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African American Males Educational Success Factors

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Abstract

Due to the recent call for educators to increase African American educational achievement (Butler, 2012; Toldson, Sutton, & Brown, 2012; Harris & Taylor, 2012), the authors sought to identify personal characteristics associated with African American male educational success. There appears to be little discussion about this group's success in today's academic literature (Harper, 2009b). Thirty high-achieving African American male undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 22 at an urban southeastern American university were surveyed. Participants completed Likert scale and open-response items regarding their success in college. The results suggest high achieving African-American males deem sources of inspiration, people, and financial incentives as important for educational success. Also, a significant difference was discovered between STEM (science, technology, engineering, or math) majors and non-STEM majors with regards to age, paternal relationship, and incentives (internal, external) to achieve goals. Implications for administrators and higher education were discussed.

Keywords: academic success, success factors

1. Factors Associated with Educational Success of African American Males

Promoting the academic success of all students is an ongoing agenda item for educators, citizens, and politicians (Cuyjet, 2006). In addition, American schools, colleges, and universities continue to increase in the diversity of their students, reflecting a changing American culture in which a homogeneous majority is becoming less dominant (Anderson, 2003). These demographic changes have forced educators to examine the academic success of diverse student populations.

Recent educational statistics report a continuing disparity between the academic success of students of color and white students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Comparative studies focused on explanations for the poor academic performance of students of color (Weigher & Tedin 2006; Steele, 2003; Anaya & Cole 2001) rather than the success aspects of those high achieving students within this group (Brooks, Jones, & Burt 2012). In an effort to recruit and retain these students at colleges and universities, characteristics of successful underrepresented students, in particular black male students, need to be better understood (Butler-Barnes, Williams, and Chavous, 2012). The ensuing study will attempt to address the above concern and provide findings to assist practitioners, researchers, and administrators in their effort to support African American male students at their institutions.

2. Achievement Gap

The U.S. population continues to change and become more culturally and ethnically diverse (Shrestha, 2011) and (DW Sue, D. Sue 2012). The United States Census Bureau (2012) projects by 2043, the United States will be a majority-minority country. Even with this growing demographic change, there continues to be an academic achievement gap between whites and more culturally diverse populations within the United States, particularly black and Hispanic males (Harper and Harris, 2012). More students of color than white students dropped out in 2010. The disparity between the academic success of minority and white students continues in post-secondary schools. The percentage of degrees conferred by race (Table 1) illustrates the continued academic achievement gap based on the latest percentages of degrees conferred in the United States.

Table 1. Percentage of Degrees Conferred By Race 2009-2010

Degree Obtained	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	American Indian
Bachelor's Degrees	72.9%	10.3%	8.8%	7.3%	0.8%
Master's Degree	72.8%	12.5%	7.1%	7.0%	0.6%
Doctorate Degrees	74.3%	7.4%	5.8%	11.8%	0.7%

3. Educational Success Characteristics for Students of Color

In an effort to provide high-quality primary and secondary education to students from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is essential to examine characteristics associated with academic success in this population. Previous research on contributors to the educational success of students of color examined internal dynamics, as well as external or environmental influences (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Walf, & Yeung, (2007). Students of color who participate in more rigorous academic high school curriculums achieve higher rates of student success (Anderson & Kim, 2006). Research has also shown students who grew up in homes where they were challenged and education was valued by their parents, were motivated and successful academically (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco 2005; Harper, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Even though a supportive and academically challenging environment is important to academic success, many other external reasons contribute to these students' success. Many African American students, particularly males, attribute their motivation to the need to their sense of understanding what a college degree can do for them financially (John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004). African American male students have been shown to enter college with the aspirations to entering a major directly correlated with higher incomes, such as engineering (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek 2004). These successful students have demonstrated other elements which have been symmetrical to their overall success.

Academically successful black undergraduates have reported internal features such as resilience, having a hopeful spirit, and a strong sense of self-efficacy (Harper, 2009a). Achievement motivation is often the greatest predictor for GPA (Robinson, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). Many high achieving African American students attribute their academic success to their internal motivation (Bonner, 2010).

Fries-Britt & Griffin (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 9 high achieving African American college students between the ages of 19 and 23. All participants were full-time students and were products of both public and private K-12 education. Participants completed both a questionnaire, as well as participated in interviews. The outcomes of this study displayed various sources to the overall academic success of these students. One such theme to emerge was the *intrinsic motivation to dispel myths concerning African American educational success*. These students were motivated by their need to show their campus community African Americans are intelligent and capable people (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Students of color who failed to create a sense of intrinsic motivation lowered the expectations placed on themselves within the classroom (Strayhorn, 2008). Evaluating internal and external attributes, within students was essential in analyzing academic success.

Developmentally, supportive relationships with adults, participation in community youth programs, academic success, pro-social skills training, and communication of high expectations to youth are common leitmotifs which appear to be related to minority youth's academic success (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). Participation in university enrichment programs was also noted as helpful because of the early exposure to higher education. Mentoring programs, for example, particularly for African American male students has provided aid to them; specifically in adjusting to college (Brooks et al. 2012). Highlighting personal characteristics manifested in the various experiences by high achieving students is the focus of this study.

For the purpose of this study, a "high achieving" student was operationally defined as a student with a minimum 3.0 cumulative college grade point average (GPA), and enrolled as a full-time student (minimum 12 semester hours) at the 4-year urban university in the southeast United States for a minimum of two semesters. The first author of this study directed a recruitment and retention mentoring program, designed for African American male students. As director, there were ample opportunities to interact with African American male students who are doing exceptionally well in college. The overall mission of this program was (and still is) to retain these students at the university by providing them with information vital to their success. Discussion topics such as how to develop time management skills, navigating the college classroom, and building positive relationships on campus are a few of the subjects covered. The primary methods for achieving student retention were peer mentoring and the development of specific program activities; these approaches provide assistance in collegiate academic and social adjustment (Harper, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to identify personal characteristics associated with high achieving African American males. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What are the personal characteristics associated with high achieving African-American male students' educational success?

2. Are there differences in the personal characteristics associated with high achieving African-American males students' educational success for stem majors and non-stem majors?

4. Method

4.1 Peer Mentoring Program

Participants were recruited from a peer-mentoring program designed to support African American male college students at an urban university in the southeast United States; all African American male first semester freshmen were eligible to join this particular program. Students were recruited into this program upon their acceptance into the university. The program participants represented approximately 43% of the total African American male population on campus. Thirty percent of the other African American males on campus, who chose not to participate in this program, were athletes. The remaining 27% of the African American male students on campus were non-athletes and non-program participants. Participation in the program was completely voluntary. Therefore those (27%) African American male students who were non-program participants were eligible, but simply chose not to be program members.

Out of 230 students in the mentoring program, 59 met the necessary criteria for inclusion in the study. The criteria for this study included being an African American male between the ages of 18 and 22, "high achieving", and enrolled in at least their third semester of college. The 59 students were extended an opportunity to participate; of those fifty-nine, 30 returned completed informed consent forms and questionnaires. These student classifications ranged from 2nd year or sophomore year, to 4th year or seniors. There were no participants who were beyond their 4th year of college.

4.2 Measures

Data was collected using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988). The MSPSS is a 12-item self-report measure which assesses perception and adequacies of social support from friends, family, and significant others. Participants rated their agreement with items on each of three subscales, via a 7-point Likert-type scale from (1) very strongly disagree to (7) very strongly agree. Total and subscale scores were calculated by averaging responses, and can therefore range from 1 to 7. Higher scores were indicative of more perceived social support.

In addition to the MSPSS, A five point Likert-type questionnaire was also administered. This questionnaire was developed by Clark, Shreve, and Stone (2004) for the purposes of determining the success characteristics of minority students. Clark, Shreve, and Stone, (2004) used the instrument to examine the characteristics of successful minority students which had successfully navigated their undergraduate experience and entered graduate school. The questionnaire was based on areas inclusive of personal characteristics, sources of inspiration, important events/milestones, and financial incentives. The instrument also asks demographic information (age, classification, major, parent education and family income), and open-ended questions to obtain detailed individual insights. The open-ended questions asked participants about decision-making style, locus of control, orientation toward the future, family dynamics, personal and cultural values, incentives, resources (internal and external), current aspirations, and selected major.

4.3 Procedure

After obtaining IRB approval, participants were invited and selected from the peer-mentoring program discussed earlier. It took participants between 20-40 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants completed questionnaires in person at the institution where the study was conducted.

4.4 Coding

Section I of the MSPSS requested demographic information. The participant's responses were recorded directly from the MSPSS. Participant's departments and majors were coded as 1 for STEM majors and 2 for non-STEM. The variable County, State (CS) represented participants' hometowns and was coded according to ACES geographical regions (Association of Counselor Education and Supervision, 2010); 1 was coded for Southern, 2 for North Atlantic, 3 for North Central, and 4 was used for to combine the Rocky Mountain and Western regions.

Section II of MSPSS contained a five point Likert scale from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important). In section II of the MSPSS participants were asked to rate their personal characteristics (inner resources), sources of inspiration, mentors/relationships, and financial incentives.

Qualitative items on the MSPSS such as those in section II number 4 and Section III consisted of interview type questions which elicited open-ended responses. Participant's responses from these sections of the MSPSS were read by investigators and categorized into two groups. If participants indicated they took initiative and did not wait for things to

happen, then they were categorized and coded into group one. If participants indicated they were passive and just let things happen, they were categorized and coded into group two. If participants' response contained elements from both categories then they were coded group 3.

5. Results

The purpose of this study was to identify personal characteristics associated with high achieving African American males. To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics were calculated. A summation of the demographical information is presented in Table 2. In regards to the personal characteristics associated with high achieving African-American male students', a report of the participant's responses is presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Demographic Descriptive Statistics

Characteristics of Participants	Frequencies	Percentages
Total Participants	30	100
Age		
19	5	16.7
20	19	63.3
21	6	20.0
Years in College		
(1) First Year	23	53.3
(2) Second	4	46.7
(5) Other	3	10.0
Department/Major		
(1) Science Majors	16	53.3
(2) Non-Science Majors	14	46.7
County/State		
1 Southeast	26	86.7
3 Midwest	1	3.3
4 West	2	6.7
Missing	1	3.3
Number of places lived		
1	13	43.3
2	8	26.7
3	4	13.3
4	2	6.7
5	3	10.0
Job Career of Mother		
(1) Management/Professional	19	63.3
(3) Sales/Clerical	3	10.0
(4) Production/Transportation	1	3.3
(5) Service/Fast-food	2	6.7
Missing	5	16.7
Job Career of Father		
(1) Management/Professional	13	43.3
(2) Construction/Maintenance	1	3.3
(4) Production/Transportation	5	16.7
(5) Service/Fast-food	1	3.3
Missing	10	33.3

Table 3. Ratings of importance of characteristics for educational success

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Personal Characteristics (Hope)		
(5) Very Important	20	66.7
(4) Important	8	26.7
(3) Somewhat Important	2	6.7
(2) Not that Important		
(1) Unimportant		
Missing		
Personal Characteristics (Imagination)		
(5) Very Important	6	66.7
(4) Important	17	26.7
(3) Somewhat Important	7	6.7
(2) Not that Important		
(1) Unimportant		
Missing		
Personal Characteristics (Perseverance/Determination)		
(5) Very Important	26	86.7
(4) Important	4	13.3
(3) Somewhat Important		
(2) Not that Important		
(1) Unimportant		
Missing		
Personal Characteristics (Belief in self and abilities)		
(5) Very Important	26	86.7
(4) Important	3	10.0
(3) Somewhat Important	1	3.3
(2) Not that Important		
(1) Unimportant		
Missing		
Sources of Inspiration (Spirituality)		
(5) Very Important	17	56.7
(4) Important	6	20.0
(3) Somewhat Important	3	10.0
(2) Not that Important	3	10.0
(1) Unimportant		
Missing	1	3.3
Sources of Inspiration (The Media)		
(5) Very Important	2	6.7
(4) Important	15	50.0
(3) Somewhat Important	8	26.7
(2) Not that Important	4	13.3
(1) Unimportant		
Missing	1	3.3
People (Mother)		
(5) Very Important	23	76.7
(4) Important	4	13.3
(3) Somewhat Important	1	3.3

(2) Not that Important
(1) Unimportant   1   3.3
Missing

People (Father)
(5) Very Important   15   50.0
(4) Important   5   16.7
(3) Somewhat Important   4   13.3
(2) Not that Important   2   6.7
(1) Unimportant   3   10.0
Missing   1   3.3

Financial Incentive (Scholarships/Fellowships)
(5) Very Important   15   50.0
(4) Important   9   30.0
(3) Somewhat Important   4   13.3
(2) Not that Important   1   3.3
(1) Unimportant
Missing   1   3.3

Financial Incentive (Future Salary)
(5) Very Important   22   73.3
(4) Important   4   13.3
(3) Somewhat Important   2   6.7
(2) Not that Important   1   3.3
(1) Unimportant
Missing   1   3.3

Section II Question 4. (a) (Important events/mile stones)
(1) Graduation from High School   16   53.3
(2) External help (parents or others)   10   33.3
Missing   4   13.3

Section II Question 4. (b) (Important Events/Mile Stones)
(1) Acceptance to College   16   53.3
(2) External intervention (Parents or Others)   9   30.0
Missing   5   16.7

Section III Question 1. (Personal Characteristics)
(1) Perseverance/Tenacity = 1   24   80.0
(2) Hope/Spirituality = 2   2   6.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   2   6.7
Missing   2   6.7

Section III Question 2. (Defining Moments of Motivation))
(1) Self Insight/Epiphany = 1   5   6.7
(2) An External Event/Influence = 2   20   66.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   2   6.7
Missing   3   10.0

Section III Question 3. (Sources of Inspiration)
(1) Financial/External Sources = 1   1   3.3
(2) Personal/Internal Sources) = 2   23   76.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   2   6.7
Missing   4   13.3

Section III Question 5. (Childhood Hopes and Dreams)
(1) Dreams of professional Achievement = 1   23   76.7
(2) Dreams of non-professional Achievement = 2   4   13.3
(3) Both (1 and 2)   1   3.3
Missing   2   6.7

Section III Question 6. (How Decisions are made)
(1) Painful Decisions   13   43.3
(2) Intuitive Decisions   4   13.3
(3) Looking at Alternatives   8   26.7
(4) Dependent vs Independent Decisions   3   10.0
Missing   2   6.7

Section III Question 7. (Locus of Control)
(1) Internal LOC   24   80.0
(2) External LOC   4   13.3
(3) Both (1 and 2)   1   3.3
Missing   1   3.3

Section III Question 8. (Childhood Attitudes towards Future)
(1) Positive   24   80.0
(2) Negative   2   6.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   3   10.0
Missing   1   3.3

Section III Question 9. (Perception of Role in the Family)
(1) Active Role   15   50.0
(2) Negative   13   43.3
Missing   2   6.7

Section III Question 10. (The Importance of Values)
(1) Personal Values   20   66.7
(2) Cultural Values   2   6.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   6   20.0
Missing   2   6.7

Section III Question 13. (Message for a Childlike Yourself)
(1) Positive Message   27   90.0
(2) Negative Message   3   10.0

Section III Question 14. (Would You Change Anything About Your Past?)
(1) Yes   18   60.0
(2) No   12   40.0

Section III Question 15. (Current Aspirations/Goals)
(1) Career Focused Goals   24   80.0
(2) Personal Focused Goals   2   6.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   3   10.0
Missing   1   3.3

Section III Question 16. (Your Reason for Choosing Your Career)
(1) Personal Choice   23   76.7
(2) Choice Influenced by Others   2   6.7
(3) Both (1 and 2)   2   6.7
Missing   3   10.0

In order to investigate the second research question, are there difference in the personal characteristics associated with high achieving African-American males students' educational success for stem majors and non-stem majors? A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The Mann-Whitney U test is an alternative test to the independent sample t-test. The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare differences between two independent groups when the dependent variable is either ordinal or continuous, but not normally distributed..   It can be used also when the sample sizes are unequal (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004).

The results of the test indicated that the age of participants who were STEM majors (*Mdn* = 20.00 / mean rank = 12.03) was significantly lower than the age of participants who were NON-STEM majors (*Mdn* = 20.00 / mean rank = 19.46), $U = 56.5$, $p < .007$, $r = .49$ (see Table 4). Participants who were STEM majors (*Mdn* = 5.00 / mean rank = 18.03) rated the importance of their relationship with their fathers significantly higher than participants who were NON-STEM majors (*Mdn* = 4.00 / mean rank = 11.27), $U = 55.5$, $p < .021$, r .43 (see Table 5).Also, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test for incentives (internal = lower scores, external =higher scores) to achieve goals indicated that participants who were STEM majors (*Mdn* = 2.00 / mean rank = 16.47) preferred more external incentives than participants who were NON-STEM majors (*Mdn*   = 2.00 / mean rank = 10.92), $U = 53.0$, $p < .047$, $r = .38$ (see Table 6).

Table 4. Comparison of the Age of Science Majors and Non-Science Majors

Department/Majors	Mean Rank Scores	*U* (2-tail)
STEM majors	12.03	56.50*
NON-STEM majors	19.46	

p<.05

Table 5. Comparison of the Importance of Paternal relationships for Science Majors and Non-Science Majors

Department/Majors	Mean Rank Scores	*U* (2-tail)
STEM majors	18.03	55.50*
NON-STEM majors	11.27	

p<.05

Table 6. Comparison of Incentives to Achieve Goals for Science Majors and Non-Science Majors

Department/Majors	Mean Rank Scores	*U* (2-tail)
STEM majors	16.47	53.00*
NON-STEM majors	10.92	

p<.05

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to detect special individualities linked to high achieving at African American male educational success. Based on the results, it is reasonable to conclude the following. Students within STEM majors were motivated to achieve academically, because they associate academic success with financial success. Many African-American students are equally intrinsically motivated as their white counterparts, but they often are more externally motivated than their White counterparts (Cokley, 2003). It is possible a large percentage of Black male students in this study are driven by financial and tangible outcomes which often come with having a degree in high demand. Black male students with career aspirations such as engineering, business, and medical professions sought out STEM majors because of the potential to earn higher incomes. Recruitment administrators should emphasize career opportunities and benefits, which come with gaining a college degree to prospective Black male students, especially those students who show strong ability with the STEM fields.

The results from the current study also revealed significant intrinsic motivation of high achieving students not in the STEM fields. Participants within this group frequently listed personal sources of inspiration to strive academically. These characteristics included personal achievement goals such as being the first one in their family to finish college. A possible explanation could be intrinsic motivation and goals are often needed to overcome external barriers such as poverty and institutional racism, which have historically impeded the academic progress of African Americans. Previous research revealed students who learned to personally value academic success, have often overcome these and other external factors (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Steel &Aronson, 2004; Strayhorn, 2010). Students who regard themselves as determined have the perseverance, which is needed to be a successful college student (Clark, Shreve, and Stone, 2006).

The study's findings thirdly suggest many of the participants were academically impacted by their relationship with a male role model within their household, specifically those participants within a STEM major. As African-American children are being educated, it is important for them to be raised in families with high levels of parental academic

engagement (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004). Even more importantly, they should be exposed to other Black professionals who have benefitted from educational attainment. Black male students with positive black male family members have been shown to have high levels of academic attainment (Butler, Evans, Brooks, Williams, & Bailey, 2013).

Lastly, the results revealed students involved in STEM majors were younger than those students involved in non-STEM majors. This finding reflects the lower number of students who persist within the STEM as the curriculum becomes increasingly more challenging. Many support programs have a focus to support students within their first year of coursework, but the lower number of older black male students within the study suggests many of those students do not continue far along into their curriculum. Academic support such as concentrated tutoring, curriculum advisement, and continued emotional supported is need to adequately ensure students being successful within the STEM fields. Black male retention and support programs should concentrate more effort into supporting their participants beyond their first year (Butler, Evans, Brooks, Williams, & Bailey, 2013).

There were limitations to this study identified by the researchers. First, the sample was specifically confined to African American male high achieving students attending school at one university in the southeast. The findings from this study may be difficult to generalize to African American male students in other parts of the United States, to women, or to other races or ethnicities. As all participants in this study are currently receiving mentorship through the on-campus recruitment and retention program, their responses on certain items regarding supportive environments may be skewed in comparison to students on campuses without such a program. Equally so, high achieving African American male students may not choose to be a part of such programs if they do exist. Such students may be stronger self-starters, or simply do not have the time to commit. Many non-program participants receive some these same or similar services collectively, in other programs. The overall low number of participants is the third and last limitation; there were restrictions on the statistical analysis. Participant numbers were low due to students not wishing to give consent to the study, or they were not members of the recruitment/mentoring program. Not having a large participant group may be a reflection on a host of societal and systemic issues. African American male undergraduate students do not make up the majority of student populations at most college campuses. To obtain a more sizable sample, it may be wise to use the African American males who attend several universities. A larger sample size would have been more representative of this population and the findings more trustworthy. However, investigators reported robust statistical significance, which suggest the findings were not produced by random chance.

Overall, the results of this study offer some insight on characteristics strongly associated with African-American male student success. These results have implications for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff, which seek to recruit and retain black male college students on their campus. In addition to providing need-based financial aid, administrators must also provide a career-focused curriculum for African-American males who, according to this study, associate academic achievement with economic success. Future researchers who have interests in African American male success characteristics should consider the current data and examine the findings of this study with a qualitative analysis. Impending inquiries could possibly address those significant variables extracted from this current study. One suggestion would be conducting an emerging thematic analysis involving selected, common short answers from the MSPSS. There are few researchers who have conducted mixed method designs, where the qualitative results complement and support the quantitative, when investigating this population. Mixed method design can be used to compensate for the shortcomings in quantitative and qualitative research (Hurtado, et al., 2011).

In sum, the college experience of students of color, African American male students in particular, remains one of the focuses being addressed by colleges and universities within the United States. There are students who come from interesting and obscure backgrounds and situations; however, these students manage to defy odds as they achieve success in college. In a world where African American Males enroll as freshmen, and less than (33.1%) matriculate and graduate, these young charges tend to finish the undergraduate experience with honors (U. S. Department of Education, 2011). This study has shown that these successful students have personality beliefs and characteristics which parallel their major areas of study and academic practices. It is not known how they acquire these beliefs, but those who are able to create associations with educational triumph, increases diversity throughout the classifications and subsequently larger graduating classes. It is only reasonable and sensible for educators of higher institutions to be culturally responsive and intrigued when communicating about ways to ignite and cultivate such students and directly influence our communities.

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