The impact of family support for African American males at an historically Black University: Affirming the revision of Tinto’s theory

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The Impact of Family Support on the Success of Black Men at an Historically Black University: Affirming the Revision of Tinto’s Theory

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This qualitative study of 11 Black male students who entered a public historically Black college and university (HBCU) as academically under-prepared and persisted to graduation, provides insight into the ways in which family promotes academic success for Black male students at a public HBCU. The study’s findings encourage practitioners at HBCUs to reassess the relationship between family involvement and academic success for Black male students. Further, the findings affirm the justification to revise Tinto’s theory of student departure to account for relationships minority students have with support networks outside the campus milieu.

Investigating the experiences of male collegians is critically important given that females comprise an increasingly disproportionate number of students who enter and complete higher education. Although this “gender gap” is consistent across all racial and ethnic groups, the issue is most alarming among Black male collegians (Harper, 2006; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Wood, in press; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010). For example, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that in 2004 the postsecondary enrollment gender gap between Blacks reached 28.6%, compared to a gap of just 8.7% in 1976 (NCES, 2007). Over the same time period, the gender gap was substantially smaller among other racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, among White, Asian, and Hispanic males and females, the gender gap in college enrollment was 11.8%, 7.5%, and 17.1% in 2004, and 4.7%, 8.6%, and 7.6% in 1976, respectively (NCES).

Research has shown that Black men currently account for 4.3% of the total enrollment at 4-year postsecondary institutions in the United States (Harper, 2006; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010). Incidentally, the percentage of Black males who are enrolled in college is the same as it was in 1976 (Harper, 2006; Palmer & Strayhorn; Strayhorn, 2008, 2010). According to national data, two-thirds of Black men who start college never finish (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006). Although research has shown that historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provide a supportive environment for Black males (Fleming, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), many of these institutions are struggling to retain their male students (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, in press; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Palmer & Strayhorn; Palmer & Young, 2009;
Although higher education researchers have long explored the impact of factors, such as noncognitive variables (O’Callaghan & Bryant, 1990; Pace, 1990; Ross, 1998; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985), student engagement (De Sousa & King, 1992; De Sousa & Kuh, 1996; Harper, 2005; Tinto, 1993), financial support (Heller, 1997; Hu & St. John, 2001; Richardson & Bender, 1987; St. John & Paulsen, 2001; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003), faculty interaction (Astin, 1993; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and campus climate (Allen, 1992; Berger & Milem, 2000; Brown & Davis, 2001; David, 1994, 1999; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), on the success of Black students, researchers have only recently begun to focus on understanding the roles of families on the academic achievement and persistence patterns of minority students (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Gonzalez, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004, 2005; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora & Cabrera; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). For example, using an in-depth interview method, Gonzalez found that first-generation Chicano students received cultural nourishment from their family, which helped to facilitate their adjustment and persistence at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Similarly, in a qualitative study of 7 women of Mexican descent, Rosas and Hamrick found that family influenced students’ college decision-making processes and supported their persistence. In a quantitative analysis of 799 minority students, involving African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native Americans at a Midwestern PWI, Eimers and Pike found that encouragement from family and friends had an important influence on students’ intentions to persist in college. Furthermore, a qualitative study investigating factors of success for 37 Black males that Ross (1998) conducted at a private HBCU revealed that the participants’ relationship with parents, particularly their mothers, was important to their success.

Some of this research on family support on racial and ethnic minority college student success has criticized Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure (Guiffrida, 2004, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). Borrowing from Van Gennep’s (1908/1960) work, Tinto (1993) suggested that students must separate themselves from their former communities, including families, to fully integrate into their new community—that is, the college environment—to be successful in higher education. However, more recent research has shown that minority students’ support networks may lie outside of higher education (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Gonzalez, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004, 2005; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Nora & Cabrera). Many researchers (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 2001; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Gloria et al., 1999; Gonzalez, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1996; Maramba, 2008; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002) who have investigated the impact of families on the success of minority students have limited their studies to PWIs, without investigating other institutional contexts. Furthermore, few studies (e.g., Rosas & Hamrick; Ross, 1998) have disaggregated findings by gender. For example, Guiffrida (2005) investigated the impact of families on the academic success and persistence of high- and low-achieving Black students at a PWI. His research challenged Tinto’s (1993) theory by noting that families played a critical role in Black students’ success by providing emotional, academic,
and financial support, therefore justifying the importance of minority students not separating themselves from their families while in college. Although Guiffrida’s (2005) study was useful in helping researchers and practitioners better understand the saliency of families to the success of Black students, his study was conducted at a PWI and did not capture the experiences of Black students at HBCUs. This is noteworthy because a dearth of research has investigated the role that families of Black students have had on shaping their college experience and academic success at HBCUs (e.g., Ross). Further, in his study, Guiffrida’s (2005) did not disaggregate findings by gender.

The purpose of this study was to build on Guiffrida’s (2005) findings by discussing the impact of family on the retention and persistence of Black males at a public HBCU. Data from the current study were extracted from a qualitative investigation that focused on factors promoting academic success for Black males who entered an HBCU as a result of participating in its remedial program and persisted to graduation. We focused solely on Black males because of the disparity in the rate of college attendance and completion for Black males compared with their female counterparts. As noted, research has shown that Black females have been relatively successful compared to Black males in navigating a pathway to higher education enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Furthermore, we focused on academically underprepared Black males because of the dearth of research on this subgroup compared to the number of research studies published about high-achieving Black males. Although researchers have focused on the experiences of high-achieving Black students at PWIs (Freeman, 1999a; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin, 2006), specifically Black males (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2007), research on the experiences of academically underprepared Black males, particularly at HBCUs, who persisted against the odds, has been limited (Palmer & Davis, in press; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009). Thus, we sought to give voice to the experiences of these students, which was notably missing from the literature.

The central question that guided this research was: What factors do academically underprepared Black males, who entered an HBCU through its remedial program and persisted to graduation, attribute to their success? Although several themes emerged from our original investigation, in this article we discuss one theme—the impact of the participants’ family on their ability to succeed in college. Similar to Guiffrida’s (2005) study, the findings of this study affirm the need to revise Tinto’s (1993) theory. Furthermore, it provides insight into family support for Black males at a public HBCU. Although limited research has provided insight into how family support impacts the college experience for Black males at a private HBCU (e.g., Ross, 1998), there has not been any discussion in the literature about family support and engagement for Blacks at public HBCUs. It is important to highlight this nuance because, generally, researchers have noted that students at private HBCUs, to some extent, have different student profiles and private HBCUs have different institutional profiles than their public counterparts (Brown & Davis, 2001; Brown & Yales, 2005; Cook, 2006; Freeman, 1999b). Specifically, Brown and Yales noted that private HBCUs have developed into an elite class of their own. They noted not only do they attract more college-prepared students and have more stringent admission requirements, but also they tend to have...
healthier endowments and more polished facilities. This stands in contrast to students who generally attend public HBCUs. Research has shown not only are students attending public HBCUs generally in need of college remediation (Brown & Davis; Brown & Yales; Cook), but also many are first-generation college students (e.g., Allen, 1992; Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Brown & Davis; Brown & Yales; Cook; Palmer et al., 2009). Given the lack of research that has focused on family support for Black students, specifically Black males at public HBCUs, institutional agents may not be fully aware of the extent to which families at these institutions are able to help their students through college. In the next section of this article, we provide an overview of Tinto’s (1993) theory. Subsequently, we will discuss the study’s methodology, findings, and implications.

OVERVIEW OF TINTO’S THEORY OF STUDENT DEPARTURE

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure is one of the most widely cited theories for explaining student departure in higher education (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, 1999; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Guiffrida, 2005, 2006). Drawing from the work of Dutch anthropologist Van Gennep (1908/1960), Tinto’s theory of student departure described three stages or rites of passage—separatism, transition, and incorporation—to explain how individuals socially adapt to new environments as they progress from membership in one group to another. Tinto (1988) applied these three concepts to understand the process students go through as they complete their undergraduate education.

The first stage of Tinto’s (1993) theory is the separation stage. During this stage, students create the potential for college success when they are able to physically and socially separate themselves from their previous communities and integrate themselves into the college community. Tinto (1993) explained that during this stage, students adopt the norms and behaviors of the college culture and reject the norms of their past communities.

Transition is the next stage of Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure. Tinto (1988) characterized this stage as a passage “between associations of the past and hope for associations with the communities of the present” (p. 444). He maintained that this period is very stressful and posited that students may employ different coping mechanisms to surmount this ordeal. Tinto (1993) explained that this process is facilitated by the degree to which the students began the transition process prior to formal entry into the university. He explained that, without assistance, many students limit the amount of time spent on campus, which in turn restricts interaction with members of the college community and diminishes opportunities for learning college norms. Consequently, students are more prone to drop out of school.

The last stage of Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure is the incorporation stage. During this stage, Tinto (1993) explained that students seek to become socially and academically integrated within the university by establishing contact with faculty and students. More specifically, Tinto (1993) stated that students who perceive their norms, values, and ideas as congruent with the institution are more likely to become academically and socially integrated. Academic integration involves experiences that formally pertain to students’ education and connect students with faculty and staff (Tinto, 1993). On the other hand, social integration entails formal and informal experiences that facilitate students’ interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff and that occur primarily outside the academic purview of the institution (Tinto, 1993). He
posed that fraternities, sororities, residence halls, student unions, contact with professors, accessing support services, extracurricular activities, and intramural sports all foster incorporation into the university.

Some researchers have supported certain elements of Tinto’s (1993) theory (e.g., Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Thomas, 2000). For example, Thomas applied Tinto’s theory to first-time, full-time, college freshmen and found peer groups facilitated social integration, positively contributing to their persistence. Braxton et al. (1997) and Braxton (1999) supported 4 of the 13 primary postulates of Tinto’s 1975 foundational theory. Furthermore, Elkins et al. supported the separation stage of Tinto’s (1993) theory for first semester students. Although Braxton et al. (2000) found that active learning strategies facilitated social integration and influenced student decision making about persistence, Braxton acknowledged that the social integration component of Tinto’s (1993) theory needs further investigation (Braxton, 1999; Elkins et al.). In particular, Braxton (2000) recommended that researchers engage in theory elaboration to enhance the understanding of factors that facilitate social integration. Specifically, he suggested using constructs from economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Braxton (2000) urged researchers to study these constructs in various contexts such as studying different groups of students based on race, ethnicity, age, and gender.

A number of scholars have criticized Tinto’s (1993) theory in regards to its applicability to minority students (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). For example, Tierney (1992) argued that Tinto’s (1993) employment of Van Gennep’s (1908/1960) model of transition, from which Tinto derived the notion that students must separate from their communities, is not applicable to minority students because the model was originally intended to describe the progression within a culture as opposed to the assimilation from one culture to another. Given that the cultural backgrounds of minority students differ significantly from the Eurocentric norms and values upon which Tinto’s (1993) framework is based (Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; Tierney, 1992), Tierney argued that “Tinto has misinterpreted the anthropological notions of ritual, and in doing so he has created a theoretical construct with practical implications that hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 603). Other researchers have agreed with this notion (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; L. V. Moore & Upcraft, 1990; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999). Specifically, L. V. Moore and Upcraft argued that student development theories, such as Tinto’s (1993), do not take into account cultural variables, which engender different developmental dynamics for minority students. Further, other researchers argued that Tinto’s (1993) theory places tremendous emphasis on the importance of students assimilating to the college environment rather than focusing on the unique backgrounds and support systems of minority students (Hurtado; Rendon et al.; Tierney, 1999).

Some researchers have found that it is important to take into account the unique support systems of minority students, which in many cases, may lie outside the institutional environment (Gonzalez, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004, 2005, 2006; Hurtado et al., 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Palmer & Young, 2009; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). As researchers noted (e.g., Guiffrida, 2004, 2005, 2006; Tierney, 1992), dismantling the support systems outside of the college milieu to encourage full academic and social integration in higher education as Tinto (1993) suggested in his theory, may
pose harm to the retention and persistence of minority students. Consequently, researchers (e.g., Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; Hurtado, 1997; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999) have urged Tinto to revise his theory to take into account students’ support networks outside of college. Tinto (2006) later acknowledged this critique and therefore recognized the importance for some students, if not many, to maintain engagement with past communities. This paper provides compelling evidence for Black males to maintain connections with support networks outside of the university setting, therefore further validating researchers’ recommendations to revise Tinto’s (1993) theory.

METHODOLOGY

The geographical location of this study was situated in an urban, metropolitan city. Specifically, we conducted this study at a public, doctoral research HBCU in a mid-Atlantic state. According to the Office of Institutional Research at this university, approximately 6,000 undergraduates were enrolled when data were collected. Approximately 91% of the students were African American, and their White, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American counterparts comprised 2.5%, 0.9%, 0.7%, 0.2% of the undergraduate student population, respectively. Consistent with recent research on HBCUs (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer et al., 2009; Roach, 2001), the number of Black men graduating in 6 years has consistently lagged behind Black women at the university where the study took place. For example, data from the Office of Institutional Research at this university indicated that just 46.7% of the Black males admitted in 1998 persisted to their 4th year and only 35.1% graduated in 6 years. On the other hand, 57.5% of Black females admitted in 1998 persisted to their 4th year and 49.4% graduated in 6 years, which is more consistent with national retention averages (Harper, 2006).

Using in-depth interviews complemented by responses to a short open-ended questionnaire, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context (Lincoln, 2002). Thus, the study’s epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln). To a large extent, grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bound to the interview process but occurred throughout the entire research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

Data for this current study emerged from a research project that investigated success factors for academically underprepared Black males at an HBCU. Given the initial focus of our research, the participants for this study consisted of 11 Black men who entered a public HBCU through participation in the university summer remedial program and persisted to graduation. College remediation is designed to enhance academic deficiencies among underprepared college students through academic support, with program components ranging from a single course offering to more comprehensive academic and social support services such as tutorial support, counseling, and study skill seminars (Boylan & Bonham, 2007). Students are typically referred to remedial programs when they do not meet traditional academic standards (i.e., GPA, SAT scores, and ACT scores) for admission into the university but demonstrate the potential to succeed in higher education. Participants in the current study engaged in a 6-week intensive
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Summer remedial program to strengthen their academic skills in preparation for college upon matriculating into the university. During the study’s data collection, all participants were traditional-aged college students and their average grade point average (GPA) was 2.7. Information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Seven participants provided information about their fathers’ occupations, which included a U.S. Postal Service worker, teacher, lawyer, police officer, minister, and maintenance worker, whose educational attainment ranged from a GED to professional and graduate school. Two participants indicated that their fathers were retired. Eight participants provided information about their mothers’ professional roles. Their mothers’ jobs and roles included a salesperson, pediatrician, minister, congressional representative, daycare worker, U.S. Postal Service worker, nurse, and a full-time college student. Participants’ mothers’ educational attainment ranged from a high school diploma to a graduate degree. Seven participants were raised in the suburbs, 3 were raised in a large city, and 1 was raised in a small city. Many of the participants came from two-parent households. Most of the participants planned to further their education beyond their baccalaureate degrees. Specifically, 4 participants planned to obtain doctoral degrees, 6 planned to obtain a master’s degree, and 1 participant did not have plans to further his education.

Data Collection

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes in length, with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a $20 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed two consent forms and completed a brief demographic form. One consent form allowed participants to engage in the study, and the other allowed researchers to contact the director of the remedial program, who tracked the participants’ academic progress since their matriculation into the university, to get information about their overall academic performance and cumulative GPA. We collected this information separately, after interviewing each participant.

During interviews, we engaged participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution. Although we used a standard interview protocol, discussions often became conversational, which allowed the researchers and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Many of the questions were open-ended. Some examples of questions include: (a) “What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success?” (b) “What were obstacles to your academic success?” (c) “How did you overcome those issues?” (d) “What has been your greatest challenge as a Black

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male at this institution?” and (e) “How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge?” Additional questions from the interview protocol are included in the formal appendix. We recorded observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview.

We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants. Specifically, we conducted separate phone interviews, which ranged from 10 to 15 minutes, with 5 participants. Follow-up phone interviews were completed during the data collection phase of the study after consulting field notes and listening to participants’ audiotapes. We conducted these interviews to ask participants to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews.

Data were collected during the fall semester of 2006. At that time, 9 of 11 students were seniors (90+ earned credits). Although 2 students were juniors, one was one credit short (89 credit hours) and the other was two credits short (88 credit hours) of senior status. We kept in contact with the participants to see how they fared at the university. All participants graduated in the spring semester of 2007.

Researchers’ Positionality. For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). This research was conducted by two Black males and one Filipina American; one was affiliated with an HBCU and two were affiliated with a PWI when data were collected. We were motivated to focus on academically underprepared Black males because much of the recent literature on Black males has focused on high-achievers, albeit at PWIs. As such, we wanted to provide a voice for Black males who persisted against the odds in an institutional context that has not been the focus of recent research compared to the number of studies published about Black students, specifically, Black males at PWIs. Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as minorities who attended, were affiliated with, and/or conducted research on HBCUs, created a unique lens and position to understand the contemporary experiences of Black male students in a familiar context. Although our experiences and research may have helped us to better understand the contextual environment of HBCUs and the experiences of students at these institutions, they may have biased how we structured the questions and our interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our biases. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants’ voices.

As researchers investigating the experiences of underrepresented minorities, we believe an increased level of trust and comfort was established immediately with participants. Another factor we believe facilitated the establishment of trust was our self-disclosure during the interviews. Specifically, we were able to relate to participants by sharing our own experiences and knowledge about Black men in college. We believe such disclosure motivated participants to provide further depth regarding their experiences on campus. Research has shown that members of marginalized groups, to some extent, have an insider advantage of soliciting more detailed, candid responses (Baca Zinn, 1979).

Data Analyses

We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (2006), constant comparative analysis
engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at “all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of codes” (p. 44). Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS-ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line by line, to identify themes. The line-by-line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and to become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin). This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation—which is when the data becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories but also to understand the relationships among them. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants’ voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

**Credibility and trustworthiness.** We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so others interested can draw their own conclusions from the data. Moreover, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants’ social reality at the institution.

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could check for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006).

Lastly, we used feedback from three peer debriefers, who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on Black males and HBCUs, to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants’ experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al.).

**FINDINGS**

In this section, we summarize the two major themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme relates to how the participants’ families’ use of role modeling the importance of an education by pursuing schooling beyond the baccalaureate degree, sharing knowledge of their college experience, and active support and encouragement promoted academic success. The second theme highlights that, although some participants’ families lacked formal education, they were equally effective in promoting their progeny’s college success. We strategically separated the themes in this current study between families that had education and those that did not to discern a thematic difference in support. In the following section, we delineate both themes and present quotes from participants to preserve the essential aspects of their experiences.

**Guiding Light: The Role of Family in Supporting Success through Role modeling and Messages of Encouragement**

Although family support emerged as a salient factor to all of the participants’ academic success, some participants discussed how their families’ use of role modeling to impress upon them the significance of an education, sharing knowledge of their college experience, and active encouragement and support, fueled
their success. James, a 20-year-old business major from the suburbs, discussed how his mother’s use of role modeling the importance of an education by continuing her schooling invigorated his drive to succeed. Her message about education also promoted James to take his education more seriously than he had in the past.

James indicated that his mother did more than indoctrinate him with how central an education was to his future plans; she also practiced what she preached by demonstrating an unrelenting thirst for education. For example, James’ mother attained a baccalaureate degree and two master’s degrees. By James’s mother displaying a penchant for education, James realized that an education was critically important to his success. Ultimately, he planned to attain a doctoral degree. James’s drive to not only complete his undergraduate degree but also pursue a terminal degree was influenced by an intergenerational effect of witnessing his mother complete both undergraduate and graduate degrees while he was growing up. Continuing, James said:

Aside from James, Omar, a 21-year-old business major from a small town who has a learning disability, is another participant who expressed how his mother, a pediatrician, encouraged his persistence. Specifically, he noted that his mother would remind him to be appreciative of his uniqueness and experiences, which facilitated his motivation to succeed. Omar said, “My mother inspired me to persist. My mother always told me there’s always somebody who has it better than you and there’s always somebody who has it worse than you, so don’t feel sorry for yourself.” Omar continued by stating that his mother emphasized hard work and discipline as qualities to surmount barriers. Omar said, “Despite my disability, my mother impressed upon me hard work and determination to overcome any obstacle. She is one of my greatest role models.”

Aside from explaining the relationship between participants’ mothers and its impact on academic success, some participants noted how both parents were integral to their retention and persistence. For example, Samuel, a 21-year-old sociology major from the suburbs, discussed how his parents motivated him to succeed. Samuel, who lived off campus with his parents, both of whom were college educated, explained that they provided encouragement and a support system. Perhaps more importantly, his parents helped him to realize that his successes or failures lay in his hands by pointing out that he could achieve anything he envisioned. Samuel stated:

I can honestly say my mom and my dad [encouraged me to achieve]. I don’t stay on campus so, when I go home, I always have an encouraging [word] . . . [letting me know] I can do it. They both graduated from college, and . . . [they remind] me that I can achieve anything I put my mind to. So my mom and my dad have been that [support system].
Samuel’s comment really draws attention to the importance of participants staying connected to their families while in college. Although Samuel lived at home, his parents were an active part of his support network outside of the university. Through frequent interactions and conversations, his parents provided messages of support and encouragement, which greatly contributed to his retention and persistence.

Although many participants explained how a parental figure supported, guided, and inspired their academic success, Anderson, a 21-year-old theater major from the suburbs, explained that his brother, Harry, served as an impetus for his academic achievement. When Anderson entered the university as a freshman, Harry was a senior at another university. Although Anderson attended an HBCU and his brother attended a PWI, Anderson stated that his brother shared advice with him on how to be a successful college student. This advice involved negotiating the academic and social demands of college. Consequently, Anderson realized that he had an advantage over other students bereft of access to such support. Specifically, he noted:

[As a result of] my brother, I consider myself a lucky student [because I knew] what to do and what not to do. See, he had no example when he came to school. He made all the mistakes and corrected them, and made everything right. When I came to college, I knew what not to do—I didn’t have to make the mistakes that he made, and so I knew how to use my time more effectively. For example, I knew things like “Don’t go to parties on the weekday [because] you won’t be able to go to class the next morning.”

Anderson’s comment is also similar to Samuel’s in that by actively maintaining contact and receiving advice and guidance from his family, specifically his brother, he was able to achieve success.

Simmons, a 21-year-old business major who was raised in the suburbs, explained that his family played a pivotal role in his success. Specifically, he noted that some of his family members were successful business owners. His family’s successes enabled him to stay focused and work toward his goal of attaining a baccalaureate degree. In a sense, his family’s successes provided a visible, tangible representation, indicating that if one put forth the effort then success is likely to follow. He explained:

I look [to] family members . . . some of them have tried to branch off and have their own personal businesses. Some have incorporated companies for years and have climbed all the way up the corporate ladder, and made it to pretty good positions. . . . One of my uncles got his master’s degree at 42. . . . By looking at my family, I am inspired to excel.

Simmons also noted that his family motivated him to succeed by constantly encouraging him to do his best. He noted that they would occasionally inquire about his grades and academic assignments. Because of such encouragement and active involvement from his family, they extended the purview of academic and social support the university provided, enhancing his ability to achieve academically. Specifically, he indicated:

Family . . . they push me, they push me because sometimes . . . you might not have the motivation. . . . I think everyone kind of see the passion that I have and they push me towards it. Just in speaking in terms of family, I told one of my family members that I was not doing my homework, something of that nature, and they got on my back. You know, it’s just everywhere I turn, I can’t slack up, they always push me, “Get your homework done,” you know, support comes from everywhere, every which direction.
No Disadvantage: Lacking formal Education, but Equally Effective in Promoting Retention and Persistence

Similar to many of his peers, Douglass, a 20-year-old business major from the suburbs, also discussed how his mother motivated him to succeed. Although his mother did not have the level of education as some of the other participants’ mothers, she still inspired and encouraged Douglass to be motivated to achieve academically while in college. Douglass’s mother did not support him in the formal sense by sharing advice, knowledge, or financial resources; but by watching his mother struggle to provide for him and his siblings, Douglass was motivated to do well in school. This fortitude served as the impetus for him to stay focused on completing his baccalaureate degree. He stated:

My mother is a very strong woman. There are seven of us in our family. My father died when I was young, so she raised all of us by herself. So every time I needed help with something, she [might not have] knew the work, but it’s... the advice she gave me, and it motivated me to [succeed].

Oftentimes, when Douglass was faced with an adverse situation or what seemed like an insurmountable obstacle, he encouraged himself to persevere by thinking of his mother. He would say to himself, “I’m gonna do good for you ma. I love you.” This mantra inspired him to put his best foot forward.

Douglass also indicated that his mother would encourage him to persist toward attaining his degree by trying to help him see the full implications of what a college degree meant for his future. Specifically, he said:

[My mother would say], “Read my Bible, pray.” [She would tell me] that being in the schools—you might not like it, but in the end, it’s going to be very beneficial to me. So just... positive stuff [she would tell me] and [it would] make me focus.

By maintaining contact with his past community—his mother—Douglass continued to receive those messages of support and encouragement while in college. These messages, along with Douglass’s motivation and persistence, served as the impetus for him to achieve success.

Although some participants did not have a nuclear family, the support they received was not compromised. The participants’ extended families helped to mitigate this perceived loss of support and guidance. For example, some participants, such as Walter, a 22-year-old business major from the city, indicated his mother and grandmother were indispensable to his academic achievement. For instance, Walter’s mom and grandmother gave him advice, which was fruitful to his persistence and helped him to overcome obstacles. Specifically, he said:

When I came to college, [my mom and grandmother] told me to “aim for the top, because the bottom is overcrowded.” Ever since [they] said that, I’ve been trying to aim for the top, you know, trying to be away from the bottom.

Lawrence, a 21-year-old sociology major from the suburbs and whose parents died in a car accident, echoed Wilson’s sentiment about how his grandparents, specifically, his grandfather, impacted his academic success.

I went through a situation in my life where I had to fend for myself. A lot of things were not available to me. So, it is an obligation for me to do well. I had no choice in [terms] of pushing and applying myself for the good of my well-being. My grandfather, [though] he wasn’t academically successful, he served as a great motivational factor by pushing and encouraging me to press on when I did not feel like it.

Chris, a 21-year-old engineering major from the city, was also motivated to succeed in
college because of his family. Specifically, he was driven to do well academically because he was determined to be able to provide for his family financially once he graduated from college and secured a well-paying job. It is important to note that, although Chris’ experience may have been a liability to academic success for some students, his determination to succeed was only energized. He expressed: “My father is a maintenance worker, and my mother, she used to work, now she is injured. Once I graduate [from college], I definitely want to help them financially.” He noted, “That’s why I am determined to graduate with a good GPA.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to build upon and extend the findings of Guiffida’s (2005) study, which challenged Tinto’s (1993) theory by focusing on the impact that the families of Black students had on their retention and persistence in college. Although Guiffida’s (2005) study focused on Blacks in a different institutional context than the current research, the findings of both studies confirm the crucial role that Black families have on the success of Black students in higher education, thereby supporting research of Guiffida (2005, 2006) and others (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992), urging the revision of Tinto’s (1993) theory, making it more culturally applicable to minority students.

Despite the consensus in the studies about the contribution that families of Black students have on their academic success, there were some differences and similarities between the findings of this current study and Guiffida’s (2005) study about the ways in which Black families support and encourage Black students’ success in college. For example, Guiffida revealed that Black families provided emotional and academic support to the students in his study, which helped to facilitate their success. Similarly, although the participants in this study explained how they received emotional and academic support, they reported that this support transcended their immediate families; it included their extended families. Research has supported this by showing that the extended families of Blacks play a critical role in rearing children (Sue & Sue, 2008). Further, although some participants in Guiffida’s (2005) study emphasized the emotional and academic support that they received from their fathers, many participants in this study, to a large extent, focused on the support that they received from their mothers. In addition, some participants in Guiffida’s (2005) study highlighted the role their families had on providing financial support while they were away at college. Other participants explained how they felt guilty accepting money from their family members, who were struggling to make ends meet. Some participants felt pressured to drop out of college in order to financially provide for their families. In this study, however, some participants reported feeling energized by their families’ financial struggles. They were able to use their families’ financial plight as the impetus to maintain their focus on completing their degrees.

Other studies examining the impact of family support for minority students have concurred with the findings of Guiffida’s (2005) study and this current study that family involvement and support play a positive role on minority students’ college experience. According to Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, and Cardoza (2003), a supportive relationship with parents enhances the psychological well-being for minority students. Other researchers have supported the impact that minority students’ families have on their success. Specifically, research from Herndon and Hirt (2004), who examined family involvement on the academic success for Black seniors at two public,
predominantly White research universities, found that students’ families contributed to their academic success by providing financial and moral support. Furthermore, J. L. Moore (2001) noted that both Black and White students rely on their families for guidance, encouragement, and assurance to help foster college success. In addition, he noted that parental support greatly enhances students’ confidence, efficacy, and motivation; therefore, J. L. Moore noted, Black students with strong parental and family support are more likely to be successful at a PWI.

Interestingly, a strong body of research has investigated the experiences of Black students on the campuses of HBCUs compared with their experiences at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Davis, 1994, 1999; Feagin et al., 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, recent research on Black students at HBCUs has focused on the lack of campus engagement among Black males (Harper et al., 2004; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Young, 2009; Palmer & Wood, in press; Roach, 2001). Although literature on HBCUs has documented the prevalence of first generation college students at public HBCUs, a discussion about the abilities of these students’ families to positively impact their college academic success is basically nonexistent. Consequently, institutional agents may not be fully cognizant of the extent to which families of students at public HBCUs are able to facilitate their academic success. Although some students in this current study were first-generation college students and others were not, the participants’ families played a critical role in their college success through the use of role modeling, the importance of an education, providing messages of encouragement, sharing knowledge about their college experience, and helping the participants stay focused on achieving a college degree. Furthermore, although the participants’ families had different education and socioeconomic backgrounds, in many ways the support provided to participants did not differ based on the parents’ education and socioeconomic backgrounds; to some extent, it was similar in terms of being engaged in the participants’ college experience and providing messages of encouragement about the importance of embracing education and working hard.

In addition, although many participants in this current study came from two-parent households, many explained that their mothers influenced their academic success. Specifically, 8 participants came from two-parent households. This finding is consistent with Ross’s (1998) study on Black males attending a private HBCU in Florida. Despite the similarity, participants in Ross’s study credited their mother for influencing their academic success primarily because their fathers were not actively engaged in their lives. Although Ross noted the lack of empirical research on how Black mothers raise their sons, she speculated that the participants noted their mothers because, not only were they their son's primary caretakers, instilling examples of “hard work” and “perseverance,” but also they were deeply concerned about their son’s survival in a racist and unjust society. Given that the data for this current study originated from a study that sought to investigate success factors for academically underprepared Black males at a public HBCU, we are not able to explain why many participants credited only their mothers for playing a role in their academic success. Perhaps further research on this topic will provide a better understanding on this issue. Specifically, this research should explore parental support and engagement for Black male collegians from two-parent households at HBCUs. Although such research might confirm or debunk our findings, it will offer
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insight into an area that many researchers have not examined.

Limitations

Three limitations in this study are readily apparent. First, this study was conducted at one public, HBCU with 11 participants. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so others can decide the transferability of this study to their institutions. Given the number of the participants, we are unable to compare the experiences of the participants to other Black males with similar profiles at other institutional types. Another limitation is that interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive. Notwithstanding, we proceeded with this approach because researchers suggested the need for qualitative research to investigate the experiences of minority students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000). Furthermore, our familiarity with the topic and experiences may have served as a limitation in that they may have biased the kind of questions selected and our interpretation of the data. Finally, the accuracy of the findings is contingent upon how well we analyzed the data, although this is true for all research studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from the current study suggest that family ties were inextricably linked to Black male college student success. Some colleges and universities, particularly HBCUs, may not be intentional about involving family to facilitate student success. In fact, the university at which this study was conducted took a laissez faire approach toward actively using family to promote student success because the university frequently touted that many students attending the institution were first-generation college students, suggesting that students’ families were not equipped to help navigate their success. To those institutions, we offer several implications from this study for institutional practice and future research.

This study emphasizes the importance of familial support to the success of Black males in higher education. As such, similar to other studies (Guiffrida, 2005, 2006; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992), it recognizes the importance for the revision of Tinto’s (1993) theory to take into account the support systems for minority students that exist outside the institutional environments. The findings of the current study further highlight the need to reinforce the positive influences of external support and the significant role that family plays in college experiences of minority students. To this end, if educational institutions have not been proactive about involving family to support student success, institutional agents should recognize that families of color are uniquely skilled at supporting and encouraging minority students in ways that colleges and universities fall short. Thus, faculty and student affairs practitioners might consider better understanding the dynamics of the family relationships among Black males and other students of color to learn how to engage them in their academic and social experiences.

Actively using family to foster student success might be especially germane to public HBCUs. As discussed, research has shown that public HBCUs, in particular, tend to enroll a large proportion of Black students with less opportunity, especially those from first-generation backgrounds. This current study found that parents without a postsecondary education degree can still play a vital role in supporting and influencing student success in higher education.
Consequently, it is critical that universities include components of programs that inspire parents to visit campus and participate in campus activities. Furthermore, as institutions have a better understanding of students’ family dynamics, they might be encouraged to offer programmatic initiatives designed to foster collective support among parents, siblings, and families.

Understanding the dynamics of family relationships will enable institutional agents to learn how to triangulate the services college has to offer students and their families. Providing effective university services in this area is essential given that several studies have emphasized the inextricable and significant link between college experiences of students of color and their families (Delgado Bernal, 2001; Gonzalez, 2002; Hrabowski et al., 1998; Maramba, 2008; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Ross, 1998). Even though the role of family was found to be critically important for all the students in this study, forming relationships with students and understanding their home context in a culturally sensitive manner is important given that not all Black men come from homogenous backgrounds and share the same experiences (Dancy & Johnson, in press; Palmer & Wood, in press). As discussed, future research should explore in greater depth the issue of family support for Black males attending public HBCUs. Specifically, such research should explore parental support among Black male collegians from two-parent households at public HBCUs. Future research should also explore in greater detail family support and interaction between Black males at public HBCUs compared to their private counterparts. Although research has focused on the campus climate for Blacks attending HBCUs and PWIs, not enough research has focused on student experiences between these two institutional types.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms and builds on the findings of Guiffrida’s (2005) study by investigating the impact of family for Black males attending a public HBCU. Although similar to many studies in that it challenges Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, it is also unique because it explored the impact of family on the academic success of academically underprepared Black males at a public HBCU, which has not been the focus of many studies. Although a paucity of research has investigated the impact of family on the success of Black male collegians at a private HBCU, much research has shown that a disproportionately high number of Black students attending public HBCUs are first-generation college students, without focusing on the ability of students’ families at these institutions to support student success. Findings from this study revealed that the families of students, whether the students were or were not first-generation college students, played an integral role in their academic success.

In regards to Tinto, we recognize the impact Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure has had on the field of higher education in general and retention literature in particular. Indeed, Tinto’s earlier work has shaped our knowledge base on practical approaches to understanding some of the most critical factors that influence student persistence. We also support its continued use in postsecondary education research. However, there needs to be a more concentrated effort of the selection and application of theoretical frameworks to thoroughly analyze and fully understand the conditions under which students of color experience and become successful in college. Dissimilar to the stage that promotes separation grounded in Tinto’s theory, this research found that students embraced—as opposed to rejected—the
norms of their community, and thrived on connections maintained with their family members. As such, their community remained a primary factor of support for the 11 Black men in this study who originally entered a public HBCU as underprepared, to persist toward degree completion.

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APPENDIX.
Sample of Interview Questions

1. What has life been like at this institution for you as a Black male?
2. How do you define success (academic and in general)?
3. How has that definition of success changed over time?
4. What are your long term professional goals?
5. What has been the most significant experience of your senior year?
6. What leadership experiences have you engaged that you believe has helped you to be successful at this university?
7. How important is campus involvement to your academic success?
8. When Black men do not achieve academic success in college, what are the primary factors you think make it difficult to achieve success?
9. What personal factors contribute to the academic success of Black men at HBCUs?
10. What educational factors contribute to the academic success of Black men at HBCUs?
11. Who has played a significant role in your ability to become academically successful?
12. What role has mentoring played in your life to be academically successful?
13. What role or impact did your parents/guardians have on your academic success?
14. How was your experience in the pre-college program?
15. What aspects of the program have you found most helpful?
16. What are factors promoting Black male achievement at HBCUs?
17. As you reflect on your college experience, what stands out as being critical to your ability to graduate with the level of success you have achieved?
18. What motivates you to do your best?
19. What information or insights would you share with other Black males entering this university, or any other public HBCU, to help them overcome barriers and achieve academically? How are these things different than what you would tell any student?
20. What would be the one thing to succeed without during your collegiate years?
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