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Examining the Prevalence of Poor Help-Seeking Behavior among Black Men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Examining the Prevalence of Poor Help-Seeking Behavior among Black Men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Scholars have emphasized the importance of being more intentional about investigating the experiences of Black men at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This article responds to that call by examining poor help-seeking behavior, which could be symptomatic of an unhealthy masculine identity, among Black men at HBCUs. This study was prompted by a single, institutional study, which found evidence of poor help-seeking behavior among Black men at an HBCU. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), this article seeks to understand the prevalence of poor help-seeking behavior among Black males in HBCUs. This article concludes with implications for future research and institutional practice.

Keywords: HBCUs, Black men, pride, academic support, masculinities

An ASHE Higher Education Report on Black men underscored the importance of scholars being intentional about investigating the experiences of Black men in diverse higher education contexts, such as community colleges, predominantly White institutions (PWIs), and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). Indeed, while research has shown that Black women are more likely to persist to graduation at HBCUs compared to Black men (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Wood, 2012; Pope, 2009; Roach, 2001), there is a dearth of empirical scholarship focused on the experiences of Black men at HBCUs. Kimbrough and Harper (2006) made a similar observation, explaining that researchers had become so consumed with interrogating the experiential realities of Black men at (PWIs) that they neglected to provide a contemporary understanding of the lived realities of Black men at HBCUs.

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Some additional insight into the experiences of Black men at HBCUs has emerged since Kimbrough and Harper’s (2006) statement. For example, through a qualitative study with 76 Black men across 12 HBCUs, Harper and Gasman (2008) found that Black men perceived the climates of HBCUs to be highly conservative, resulting in a suppressive milieu and constricting their expression, speech, and life choices. Specifically, Harper and Gasman characterized this conservatism as political in nature and indicated that it is so embedded into the structure of the institution that many students are afraid to challenge it. They argued that this climate has the propensity for causing some Black men to prematurely depart from HBCUs. Moreover, in a qualitative study with Black males, Palmer and Gasman (2008) revealed how social capital at HBCUs acts as a facilitator of student success. Similarly, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) found how critical family support was to the success of these men. Specifically, their study emphasized that the families of first generation and second generation students were able to support the success of Black men at HBCUs in diverse ways. The findings of this study are compelling because they help to dispel the myth that parents of first generation college students at HBCUs are inept in helping their student navigate different aspects of college life.

While these studies as well as other scholarly resources (e.g., Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Young, 2009; Palmer & Wood, 2012; Palmer, Wood, & McGowan, 2014) have provided some fodder on the contemporary experiences of Black men at HBCUs, one study has provided critical insight into some of the challenges that contribute to attrition among Black males at HBCUs (e.g., Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). One of the salient aspects that emerged from this study was the impact that poor help-seeking behavior had on the success of some Black males at HBCUs. Specifically, Palmer et al. (2009) found that although Black male participants needed help with various issues (i.e., academic or personal), they were less inclined to seek support from faculty and administrators because of pride. Moreover, Palmer and colleagues explained that often when these students finally sought support it was too late for college officials to help with the issue. According to research (e.g., Harris & Harper, 2008), this sense of pride and its manifestation of poor help-seeking behavior is one factor reflective of an unhealthy masculine identity for Black men.

While Palmer et al.’s (2009) study is qualitative, the present quantitative study uses data from HBCU students who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to examine the prevalence of poor-help-seeking behavior among Black male HBCU students. To contextualize the relevancy of this article, the subsequent section will provide an overview of masculinities and Black men. While research has focused on masculinities and Black men at PWIs (Dancy, 2011; Harper, 2004; Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Martin & Harris, 2006) and community colleges (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin & Castro, 2010; Harris & Harper, 2008), limited research has investigated masculinities among Black men at HBCUs (e.g., Dancy, 2011, 2012; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2014). Given this, the present article contributes to higher education literature in general and to the literature on HBCUs specifically.

**Overview of Literature on Masculinities**

This review of masculinities literature will discuss the following: (a) The Social
Social Construction of Masculinities

Some researchers have concluded that masculinities are socially constructed as opposed to being biologically determined (Connell, 1995; Kimmel & Messner, 2007; Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1981). Scholars, who embrace this perspective, argue that stereotypical masculine behavior, such as aggressiveness, toughness, competitiveness are learned and reinforced through social structures, such as families, schools, media, and sports (Harris, 2008). Instead of emphasizing a dominant form of masculine identity, scholars subscribing to the social construction of masculinities, maintain that there are multiple masculinities (e.g., Black, White, gay, heterosexual) grounded in sociocultural contexts (Harris et al., 2011; Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Despite this belief of multiple masculinities, Connell’s (1995) conceptualization of “hegemonic masculinity” underscores “the integration of a number of traditional beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that prioritizes White, heterosexual, able-bodied, and other normative construction of masculinities” (p. 49). Similarly Kimmel and Messner (2007) explained that certain masculinities, such as White, heterosexual, and able-bodied are prioritized and viewed as dominant. Finally, given that gender refers to socially constructed identities, the way individuals conceptualize and express masculinities will ultimately change as they grow and develop throughout their lives (Dancy, 2011, 2012; Harris, 2010; Harris et al., 2011; Kimmel & Messner, 2007).

Male Gender Role Conflict

Male Gender Role Conflict (MGRC) is a psychological and emotional anxiety stemming “from men’s fear of femininity and inability to live up to socially constructed masculinities” (Harris et al., 2011, p. 50). When men are unable to express themselves as men where viewed through the prism of traditional or hegemonic expectations, they may view themselves as less masculine and assume others will hold similar views (O’Neil, 1981). “MGRC is also directly related to men’s fears of being perceived as feminine” (Harris & Harper, 2008, p. 29). When men express feminine qualities, their actions/behaviors could be perceived as gay and may engender homophobia and hypermasculinity among men (Dancy, 2011, 2012; Harris & Harper, 2008; Harris et al., 2011). There are many consequences of MGRC on the development of college men. Specifically some behavioral patterns linked to MGRC among college men range from homophobia to restrictive emotionality. A number of scholars posit that MGRC is the culprit for negative issues—sexual assault, academic underachievement, poor help-seeking behavior, alcohol abuse and rule-breaking—among men on college campuses (Dancy, 2011, 2012; Harper, Harris & Mmeje, 2005; Harris et al., 2011).

Expressions of Masculinities among Black Men

Majors and Billson (1992) proposed cool pose as a way of understanding masculinities among Black men. Specifically, they noted that cool pose is a strategy Black men use to cope with oppression and social alienation that characterize the
daily lives of Black males. Black men express cool pose through styles of speaking, gesturing, dressing, wearing hair, walking, standing and shaking hands (Dancy, 2011, 2012; Majors & Billson, 1992). These acts are expressed at the dominant culture to display pride, strength, and control, as well as to contest White male masculine norms. Some researchers (e.g., Billson, 1996; Corbin & Pruitt, 1999; Dancy, 2011, 2012; Harris et al., 2011; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009) contend that cool pose causes Black men to distance themselves from activities associated with White and feminine values, such as education and to place more emphasis on music, athletics, and entertainment. Moreover, others (e.g., Majors & Billson, 1992; Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994; Stinson, 2006) have noted that cool pose causes Black men to express masculinities by emphasizing sexual promiscuity, toughness, and physical expressions through way of dress, demeanor, walking, and posture.

While research has discussed MGRC and cool pose to explain ways in which college students in general and Black men specifically express masculinities, Martin and Harris (2006) contributed to the discourse by adding a more nuanced perspective on men and masculinities. Specifically they interviewed 27 academically-driven student-athletes to understand their beliefs about masculinities. The participants in their study associated masculinities with being accountable, displaying character, serving communities and pursuing academic excellence. Similarly, Harper (2004) investigated expressions of masculinities for 32 high-achieving Black men enrolled in six PWIs with high GPAs and lengthy records of leadership and involvement on campus. Participants in Harper’s study expressed concepts of masculinities that differed significantly from Black males not involved on campus. Harper discussed that while high-achieving Black men expressed masculinities by pursuing academic excellence, becoming leaders on campus, and serving the Black communities, the participants’ same-race uninvolved peers’ conceptualized masculinities by pursuing short-term sexual relationships with women, competing in male dominated activities, and accumulating and displaying material wealth.

Understanding masculinities is important to the academic and social development of Black men in higher education (Dancy, 2011, 2012; Davis, 2012; Harris et al., 2011; Kimmel & Messner, 2007; Palmer et al., 2014). In fact, scholars have noted that engaging in campus activities, developing meaningful friendships and interpersonal relationships, and seeking support when needed are indicative of healthy psychological development for college men. However, men are less inclined to engage in these “behaviors because they are traditionally defined as feminine and conflict with lessons about masculinity prior to college” (Harris & Harper, 2008, p. 29). Given this, it is important that college educators focus on helping Black men to develop healthy masculine identities.

Despite the importance of masculinities to the growth and development of Black men in college, limited research has focused on ways Black men at HBCUs express masculinities. For example, Dancy (2011) examined ways in which PWIs and HBCUs developed expectations of masculinities for 24 Black men enrolled across 12 universities. In particular, Dancy noted that Black men at HBCUs felt pressured to live up to media depictions of Black men (i.e., rap artists, athletes, criminals), which they believed the Black community valued in Black men’s manhood. Nevertheless, in his book, The Brother Code, Dancy (2012) countered that HBCUs are more supportive environments for Black men given the shared worldviews between this student demographic and institution themselves. Further, he posited that Black male definitions of masculinity aligned with espoused HBCU missions.
Given the paucity of research, additional knowledge that provides deeper insight into ways Black men conceptualize masculinities in HBCUs is warranted. As noted, this current study responds to his clarion call by examining the prevalence of poor help-seeking behavior among Black men at HBCUs, which is one characteristic indicative of an unhealthy masculine identity.

**Methodology**

Data employed in this study were derived from the NSSE. NSSE is a large-scale survey employed at colleges and universities throughout the nation. Over 1,400 institutions have participated in the survey since 2000. The purpose of the instrument is to assess students’ engagement, learning, and development in four-year institutions. NSSE data are collected from participants online, typically through a random sampling or population sampling of freshmen and senior students. Data used in this research were from a delimited dataset comprised of HBCU’s that participated in NSSE between the years of 2009 and 2012. Specifically, 1,779 students nested within 55 colleges were employed in this analysis.

**Measures**

The outcome variable employed in this study was faculty-student engagement. This composite variable assesses student interactions, discussions, and engagement with faculty, accounting for both in and out-of-class experiences ($a = .78$). The robustness of this engagement measure has been assessed in prior research on HBCU student engagement; illustrating satisfactory construct validity and reliability (see Palmer, Wood & McGowan, 2014). Five primary predictor variables were employed in this study. These variables included the following: a) academic challenge—the degree to which students engaged in learning activities that were intellectually challenging and corresponded to enhanced levels of interest ($a = .86$); b) active and collaborative learning - the extent to which students placed effort in academic matters and participated in collaborative learning endeavors ($a = .74$); c) enriching educational experiences—reflecting students engagement in learning activities that were supplemental in nature but which provided students with exposure to diversity and activities that advanced their learning ($a = .70$); d) supportive student success—students’ degree of involvement in services that facilitate and support students’ success in college ($a = .75$); and e) support campus environments—students’ perceptions of the supportive nature of the institutions’ learning environment ($a = .74$) (NSSE, n.d.). The aforementioned predictor variables encompassed the five benchmarks assessed by NSSE and were derived from 42 questions.

Five control variables were also examined in this study. These variables included respondent age, generation status, enrollment status, class, and GPA. Respondent age was calculated using birth year. Generation status indicated whether the respondent was a first-generation collegian. Non-first generation was coded “0” while first generation was coded “1”. Enrollment status referred to whether respondents were enrolled full-time or part-time. Part-time was coded “1” while full-time was coded “2”. Class indicated students rank in school, including freshman (coded 1), sophomore (coded 2), junior (coded 3) and senior (coded 4). Grade point average represented students GPA in college in class intervals. Descriptive statistics for the controls, predictors, and outcome variable are presented in Table 1.
Data in this study were analyzed using multiple linear regression (MLR). MLR allows researchers to examine the effect of a set of variables on one dependent variable (Green & Salkind, 2009). In the case of this study, the researcher was interested in assessing the effect of the five primary predictor variables (e.g., academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, supportive student success, supportive environment) on faculty-student engagement, after accounting for the influence of the controls. Effect sizes are reported in this study using both $R^2$ and the adjusted $R^2$. A general problem encountered by researchers engaged in secondary data analysis is missing data. Missing value analyses indicated that the level of missingness in the dataset was below 5%, except for three variables. The two variables, the scale for active and collaborative learning and enriching education were missing 6.2% and 8.6%, respectively. However, the variable assessing whether or not students were first generation college goers was missing 47.6%. Missing values for this variable were coded separately to indicate whether data were missing. Thus, in subsequent analyses, this variable had three levels: first-generation, non-first-generation, and missing. Except for this variable, all other missing data were imputed using the expectation maximization procedure. This produced a full dataset for analysis. All variables were employed as both predictor and outcome variables in the imputation procedure, except for generation status which was excluded from both categories. Given that imputation was employed, data were tested at .01 to reduce the likelihood of a Type 1 error.

**Results**

Correlations among study variables are depicted in Table 2. Several correlations with moderate effect sizes were identified. The largest correlations were identified between active and collaborative learning and enriching education ($r = .629, p < .01$). In addition, a moderate correlation was also found between academic challenge and active and collaborative learning ($r = .513, p < .01$). Moreover, a moderate correlation also existed between enriching education and supportive student success ($r = .445, p < .01$).
The model inclusive of the control variables and predictor variables significantly predicted the outcome \( (F = 284.31, p < .001) \). The model accounted for 61.4\% of the variance in the outcome \( (\text{adj}R^2 = .617, R^2 = .614) \). Results from this analysis indicated that two of the control variables employed had a significant effect on the outcome. Students with missing values for generation status had greater levels of faculty-student engagement than those who were first-generation college goers \( (B = .565, p < .01) \). Moreover, students with greater class standings (e.g., freshmen, sophomore, juniors, seniors) were also more likely to have greater levels of faculty-student engagement. This finding regarding class standing was to be expected, given that students who persist to further levels of education are more likely to demonstrate participation in high impact practices.

After holding the effect of the control variables constant, all but one of the predictor variables (supportive environment) had a significant effect on the outcome. Students who engaged in activities characterized as exemplifying higher levels of academic challenge (e.g., completing assignments, writing papers multiple times, working hard) were more likely to experience greater levels of faculty-student engagement \( (B = .171, p < .001) \). In addition, participation in active and collaborative learning was also found to have a positive effect on the outcome \( (B = .404, p < .001) \). Similar to academic challenge, active and collaborative learning also measured students' effort placed in college with a greater focus on in-class engagement and collaboration with other students. Like other measures of student engagement, enriching educational experiences was found to be a positive determinant of faculty student engagement \( (B = .165, p < .001) \). As such, students who engaged in diverse interactions and participated in high impact programming (e.g., practicums, community service, study broach, independent study) had greater levels of faculty-student engagement. Finally, supportive student success was also identified as a positive contributor to Black male students’ engagement with faculty \( (B = .165, p < .001) \). Thus, in colleges where men perceived that they received support to thrive socially, academically, and non-academically (e.g., work, family), they were significantly more likely to engage in interactions with faculty.

**Discussion**

Prompted by Palmer et al.’s (2009) study, this paper examined the prevalence of poor help-seeking behavior among Black men at HBCUs. As discussed, investigating this issue is critical because it may provide some insight into whether Black men at HBCUs have an unhealthy gender identity. Whereas the participants in Palmer et al.’s study indicated that some Black men at HBCUs were reluctant to seek support from faculty and other university administrators when experiencing academic or personal concerns, the results of the present study, to some extent, supports the findings from Palmer et al.’s study. For example, using NSSE data, the present study found that many Black men at HBCUs tend to have high levels of engagement with faculty. Despite this, the data indicated some nuances regarding Black male interaction with faculty. For example, first generation Black men appeared to have less interaction with faculty than their non-first generation counterparts. Moreover, class standing was also found to be related to faculty-student engagement. Specifically, the data indicated that Black men with greater class standing had more interaction with faculty.

In a way, the results of this paper study support the finding from Palmer et al.’s study (2009) because their study indicated that some Black men at HBCUs were
disinclined to engage faculty and other professional members of the university community. Similarly, this current study showed evidence of some students having less interaction with faculty. Given, however, that a paucity of research suggests that there is a dearth of concerned faculty and staff on some HBCU campuses (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2012), it may be somewhat difficult to fully conclude that some Black men at HBCUs are not being proactive in seeking support from faculty and other institutional agents. Conversely, because the aforementioned studies (e.g., Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2012) were single institutional studies with small sample sizes, the finding of those studies may not bear relevance to this current study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
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<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
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<td>Upper Bound</td>
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<td>2.960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Challenge</td>
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<td>2.261</td>
<td>.005</td>
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*|p < .05, **|p < .01
While the results of this current study provide some context about the interaction that Black male students have with HBCU faculty, the data does not reveal the impetus for this interaction. For example, naturally as students advance in class rank (e.g., freshmen, sophomore, juniors and seniors), by default, they are going to have more engagement with faculty. Nevertheless, the data from this current study does not provide context about the nature of this engagement. The data does reveal, however, that students who were more engaged in higher levels of academic challenge, participated in active and collaborative learning as well as enriching educational experiences, experienced greater levels of faculty-student engagement. Indeed this is consistent with Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, who asserted the more students become academically or socially integrated into the institution, the greater contact they will have with officials of the university community.

Results from this current study also indicated that a supportive environment was a salient facilitator of Black male student-faculty engagement. Research has unequivocally asserted that HBCUs foster a supportive educational climate, which positively enhances student retention and persistence (Allen, 1992; Dancy, 2012; Davis, 1994; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006). A critical component of the supportive environment of HBCUs is the faculty who are known for going above and beyond their professional responsibilities to help students succeed academically (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). Moreover, research has also credited HBCU faculty for serving as mentors, role models, and strong support agents for all students at HBCUs in general (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002) and Black males specifically (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Wood, 2012). Finally, while the results of this study have provided critical insight into Black males’ engagement with faculty at HBCUs, it has spurred more questions about masculinities among Black men at HBCUs. In particular, based on the results of this study, though some Black men at HBCUs appear to exhibit elements of poor help-seeking behaviors, this study cannot conclude that Black men at HBCUs have an unhealthy gender identity or have MGRC (Dancy, 2012). Therefore, more research into this issue is warranted. Similarly, greater examination of masculinities among Black at HBCUs is also needed.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

One of the first implications for research that has emerged from this study is the need for researchers to be more intentional about investigating masculinities among Black men at HBCUs. As noted, the purpose of this study was to investigate poor help-seeking behavior among Black men at HBCUs. While this study has provided some context on this issue, it has raised more questions than answers. Indeed this study has indicated that most Black men at HBCUs tend to engage faculty. The nature of this engagement, however, is not well understood. For example, are Black males at HBCUs seeking support from faculty for various academic or personal issues or are they merely interacting with faculty when they attend class or work with them on collaborative projects? Given the exploratory nature of qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry would be critical to providing further insight into the help-seeking behavior of Black men at HBCUs as well as other factors indicative of a healthy or unhealthy masculine identity.

While more research is needed to help provide vital context about masculinities among Black men at HBCUs in general and their help-seeking behavior specifi-
cally, it is clear that Black males at HBCUs benefit immensely from having close interactions with faculty. Thus, HBCUs should continue to hire faculty and other institutional administrators dedicated to engaging students in and outside of the classroom via research collaborations, civic learning experiences, and other initiatives that helps to enrich and maximize the educational experiences for Black males. Doing this is critical because, as noted, some studies (e.g., Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2012) have indicated that some Black men at HBCUs have encountered some challenges in finding positive Black male role models and supportive faculty. Though these studies are based on single institutions with small sample sizes, they provide some important context for helping HBCU leaders think about Black male faculty-student engagement on their campuses.

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