Nontraditional Black Male Undergraduates: A Call to Action

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Abstract: Institutions of higher education have witnessed an influx of nontraditional Black college students generally, and males specifically. However, there is limited research that investigates the academic and social experiences of nontraditional Black males. As universities seek to improve the academic retention and graduation rates of Black males, nontraditional Black male undergraduates must be included in the discussion. This article provides a call to action for researchers and practitioners not only to begin researching nontraditional aged Black male collegians but also to focus on those men who are academically successful to inform the academic and social supports on college campuses implemented for nontraditional Black men.

Keywords: nontraditional Black students, Black males in higher education, nontraditional African American students, nontraditional Black males, high-achieving Black collegians

As an emerging scholar, I set out to examine the experiences of high-achieving Black men in higher education. I assumed I would encounter students between the ages of 18 and 24. However, throughout my dissertation research, the experiences of a subgroup emerged. I found four of my nine participants ranged in age from 28 to 62 and self-identified as nontraditional students. My research explored the academic and social experiences of nine high-achieving Black males (3.0 grade point average [GPA] or higher) attending a historically Black college and university (HBCU). After successfully establishing professional careers and families, these men entered college later in life with the desire to set an example for their children. Unfortunately, the stories of academic success similar to my participants’ have been missing in the adult education literature. Thus, the purpose of this Futures article is to call researchers to reframe the narrative on nontraditional Black male collegians by examining how these men succeed in postsecondary institutions.

"I contend researchers should begin with asking academically successful adult Black male students how they persisted in their postsecondary settings."
Nontraditional Black Males: A Researcher’s Reflection

Throughout participant interviews, I wondered whether there were more men, with similar backgrounds, who entered the workforce and attended college later in life. For instance, one participant explained his story of dropping out of high school, earning his General Education Development (GED), and entering college as an older student was not out of the norm on campus. Intrigued, I searched for official statistics to investigate his claims. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2013), there was a 35% increase in college students aged 25 and older from 2000 to 2012. In addition, the National Urban League (NUL; 2014) found approximately 65% of Black college undergraduate students are nontraditional.

After investigating the increase of Black adult learners enrolling in higher education, I wanted to incorporate research about this student population into my analysis. I sought literature that would provide a foundation for my understanding of the experiences of adult Black male undergraduates. To my surprise, the research was scant. Few researchers had explored this population’s unique experience. The studies I found often discussed the challenges nontraditional Black male undergraduates faced in college or the experiences of Black males who entered college after incarceration. I found no studies reflecting the experiences of high-achieving adult Black male undergraduates, such as the participants in my study.

Although somewhat frustrated, looking for literature on this topic allowed me to reflect. In particular, I asked myself the following question: If more adult Black students, particularly Black men, are enrolling in college, yet little is known about them, how are institutions supporting this unique population and adapting to the changing demographics of nontraditional students? To address this question, I contend researchers should begin with asking academically successful adult Black male students how they persisted in their postsecondary settings. These answers can provide insight on the supports that aided their success as well as the challenges they overcame. The information can inform how faculty, administrators, counselors, and other practitioners interact with and support these men. These data will add to the adult education literature and present a narrative that counters the pervasive deficit-oriented discourse about Black men.

Black Males in Adult Education: Swimming Upstream Against the Current

Guy (2014) metaphorically described the plight of adult Black males in society and education as analogous to a salmon racing upstream against the current, trying to survive despite life-threatening obstacles and predators. In essence, Guy's metaphor can also be applied to how researchers have examined the experiences of Black males in adult education. There is more focus on the barriers Black men face going against the current than examining those who successfully navigated the rocky waters.

In the existing adult education literature, researchers have examined the obstacles Black males face when they enter college and continuing education programs as adults. For instance, Miller, Mondesir, Stater, and Schwartz (2014) studied the academic, social, and societal challenges formerly incarcerated Black men experience when seeking to complete their GED. Moreover, Rosser-Mims, Palmer, and Harroff (2014) examined the reentry experiences of Black males and found a lack of role models and financial resources as well as the inability to sustain a work–life balance served as barriers to success.

Although the challenges Black males face in adult education are worth investigating, exclusively focusing on problems reinforces stereotypical notions of who Black men are and what they aspire to become. To challenge the current narrative and investigate the layered experiences of Black men, researchers must begin to highlight those who have overcome challenges and succeeded later in life. These additional data show how Black men can be successful at any age and in a variety of circumstances. Through these stories, researchers, practitioners, and other educational stakeholders can begin to understand the academic and social supports needed to retain and graduate all their students, regardless of age.

Disrupting the Narrative: Implications for Future Research and Practice

If the media were entirely responsible for shaping society’s narrative and view on Black males, their
message is most certainly clear: Black males are a danger to society, have limited aspirations for academic achievement, and would rather be athletes or entertainers than judges, nurses, or educators. Howard, Flennaugh, and Terry (2012) contended this negative imagery has shaped society’s view on Black males. Although the challenges Black males face in society and adult education have been examined in great detail, this focus has skewed the narrative.

Several researchers assert the voices and experiences of Black males are missing in the adult education literature (Rosser-Mims et al., 2014; Guy, 2014). To extend their argument further, the voices of high-achieving Black males in adult education literature are also absent. Because research influences practice and policy, researchers must begin to examine academically successful Black men to inform how to work with them when they enter college campuses and continuing education programs.

When investigating the high-achieving Black male experience, researchers should use an asset-based approach to challenge the existing deficit-laden research on Black males. Furthermore, researchers should investigate Black male adult undergraduate experiences in a variety of settings, including HBCUs, predominantly White institutions (PWIs), community colleges, online universities, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs; for example, Hispanic-serving institutions). In these investigations, researchers should ask successful Black men how they transitioned into college as this information might shed light on the impact of continuing education and GED programs on the academic trajectory of Black males. Exploring their experiences in these various institution types will provide valuable information for institutions to enhance the experiences of their adult Black male students. Furthermore, understanding how culture, environmental factors, societal views, historical inequities (e.g., segregation), and institutional and structural racism impact the educational experiences and trajectory of Black males will add depth to this research.

The Future Is Now

As we look to the future, researchers and practitioners have an opportunity to learn from academically successful adult Black men attending postsecondary institutions. Not only can the perspectives of these men inform on-campus decisions regarding how to better support the larger Black male student population, but their insights may also give institutions a glimpse into Black men’s motivations for furthering their education. Universities can use this information to develop targeted recruitment efforts for adult Black male college students. As researchers, we must begin to take a different approach, one that explores the successes of Black men at various points in their lives, not just early adulthood. As my colleague Marybeth Gasman and I argued previously (see Goings & Gasman, 2014), if researchers and practitioners continue to ask deficit-oriented questions, how can you expect anything other than deficit-oriented results? It is time for a change—which I hope begins now.

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