To be Young, Gifted, African American and Male

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to be Young, Gifted, African American, and Male

I try to be creative. I like being spontaneous. I don't like it when people know my next move. I never let my left hand know what my right hand is doing. Because, when people have got you figured out, they can do a lot of things to you and I don't like that.

--Trey Williams

"You're interested in studying academically gifted African American males? You know the greater academic community doesn't believe this being exists!"

These words spoken by a colleague rang out in my mind like the synchronized chimes in a clockmaker's repair shop. Was my graduate school comrade apprised of some writ that unbeknownst to me would lead to my dissertation process resulting in the sequel to the Never-Ending Story? Had I stumbled upon a research topic that would prove to be the bane of my doctoral existence? Were the pundits within academe ready to focus on students of a caramel, chocolate, ebony, or mocha hue, particularly if this focus cast the light in a direction away from the alabaster and ivory stalwarts who traditionally occupied center stage? All these questions swirled around in my head as I contemplated conducting research highlighting the experiences of the academically gifted African American male collegian within the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and Traditionally White Institution (TWI) contexts. The eventual questions that I sought to answer were these:

What were the perceptions of one academically gifted African American male undergraduate attending an HBCU and one academically gifted African American male attending a TWI concerning his relationship with the institution in the cultivation of his academic giftedness?
What identifiable factors influenced the success of the academically gifted African American male collegian?
What were these factors specific to the type of institution attended?
This article will focus on these factors, uncovered as themes in a qualitative research investigation of two students, both young, gifted, African American, and male. Although these case studies are not representative of all academically gifted and talented African American males, their particular experiences may help initiate dialogue about other postsecondary contexts involving similar students.

Case Study Participants and Institutional Context
I purposefully selected the two case study participants based on their class standing (junior or senior status) and their past and current records of academic success. Initially, I sought to identify participants who were identified as gifted and talented during their K-12 years. Yet, this proved to be a formidable task, in that many of these students, as the literature so clearly articulated, are under- or unidentified for gifted programs. Also worthy of note was the vast array of literature that spoke to the lack of validity in using conventional measures (grades, standardized tests, IQ) to assess the intellectual capacities of minority students (Baldwin, 1980; Eby, 1983; Frasier, 1989; Hilliard, 1976; Renzulli, 1981; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986). Nevertheless, I persisted, using a very traditional approach to defining giftedness, namely, standardized test scores: Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT), as well as high school and college grade-point averages (emphasis on GPAs above 3.5 on a 4.0 scale). This is what Renzulli (1986) refers to as a "schoolhouse" or "test-taking" definition of giftedness.

Individuals at each respective institution identified several students and allowed me to conduct on-campus interviews with them. I purposefully selected one chemistry major from each institution: Stephen (a pseudonym) for the student attending the HBCU and Trey (a pseudonym) for the student attending the TWI. Both agreed to allow me to pry into their worlds in order to listen, observe, and attempt to construct meaning out of their experiences. Southern State University (SSU), the HBCU, and Texas State University (TSU), the TWI, were purposefully selected based on a number of criteria, including institutional size, mission, student demographics, and location. These two institutions and the stories of the participants attending these schools will be discussed through six emergent categories (Relationships With Faculty, Peer Relationships, Family Influence and Support, Factors Influencing College Selection, Self-Perception, and Institutional Environment) uncovered in this investigation. What follows is a discussion of each of the six emergent categories and their implications for not only K-12 institutions, but also higher education and student affairs divisions, as well.

Research Methods
Qualitative research methods were used to collect data for this study, including (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (b) direct observation, and (c) written documents. I employed a phenomenological case study approach to understand the experiences of these two academically gifted African American men. Phenomenology is a theoretical orientation that focuses on the question "What is the structure and essence of this phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 1990,
The phenomenon under investigation was each student's relationship with his respective institution. Additionally, case studies were employed to provide rich detail and description. Case studies allowed me to investigate the selected phenomenon within its "real-life" context (Yin, 1994). Interview data were transcribed verbatim, yielding 227 pages of transcripts. All information was analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding methods to uncover salient emergent categories and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method was also implemented to serve as an ongoing means of comparing data to and against other data to provide additional insights on research findings (Merriam, 1990).

**Relationships With Faculty**

A discussion of the importance of fostering positive and supportive faculty relationships has been touted in many empirically and nonempirically based studies to serve as perhaps the most important component in a student's college experience. Regardless of factors such as precollege preparedness or intellectual prowess, students at both ends of the academic continuum profit from meaningful liaisons with faculty. Trey and Stephen were no exception to this rule.

The relationships they maintained with faculty were somewhat different in structure, but similar in outcome. Trey intimated that his relationships with faculty were an integral part of his collegiate experience, providing him with immeasurable academic support. Yet, he did not hesitate to point out the limitations of these relationships, which he perceived as directly affecting his connection to faculty members. In describing one particular relationship with a professor he viewed as helpful in assisting him to secure an academic scholarship, Trey stated, "He was instrumental, and though we established a relationship, it was not a leisure or pleasure type of relationship; it was only academic." This circumscription of the relationship to the campus environment created in Trey a sense of disengagement and detachment from the faculty on matters falling outside of the realm of academics. By the faculty relegating their relationships with Trey solely to an academic arena—a classroom, a laboratory, or an office—his notions of faculty support did not appear to extend beyond the doors of the classroom or edges of the campus grounds.

Stephen's relationship with faculty mirrored Trey's relationship along on-campus, academic dimensions; namely, Stephen enjoyed close contact with faculty on issues of academic and scholarly import. Yet, where Trey received support only within the academic setting, Stephen received support within and outside of the academy. Addressing the issue of faculty support, Stephen commented, "If I had problems outside the classroom, I could go to ... any of the professors. They really instilled the confidence within me." Stephen also commented on the support he received from faculty who provided him with recommendations for a summer internship experience: "their recommendations accommodated my personal willpower." Statements such as, "I could go to any of the professors" and "They accommodated my personal willpower" reflect the practices of faculty who are committed to meeting the needs of their student populations inside and outside of the academic circle, recognizing that an entire set of issues these students confront fall outside of this loop.
Peer Relationships

Research has documented the support that peer relationships can offer all students and the particular added benefit they afford the minority student in nonminority collegiate settings. Both participants spoke freely about their peer networks and the influence these liaisons exacted on their lives from an academic, social, emotional, and psychosocial perspective. Although the institutional contexts were different, the relationships served the same ostensible purpose: the provision of support.

Trey's peer relationships were multifaceted, touching upon all of the perspectives mentioned above. Perhaps the strongest peer relationship he maintained was with his roommate, who happened to be his biological brother. Trey negotiated social and emotional concerns and psychosocial issues during his experience at the institution and discussed them in his informal exchanges with his brother over a quick snack while completing a classroom assignment or on the way to campus from the apartment they shared minutes away. Although Trey's relationship with his brother is also discussed under another of the identified categories in this investigation (Family Influence and Support), the support Trey perceived from his brother as a peer was just as essential as his support as a brother. In essence, I felt that "double dipping" in this particular instance was required to show the multidimensionality of this relationship. When speaking about his relationship with his brother, Trey stated, "I really don't tell anybody my business, my personal business, except him because he's my brother, you know, I trust him completely, more than anyone."

Peer relationships were also an important part of Stephen's academic experience. Although the institutional context did not relegate Stephen to minority status from a cultural or ethnic standpoint, his designation as a high-achieving student did have the potential of compartmentalizing and isolating him from an academic and social perspective. Thus, he discussed his need for supportive peer relationships within the institutional setting. Like Trey, Stephen's initial identification of a peer relationship he deemed important was with a family member, a female cousin who lived nearby. Stephen said, "I occasionally stop by her apartment to shoot the breeze." His relationship with his cousin appeared to be supportive of his wellbeing.

Beyond his identification of the relationship he maintained with his cousin, Stephen spoke of the many liaisons with his collegiate peers. In one statement, Stephen reported, "When it comes time for studying, it's always good to study in groups or something like that. If I don't know something, I can always call one of my classmates. They are real important."

Family Influence and Support

The family has been cited as one of the most critical elements in the translation of ability and talent into achievement among gifted individuals. Studies have revealed the relative influence of the mother, father, siblings, and extended family unit on the success of academically gifted and talented students. The family serves as a source of support on academic and nonacademic issues, emotional as well as developmental. Additionally, the family role is ongoing, playing a major part in the individual's decision-making processes throughout his or her formative years and
well into adolescence and adulthood. This is particularly the case with minorities, who often maintain very close familial relationships.

Trey spoke of the importance of family in many of his interview statements and during our informal exchanges. His relationship with his brother, who was also his roommate, was previously mentioned under the category Peer Support. In addition, Trey made numerous references to his brother that are appropriately treated under the category Family Influence and Support. Yet, some of Trey's most powerful statements about his family and their support were made in reference to the support he received from his mother. In speaking to his mother's influence during his formative years, Trey said, "I use the same patterns that she started me out with when I first got in school, as far as kindergarten that is. I still use the same ones in college.... I was actually asked a question about how I make a GPA or why it is that I am so studious, and I told them that it all goes back to my mother." In addition, Trey mentioned the support his mother continued to provide to him during his undergraduate experience.

Family was also central to Stephen's collegiate experience. Stephen spent a significant amount of time talking about the role his family played in supporting his college decision-making process. He too spoke of his family's role in not only his elementary and secondary development, but also his postsecondary development. When referring to the support his family provided and his perceived overdependence on them for their support, he replied, "I would like to try and become more independent." Yet, Stephen was not hesitant in discussing his family's role in providing him with guidance in meeting the goals he had set for himself. According to Stephen, "My parents paved the way for me and instilled in me the confidence that I could succeed." Both parents were cited as instrumental in providing support; yet, mirroring Trey's experience, Stephen's mother appeared to play a more pivotal role as supporter.

**Factors Influencing College Selection**

The importance of making the right college choice is paramount for minority students, especially those faced with the prospect of attending a majority institution. Research conducted by Anderson (1984), Astin (1975), Astin and Panos (1969), Pascarella, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1996), and others have revealed that various institutional characteristics and traits exert a strong impact on student matriculation and persistence. Trey and Stephen both talked about the influence of family on their collegiate selection processes.

A recurrent factor in Trey's college selection process was the size and the location of the institution he would attend. When prompted to discuss his decision to enroll at Texas State University, Trey immediately spoke of the numerous consultations he had with his mother regarding the benefits she perceived of his attending a smaller institution located close to his home. Although his initial desire was to attend a large state university, he was pleased with his choice to attend a smaller regional school. It provided him with access to many of the benefits a larger campus would not afford, such as access to faculty, recognition for scholastic achievement, and acknowledgment of individuality, not to mention the less than 2-hour distance from his parents. Trey spoke candidly during the interview:
Since I have been going here, I'm really glad I did because I am better able to understand the subject at hand as opposed to how it might have been at [a large state university he had contemplated attending]. I had classmates to go there, and they are way behind because they don't have any type of real ... interaction with their professors. They are just basically numbers and I didn't think that would be good for me or my understanding of certain things.

Unlike Trey's desire to remain in close proximity to his home community, Stephen intimated that his choice to attend Southern State was based on the relative distance of the institution from his home. In addition to his desire to "leave the nest," Stephen also discussed the influence his parents had on his institutional selection process. A major factor influencing his decision to attend SSU was his parent's affiliation with the institution as alumni. The rich legacy and tradition of the Historically Black College and University experience was shared through the stories of their experiences at the academy. In discussing his selection process, Stephen said, "They really left it up to me, but since both of my parents are alumni of Southern State, they kind of said, 'Oh you gotta go to SSU' or something like that. And, I was always hearing how, you know, 'SSU was number one.'"

**Self-Perception**

Many inferences were made regarding self-perception, a term often cited in the literature in conjunction with discussions highlighting a related topic, self-esteem. As I looked at self-perception as a construct and its relation to the experience of the academically gifted African American male, I found myself envisioning a Rubics Cube. The Rubics Cube offers its many faces and permutations, and the ultimate goal of the individual manipulating the Cube is to establish uniformity on each of its six sides. Just like the Rubics Cube, the academically gifted African American male offers a myriad of faces (e.g., identities, developmental levels) and permutations (e.g. combination of "real-world" and socially constructed experiences) that must be manipulated to attain some measure of equilibrium and a sense of congruity with the academic environment--essentially establishing some modicum of uniformity.

When looking at defining or even understanding self-perception among these men, I had to deal with multiple realities steeped in academic, developmental, and socio-cultural contexts. To understand how these two students constructed their self-perceptions, it was important to look at how they combined their academic and sociocultural identities, often cited in the literature as being at odds in the mind of high-achieving African American students. According to research, these students ostensibly negotiate being smart and being African American, which is viewed by many as an oxymoron. Additionally, these students have to reconcile what DuBois (1986) in another circumstance referred to as an "unreconciled striving," that is, being forced to become two different people in one situational context.

Descriptive comments from both Trey and Stephen as they related to their academic abilities ranged from "excellent" to "I do okay," with a number of variations mentioned in between. Trey spoke frankly and shared that he perceived himself to be an open and caring individual. He used terms such as kind, gentle, softhearted, neat, and compassionate in his self-description. Trey
reported in an interview, "When people come to me and need help, I never turn my nose up or walk away. I know if I was in the same position I would like help, so I try to put my feet in other people's shoes as far as that is concerned." I expected Trey to talk at length about his academic prowess and intellectual conquests; but, to my surprise, he downplayed his academic abilities and embraced a philosophy promoting the multiple manifestation of giftedness that he perceived to exist among all individuals and populations. For example, he stated, "I believe everybody is gifted in some way because there are certain things that I can't do that somebody else can do.... that's what makes things happen in this world."

Whereas Trey's comments reflected an unassuming tone in reference to his academic skills, Stephen's comments revealed a very different posturing concerning his talents. A typical rejoinder in response to statements identifying individuals as gifted in my formal and informal investigations has been, "I'm not gifted, I just work hard" or "I question your definition of the term gifted." Stephen was and still remains the only person in my experience who has readily embraced the moniker of gifted and has not been afraid to express his comfort in identifying with individuals classified as such. In the interview, Stephen stated, "I think you could have many interpretations of that word, gifted. But, yes, I think you could call me gifted." Perhaps Stephen's readiness to accept this title has as much to do with the institutional context, that being the HBCU environment, as it has to do with his own personal views of self.

**Institutional Environment**

In order to understand fully who these two case study participants were in terms of their academic and social identities, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the institutional environment that contributed to the formulation of their identities. Higher education environments, with their oftentimes facilitative and sometimes constraining influences, are an important part of the college student's experience. Researchers like Banning (1988), Lewin (1936), Moos (1976), Strange (2001), and others have highlighted the impact of human, physical, organizational, and constructed environments on the experiences of individuals within various settings.

Trey perceived the institutional environment at TSI to offer support that was limited solely to academic matters. He lamented the fact that his nonacademic needs were not being met and that even the academic support he did receive by way of academics was provided on a limited, as well as competitive, basis. Trey commented,

You got to be 10 times as smart as anybody else, especially somebody White because there is always going to be some type of favoritism or some type of leeway given to them or some type of break. So, you really got to prove yourself. I had to prove myself. It shouldn't come down to that, but yet it still happened to me.

The institutional environment Stephen identified at SSU promoted a healthy mix of collaboration and competition, with a greater emphasis on collaboration. When asked to elaborate on his comment regarding the collaborative spirit that seemed to exist on the campus, Stephen stated, "When it comes time for studying, it's always good to study in groups or something like that. If I
don't know something, I could always call one of my classmates, you know, other students." In responding to another question that asked about the one thing he would change at the institution, Stephen referred back to the collaborative nature of his peers and professors on campus and simply replied, "I wouldn't change too much."

Practical Implications

Relationships Do Make a Difference

Both students expressed the importance of relationships. On Trey's campus, the Traditionally White Institution, relationships with faculty were viewed as being of limited support. Although he perceived the faculty to be supportive of his academic and on-campus efforts, he did not feel supported in his social or off-campus concerns. For Trey and students like him, this bifurcation of academic and social experiences runs counter to the notion of meeting the needs of the student holistically. We know that the student is not sometimes cognitive and other times affective, sometimes scholarly and other times social. These seemingly polar opposites are not opposites at all; they coexist.

Stephen's experience on the Historically Black College campus provided him with many opportunities to engage faculty in academic and social discourse. The numerous contacts Stephen made with these campus-based constituents provided him with the support he needed to develop and grow as an intellectual and as a human being. It was this concern for the whole student practiced by Stephens college that made his experience rewarding, and it is the reason why many African American students select predominantly African American academies of higher learning in the first place.

Relationships established with peers were also instrumental to both students' successful experiences. For Trey, peer relationships often served to mitigate a lack of close faculty contact. His peer network supported his academic, emotional, and psychosocial development. For, Stephen, although faculty contact was not at issue, he also relied on his peer connections for affirmation and support, primarily for social purposes, but also for some limited academic counsel. The fact that both of these students were academically gifted, minority, and male made it even more important for them to establish enduring, multifaceted, and mutually supportive relationships (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Davis, 1986; Fleming, 1984). Cline and Swartz (1999) reify this point by their statement, "Gifted African American students share the same concerns as gifted students in general.... However, their concerns are compounded because they contend with social and environmental issues such as racism and discrimination" (p. 101).

Student affairs personnel are in a prime position to assist in the facilitation of positive and supportive relationships between students and faculty, as well as among students themselves. As a professional entity, student affairs personnel possess an unclaimed and unrealized dominance in their access and influence on student learning and development (Gordon & Bonner, 1998). After all, students spend the majority of their time outside of the classroom. Therefore, this group is well suited to lead the charge in creating linkages between students and faculty in order to foster success. The initiation of events, practices, or programs aimed at creating these liaisons are
necessary pieces of the student learning and development puzzle. A concerted effort along these lines will serve not only as an outward display of the institution's acknowledgement of the importance of these relationships, but also as a means of recognizing student interest and need, which is an important aspect of the college going experience regardless of the institutional, cultural, or ethnic milieu.

Avoid Sidestepping Family Matters
Family played a major role in the experiences of both participants. Just as Wilson and Constantine (1999) asserted, for the minority collegian, the family serves as supportive scaffolding for the student. When adding the term academically gifted into the equation, one can readily see how the involvement of Trey's family, particularly his mother, was not atypical of the gifted student's experience (Bonner, 2000; Kulieke & Kubilius, 1989). Trey provided a vivid account of the numerous phone calls he made to his mother seeking her advice on a range of issues. He reflected on the guidance she provided him as a child and her continued guidance during his adolescence and early adulthood years. Her support also played a major part in his institutional selection process, advising against his selection of a mammoth state institution that she perceived would run counter to his academic achievement.

Stephen's family also served as major supporters of his educational goals. Stephen's family served as conduits to his choice of a Historically Black College. Much of their guidance centered on their experiences as alumni of the institution. The message Stephen's parents conveyed to him was that the institution would support his giftedness by providing him with an environment conducive to learning, an environment that would instill in him the confidence to achieve while simultaneously providing him with a rewarding undergraduate experience. Much of their message echoed the historic mission of the Black college: to show a concern for the whole student, recognizing that student needs are not solely academic (Hughes, 1987; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Student affairs officials must be cognizant of the role family plays in the student's selection and subsequent matriculation processes. For example, orientation officials at the university and departmental levels should promote initiatives that include parents and other family members in all academic decision-making processes. The knowledge and expertise of the student affairs professional in the area of campus-based orientation programming and the acumen of the academic affairs professional in the area of department/domain-specific orientation programming could be merged. This merger could potentially serve to meet the varied developmental needs of all students, as well as promote an image of inclusiveness.

Adjust the Campus Climate Control
The climate created on college and university campuses has as much to do with physical features and organizational structures as it does with human aggregates. Yet, it is often the influence of the human aggregate that takes precedence in the discussion of these environmental cues. It was the experience of the institutional environment, the climate of the campus that appeared to provide the most divergent institutional experiences for Trey and Stephen. For Trey, he found the campus climate to be steepled in competition. He spoke at length about his concerns regarding the level of
competition between students and the seeming lack of equanimity in the way faculty members
treated him vis-a-vis his non-minority peers. Trey's perceptions are discussed in the works of Allen
(1992), Bonner (2001), and Fleming (1984). These researchers found that African American males
in White institutions perceived competition to be extremely intense, much more so than their
counterparts attending predominantly African American institutions.

While competition appeared to be the order of the day for Trey, Stephen found his institution to
not only embrace, but also promote a sense of collaboration and esprit de corps. Faculty and
student engagements, student and student contacts, administrator and student liaisons—all of these
relationship combinations connoted to Stephen a campus climate that promoted collaboration. A
number of researchers (Allen, 1992; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Bonner & Murry, 1999; Davis,
1986; Fleming, 1984; Garibaldi, 1991; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Harvey & Williams, 1989; Roebuck &
Murry, 1993; Ross, 1998; Sims, 1994; Wilson-Sedberry, 1991) in the field of higher education
have pointed to the inclusive and supportive climate created on the Historically Black College
campus and have suggested that these institutions serve as models to the broader higher
education community. Therefore, Stephen's campus-based experience would be viewed as the
norm, rather than as the exception.

The role of the student affairs division at TWIs should include the embodiment and promotion of a
campus-wide multicultural agenda. A culturally competent cadre of student affairs professionals
should be poised and ready to address emergent issues posed by a diverse campus clientele. On
the HBCU campus, the student affairs division should promote activities and campus-based
engagements that are inclusive of an ever-changing student population. Notwithstanding the
numerous successes reported by HBCUs in addressing the academic and social needs of Black
students, rising concerns have been leveled against these institutions for their seeming lack of
initiative in meeting the needs of gay and lesbian, international, nonminority, and female student
cohorts (Sims, 1994). The academically gifted African American male would most likely fall into
the ranks of this forgotten group of students. Thus, regardless of campus demographic or
sociological profiles, contexts must be created to ensure that climates exist that foster student
success.

Identify and Integrate Identity
Regardless of institutional context, both students dealt with issues of identity, discussed under the
category Self-Perception. Although considered in two very different cultural and ethnic contexts, a
common element in this self-identity mix was academic giftedness. For Trey, dealing with the
development of his identity as an African American male in a predominantly White setting
presented a number of challenges, which were compounded by a sometimes complementary and
sometimes competing identity as an academically gifted student. Fries-Britt (1998) noted that this
double-edged sword slices at both the academic and cultural/ethnic identities of these students.
For students like Trey, it is sometimes difficult to find a comfortable home in either camp, and the
alternative of existing in both places often proves to be confusing and, at many times,
dissatisfying. The alternative then becomes to embrace one camp and disregard the other, and for
many students like Trey, the academic venue becomes the abandoned enclave.
Stephen's evolving identity as an African American male was allowed to flourish in an environment where others shared similar identity-development experiences. In their research focusing on self-esteem among African American student populations, Hughes and Demo (1989) revealed that self-esteem, which is formed based on comparisons among like peers, was typically at very high levels among these students. Yet, self-perception, which is formed based on comparison among nonlike peers, was typically at very low levels. Stephen's notion of self and identity were based on comparisons and contrasts he made among students who not only looked like him, but who also acted, talked, and even thought like him, whereas Trey found himself negotiating his cultural and academic identity development among a group of peers who were in many ways diametrically opposed to who he was as an individual.

The educator, whether in an academic or student affairs position, must recognize the importance of creating environments that promote inclusion and a level of comfort to satisfy and sustain all learners. Again, part of the educational experience beyond learning should promote growth and development. Perhaps a good place to start is by creating and supporting microsocial groups such as African American Student Unions, minority Greek fraternities and sororities, or special campus interest groups. In addition to creating and supporting these groups, avenues must be forged that allow them to connect to the broader (macrosocial) campus community. Groups of this nature would provide students with a testing ground to work through issues of identity, ultimately enhancing their collegiate experience and chances at success.

Conclusion
Trey and Stephens stories provide valuable information for not only addressing the needs of academically gifted African American male undergraduates, but also for addressing the needs of a wider minority student populace. What do the experiences of these two students tell us about how we "go about the business" of making a place within academe for this population of students? How do we make a place for other students who, like them, do not fit into the mainstream template? I asked these questions at the onset of this investigation: Are there identifiable factors that influence the levels of perceived success among academically gifted African American male collegians and, if so, are these factors related to the type of institution these students attend? Based on the limited findings from this study, the answer to this question is a resounding "yes."

Although these two institutional contexts, as well as the two participants, differed, a number of the issues presented were the same: the importance of relationships with faculty and peers, the value in being connected to family, not to mention the salience in establishing identity. Many would argue that the issues experienced by these two academically gifted minority college students parallel the experiences of other academically gifted college students, save the moniker minority. Yet, it is this moniker and the confluence of a number of additional variables specific to these student's collegiate experiences that make their situation unique. Whether it is Trey's speaking to campus climate issues by saying, "You got to be 10 times as smart as anybody else, especially somebody White, because there is always going to be some type of favoritism or some type of leeway being given to them or some type of break," or Stephens comment, "I think you could have many interpretations of that word, gifted. But, yes, you could call me gifted," denoting his perceived level
of comfort in his abilities, the experiences of the gifted minority student differ along these and many other dimensions.

From a K-12 vantage point, I am conscious of the major influence teachers and counselors can exact on the lives of their students. It is important for these individuals in the elementary and secondary pipeline to serve as positive conduits to academe for all student populations. For the academically gifted African American male population in particular, encouraging enrollment in advanced courses (especially science and mathematics), providing essential mentoring and guidance, and developing a rapport with family and community members who are instrumental in these students' educational development are critical. From a higher education vantage point, I am conscious of the collection of engagements outside of the parameters of scholasticism that make the college-going process interesting and pleasurable, a definite area of influence for the student affairs practitioner. If we are to affect the lives of students like the individuals included in this study, we cannot view our roles (e.g., counselor, teacher, administrator, professor, parent) as ancillary. Rather, we must be exacting in how these students construct their notions about college. Otherwise, we are left to the vices of chance, with an outcome similar to the one expressed by Trey: "Things are not their best. I have hills to climb. There are good days and bad days. I just take the good with the bad and keep on going. But, I guess that's college life."

References


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