

## Chapter 8

# **Institutional Seriousness Concerning Black Male Student Engagement**

### **Necessary Conditions and Collaborative Partnerships**

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A recent experience compels me to question the seriousness with which educators and administrators are willing to accept personal responsibility for Black male student success. I was invited to give a presentation for the annual staff development day at a college. Because data revealed several racialized and gendered disparities in student outcomes, the president and other administrators decided to frame the event around minority males. In advance of my visit, the organizers described to me some of the problems plaguing these students and asked that I unapologetically direct considerable attention to Black male undergraduates, the population for whom engagement and outcomes were especially troublesome. I recall being initially impressed that institutional leaders relied on data to inform the thematic focus of the half-day set of activities in which all faculty and staff were required to participate—unfortunately, my enthusiasm dwindled once the professional development day began.

Ironically, the event was held in the gymnasium on this particular campus. Perhaps this was the most appropriate venue in which to talk about Black male students, being that they composed the overwhelming majority on the basketball team there. From the center of the gym floor, I presented to what appeared to be a 95 percent White audience (as an aside, most of the persons of color were dressed in blue service uniforms). Given that I have taught and written extensively on engagement, I easily recognize disengagement when I see it. Despite my enthusiastic presentation style, the majority appeared, at

best, marginally interested in the topic about which I had been invited to speak. Never have I seen a crowd respond so chillingly to a Black guy on a basketball court—perhaps their response would have been different had I been dribbling a ball instead of giving practical recommendations for improving outcomes among Black men and other male students of color. In some ways, I felt booing might have been better than the obvious disengagement their faces and body language communicated; verbal disapproval would have at least signified the faculty and staff were seriously paying attention.

After the presentation, a Black professor approached me with praise and gratitude for raising issues that were widely known and longstanding, but had gone unaddressed at the college. I left the gym feeling reasonably confident that few who attended would actually do something purposeful to improve the conditions for and outcomes among Black males. There were other indicators throughout the day that suggested collaborative efforts were unlikely to ensue in ways that would help this college close achievement gaps. Despite its devoting three hours to the topic, requiring all faculty and staff to attend, compensating me for sharing my expertise, and espousing a commitment to diversity on its website and in other materials, at the end of my visit I concluded (perhaps erroneously) that this institution was not serious in an actionable way about engaging, retaining, and improving outcomes for minority males.

In this chapter, I review recent research and highlight findings from national survey data that justify the need for institutional seriousness concerning Black male student engagement. Although some literature I review seemingly attributes problems to the expenditure of student time and effort, I firmly believe that much of what I describe is a byproduct of institutional negligence in fostering conditions and environments that compel Black males to take advantage of resources and engagement opportunities. These issues are placed in a multidimensional theoretical framework, which informs the necessary conditions and collaborative partnership ideas I present at the end of the chapter.

## A Compelling Case for Engaging Black Males

Consistent with other parts of this book, what I call for in this chapter is a shifting of the onus from students to faculty, staff, and administrators. Because there are other chapters related to engaging women, men, and racial/ethnic minority students, some might ask, “Why the special emphasis on Black male undergraduates?” Below are four points to justify this population-specific call for institutional effort.

### The Shamefulness of Student Attrition

The commission appointed by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to examine the future of American higher education emphasized the need to drastically improve the rates at which students graduate from colleges and universities. In their 2006 report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, commission members argued the following:

Among high school graduates who do make it on to postsecondary education, a troubling number waste time and taxpayer dollars . . . some never complete their degrees at all, at least in part because most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed. (p. vii)

Although retention is lousy for students in general (as noted in Chapter 1, only 56 percent graduate within six years), it continues to be most problematic among Black male undergraduates.

Fewer than one-third (32.4 percent) of Black men who start college graduate within six years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005), which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups (Harper, 2006a). As indicated throughout this book, engagement and persistence through baccalaureate degree attainment are inextricably bound. Thus, any effort to improve the rate with which Black male students graduate must include an aggressive focus on eradicating the disengagement trends I later describe in this chapter. Put another way, graduation rates will remain ridiculously low as long as Black men are continually disengaged.

#### Engagement Now = Socioeconomic Progression Later

Placing greater emphasis on engaging and retaining Black male undergraduates now would ultimately increase the proportion of Black men with bachelor's degrees in the U.S. population. This is essential for narrowing socioeconomic gaps between them and their White counterparts. Over 20 years ago, Perry and Locke found "Black men have lower median incomes, higher unemployment, and employment in less prestigious occupations than do White men" (1985, p. 107). The most recent *Report on the American Workforce* indicates that 49 percent of White men served in professional and leadership roles, compared with 37.3 percent of Black men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). Conversely, 62.7 percent of Black men worked labor-intensive and service jobs, compared to 51 percent of White male employees.

Furthermore, Mickelson and Smith (1992) as well as Shapiro (2004) found that White men earn on average significantly more than do Black males with comparable educational credentials. In 2000, the median annual salary for White males with bachelor's degrees was \$51,099, compared with \$40,360 for Black male bachelor's degree recipients (NCES, 2003). These findings validate Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard's assertions that "Black male professionals continue to be excluded from positions of authority, are often deemed incapable of management or technical work, and continue to earn less than their White male counterparts" (1994, p. 518). Thus, it is important to expose Black male undergraduates to engagement opportunities that will strengthen their likelihood of attaining bachelor's degrees and compete successfully for financially rewarding jobs after college.

Thousands of students participate in internships each year that enable them to acquire the skills necessary for effectiveness in the workplace after college (Harper, 2006b; Kuh,

1993, 1995). Given this, internships are part of the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007). The relationship between internship acquisition, engagement, and post-college economic outcomes for Black men is clear: Those who are actively engaged are more likely to compete successfully for internships that will later render them competitive for better jobs with higher salaries and leadership responsibilities. The title of Thomas Shapiro's (2004) book, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*, perhaps best captures the point I am attempting to make here. That is, active engagement in college offers wealth to students by way of outcomes for future advancement—Black males are continually shortchanged in this regard.

### Empty-Handed Applicants Need Not Apply

Similar to the insufficient readiness for career competition I just described, those who were disengaged as undergraduates are less likely to be deemed attractive for admission to highly selective graduate and professional schools. This is especially true at institutions that do a holistic evaluation of applicants and place some value on prior engagement in campus activities. Having evaluated more than 3,500 applications in past roles as a graduate admissions officer for the MBA program at Indiana University and Executive Director of the Doctor of Education Program at the University of Southern California, I know firsthand the difference that engagement makes. Those with solid grade point averages, good test scores, and undergraduate leadership experiences consistently rose to the top of applicant pools. On a related note, despite its being a weak indicator of performance in graduate school, most universities still rely on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) to conveniently sift through applications and limit access to post-baccalaureate degree programs (Nettles & Millett, 2006). A recent report from the producers of the exam indicated that only 2 percent of all GRE takers in 2005–2006 were Black males (Educational Testing Service, 2007). This could signify that Black men are not engaged in experiences that compel them to even think about preparing themselves for educational opportunities beyond the baccalaureate. As a case in point: In 2005, only 28.6 percent of Black students enrolled in master's degree programs were male, and Black males constituted only 3.1 percent of all master's students in the United States (NCES, 2007).

### Better Off Ball'n? Not Really

“Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of Black male students more insidious than in college athletics at major universities” (Harper, 2006a, p. 6). This assertion is substantiated by the following data points offered in a report I authored for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C.

- In 2004, Black males represented 30.5% of student-athletes in Division I men's sports, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's highest level of competition. They comprised 54.6% of football teams and 60.8% of men's basketball teams.

- Across four cohorts of college student-athletes, 47% of Black men graduated within six years, compared to 60% of White males and 62% of student-athletes overall. The averages across four cohorts of basketball players were 39% and 52% for Black men and White men, respectively. Forty-seven percent of Black male football players graduated within six years, compared to 63% of their White teammates. (Harper 2006a, p. vii)

These data have led me to two conclusions that admittedly come across as editorial, but in my view are indisputable.

First, if colleges and universities expended even half as much effort engaging and retaining Black male students as they do recruiting them to play football and basketball, the problems described in this chapter would not be nearly as enormous. In the Joint Center Report I note that in 2002 Black men composed only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976. Stagnation in Black male college participation rates over a 26-year period is both surprising and absurd, given that institutions seem to have no trouble at all finding suitable students to play on revenue-generating athletic teams. The same is true with engagement. That is, if educators and administrators undertook the task of fostering the conditions that enable engagement for Black males with the same deliberation and intensity as coaches and athletics departments approach recruitment activities, it would very likely end up being the case that this would suddenly become the most engaged population among all that are written about in this book.

My second point is related to racialized outcomes disparities among male student-athletes. Although athletics departments offer specialized resources and support services, their effects obviously differ by race. Much about aggressively targeting Black men to make up more than half of certain sports teams, but having their White teammates graduate at significantly higher rates, is wrong. Although Black male student-athletes graduate at higher rates than do their same-race male peers who are not on intercollegiate sports teams (47 percent vs. 32.4 percent), racial disparities for both groups make clear the need to engage them more purposefully. Moreover, as Brandon Martin notes in Chapter 15 of this book, only 1.8 percent of college football players are drafted in the National Football League (NFL), and 1.2 percent of men's basketball players are drafted in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Thus, it is essential to ensure that student-athletes are exposed to value-added engagement experiences that will equip them with the credentials needed to compete for jobs and admission to graduate schools, as the overwhelming majority will not go on to play professional sports. Just because they graduate at 14.6 percentage points higher does not necessarily mean Black male student-athletes will have accrued the outcomes requisite for success after college.

### Most Useful: Engagement and Race/Gender-Specific Outcomes

As noted in Chapter 1 and in the Afterword to this book, a plethora of gains, outcomes, and benefits are associated with educationally purposeful engagement for all students, regardless of race or gender. But I have documented elsewhere the ways in