been an emergence of Black male initiatives and centers on college campuses (e.g., Bowie State University Male Initiative, University Systems of Georgia African-American Male Initiative) that have a targeted mission of supporting Black males. Centers like these are needed more widely across institutions and should also have a division that focuses on older Black male students, as this population will have different needs than traditional aged Black males on campus.

Addressing the needs of nontraditional Black male collegians will require a comprehensive approach. In this article I have suggested that in order to determine how to help nontraditional Black males, we must first have an understanding of how HNBMs succeed. Knowing about their success will allow IHEs to develop comprehensive services to ensure their success on campus. Lastly, given that research on Black males and nontraditional students has focused on their deficits, focusing on high achievers will help reframe deficit narratives about nontraditional Black male students where their successes are seen as the norm and the challenges they overcome can be celebrated.

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