Leading the way: Inside the experiences of high-achieving African American male students

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High-Achieving
African American Male Students

More than two-thirds of all African American males who begin college never finish. This and a legion of other discouraging facts about African American males are the usual headlines. But what about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college, and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside of the classroom? Who are they, and what can they teach us?

By Shaun R. Harper

Cullen and Keely are two recent college graduates who attended different universities but made similar choices regarding the allocation of their out-of-class time and consequently came to enjoy a common set of measurable outcomes and other, less tangible but very real, gains. Cullen studied hard to earn outstanding grades in his mechanical engineering courses, participated actively in out-of-class activities, and held leadership positions in a variety of student organizations. Specifically, he was president of the National Society of Black Engineers chapter on his campus; academic excellence chair for an honor society; a peer mentor for the Office of Minority Affairs; a new student orientation leader; and the student representative on several university committees. In addition to having earned more than $50,000 in merit-based scholarships, Cullen received numerous awards and honors for his achievements, including the university’s Board of Trustees Award. The 2002 Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship recipient completed three different summer internships with Polaroid, Proctor & Gamble, and Dow Chemicals, and participated in a research exchange program in Brazil during the fall term of his senior year. Immediately after completing his undergraduate studies, Cullen accepted a full fellowship to support his pursuit of a Ph.D. in engineering at Stanford University.
Keely earned his bachelor’s degree in political science with a minor in African American studies. As an undergraduate, he served as president of Iota Phi Theta fraternity; political action chair for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter on his campus; an executive committee member for Men of Impact, an African American men’s conference and activity organization; and a member of the Black Greek Association President’s Council. In addition, he was a member of the 4.0 Club, the Residence Hall Association, the Student Government Association, the Black Student Union, and the Minority Association for Future Attorneys. His crowning accomplishment was being elected to serve as student representative on the board of trustees for his university. Keely’s name regularly appeared on the dean’s list. His other awards and honors are too numerous to list. His stellar grade point average, persuasive recommendation letters, impressive campus leadership record, and practical experiences gained through summer internships earned him admission to the University of Chicago Law School.

Both students attended large, public research universities in the Midwest. Their active engagement both inside and outside of the classroom afforded them opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with faculty and key campus administrators such as the president, dean of students, and provost. Moreover, these two students shared a genuine obsession with learning, as evidenced through their participation in an array of enriching educational experiences. One additional attribute they share is that both Cullen and Keely are African American. Students such as these are rarely highlighted in the literature; thus, their stories regarding the keys to college success typically remain untold. Instead, emphasis is usually placed on the plight of the African American male collegian—the reasons why he is retained least often among both races and all racial and ethnic groups in higher education.

EXAMINED THE EFFECTS of active out-of-class engagement on the experiences of thirty-two African American male student leaders at six large predominantly white research universities in the Midwest—Indiana University, Michigan State University, Purdue University, The Ohio State University, the University of Illinois, and the University of Michigan. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with undergraduate students who had made the most of college—those who had earned cumulative grade point averages above 3.0; established lengthy records of leadership and involvement in multiple student organizations; earned the admiration of their peers (as determined by peer elections to campus leadership positions); developed meaningful public relationships with key campus administrators and faculty outside of the classroom; participated in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad programs, internships, and summer research programs); and earned numerous scholarships, awards, and honors for their undergraduate achievements. Administrators at each of the six universities, including vice presidents for student affairs, deans of students, minority affairs or multicultural affairs professionals, and directors of major campus programs and culture centers, identified high-achieving African American male student leaders on their respective campuses who fit this profile.

A STUDY OF HIGH-ACHIEVING AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

Sharon Fries-Britt suggests that “the disproportionate focus on Black underachievement in the literature not only distorts the image of the community of Black collegians, it creates, perhaps unintentionally, a lower set of expectations for Black student achievement” (p. 556). My pleasure is to introduce a group of African American men who have exceeded these expectations and exemplify what we hope for in all undergraduates: an enthusiastic commitment to learning, active engagement, citizenship, and the acquisition of practical competencies. By sharing their stories, I attempt to expand our understanding of African American male collegians by providing insight into the experiences of high-achieving student leaders. Specifically, I share the impetus for their active engagement outside of the classroom; highlight some of the outcomes that accrued as a result of their leadership in student organizations and participation in campus activities; and describe the ways in which the investment of their out-of-class time enhanced their overall experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). These findings, which emerged from my 2003 qualitative research study, have implications for those who wish to encourage meaningful engagement among African American male undergraduates.
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In his book *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light describes the powerful ways that out-of-class experiences affect undergraduate student learning and insists that those who enjoy the most profound and enduring outcomes are actively engaged inside and outside of the classroom. To this end, I deem it necessary to take a comprehensive approach to defining high-achieving. My conceptualization includes but is not limited to grade point averages and in-class achievement. In the limited published literature on high-achieving African American students, the term high achiever has been applied almost exclusively to those with good college grades and students who participated in a structured university-sponsored program for academically talented racial or ethnic minority undergraduates. The most memorable and valuable learning experiences, admission to the best graduate and professional schools, the most highly sought-after jobs, and portfolios of the most essential transferable skills rarely go to students who simply do well in class. Instead, those who can rely on multiple sources to confirm that their in-class and out-of-class experiences have afforded them the aptitude to competently perform a wide range of tasks, as well as the comfort to work productively with others who are different, tend to be most successful. Some students recognize this as important, while others do not. The high achievers somehow figured out this formula and subsequently decided to take advantage of the resources their universities had to offer.

**WHY MAKE THE MOST OF COLLEGE?**

The impetus for high achievers’ leadership and active engagement is profound and multifaceted. First, campus involvement was not foreign to these students; they had participated actively in high school activities, including varsity sports. Although none were involved in intercollegiate athletics, they all recalled the positive benefits associated with membership in high school clubs and organizations and anticipated that similar outcomes would accompany active out-of-class engagement in college. High school memberships gave them the introductory experiences and confidence to seek more complex leadership roles as undergraduates. However, many waited until the second semester of their first year or even until they were sophomores to start aggressively seeking college involvement opportunities. The high achievers initially chose to join particular campus organizations because older African American male student leaders reached out to them when they were first-year students. They later chose to pursue and accept various leadership positions to repay their debt to those who had earlier encouraged them to devote their time to positive experiences and become good citizens in their campus communities. A junior at Michigan State shared the following: “Some student leaders I look up to have graduated, and I felt that somebody needed to fill their shoes. Giving back was the least that I could do to pay homage to those brothas and keep their legacy alive.”

Recognizing the retention crisis, gaps and inequities, and the unmet needs experienced by the African American community on their campuses, the high achievers chose to seek leadership positions that would allow them to bring about change and address the issues that plagued African Americans and other racial or ethnic minority students. Jamein, another Michigan State student, offered this explanation: “I tried to think of ways that I could benefit my community and make it easier for other African American students to graduate. If you look at the retention rates for African Americans on this campus, especially the guys, you’d be like ‘Wow, this is really messed up!’ That is why I got involved.”

Student organizations provided a forum through which they

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could advocate for and programmatically promote the advancement of other African Americans.

Moreover, being elected to coveted and high-profile leadership positions, earning good grades, and becoming their institutions’ ideal student also enabled the high achievers to debunk stereotypes that faculty and administrators may have held about African American men, which was another factor that inspired them to maximize their engagement outside of the classroom. They also wanted to ensure that the African American perspective was represented and that the voices of racial and ethnic minority communities were heard in mainstream student organizations and on major campus committees. Keely commented: “When I sit around a table in a meeting with the board of trustees or a student leadership group, it’s a very white room. It is my hope that I, as well as some of the other African American men that you’re interviewing here, have gotten into the minds of administrators that this campus needs to be a lot more diverse. If we weren’t seated around those tables, who’d advocate for our needs?”

The high achievers also wanted to leave their mark on their respective campuses. Many talked about leaving perpetual legacies behind and being involved in programs that would have a long-lasting impact on their institution. They saw active involvement as a way to distinguish themselves from other students who would someday become alumni. None were satisfied with the idea of simply graduating and leaving nothing behind. They desired to be remembered for their valuable contributions long after their student days were done.

Finally, but perhaps most important, opportunities to grow and learn new things attracted participants to student organizations and leadership opportunities on campus. The passion they articulated for learning was particularly noteworthy. One University of Illinois student reflected: “I began to understand that the greatest lessons don’t necessarily come in the classroom. The refinement process usually comes outside of class. So I began to see involvement as a process for learning, and I knew that if I got involved in this process I would be a better person than when I started college.” A thirst for learning led the high achievers to seek new involvement opportunities, use their organizations as safe forums for trial and error, and participate in out-of-class opportunities for peer education. “When do you learn to be a leader if you don’t learn it here?” one student asked. Their commitments to assuming responsibility for the advancement of the African American community and ensuring that minority voices were heard, as well as their interest in making a lasting impact on their campus and themselves, resulted in a powerful set of gains and learning outcomes.

**WHAT STUDENTS GAINED FROM CO-CURRICULAR INVOLVEMENT**

Regarding the most memorable undergraduate experiences associated with learning and personal development, Jibreel would cite out-of-class leadership roles that allowed him to plan, organize, make decisions, and manage. He and the other high achievers identified a set of practical competencies that they unmistakably acquired from specific leadership opportunities in student organizations and through meaningful interactions with fellow student leaders, advisers, administrators, and various external constituents. These included learning to work with people from different cultural backgrounds; effectively managing time and juggling multiple tasks simultaneously; functioning productively on teams; comfortably communicating with individuals, in small groups, and with large audiences; delegating tasks to others; and successfully navigating complex political environments. Most of these concepts would sound familiar to Light, as they are consistent with his own research and with George Kuh’s 1995 qualitative study of 149 seniors from twelve institutions. Jibreel could share with Light three reflections offered by his fellow African American male student leaders in the study:

Interactions in clubs and student groups have introduced me to people of other cultures, and have really prepared me to go into the world of medicine, where I’ll be treating and constantly interacting with a lot of patients from different racial and cultural backgrounds.
One thing I learned from my internships is that you need to be able to multitask. So I think I’m already a step ahead of someone who has never been involved in activities or held a leadership position. It’s not like when I go to work I’m only going to have one thing to do. There are going to be things here, here, here, and here that need to be done all at once. Through being involved, I’ve learned to prioritize what’s important.

My speaking abilities have really improved. I now can get up in front of a crowd of several hundred people and speak. I’m not afraid to show it in class. We have group presentations for class, and getting up in front of thirty students and a professor is nothing. I’ve learned how to speak in front of and communicate with people from leading meetings in my different student organizations.

Jibreel and the other participants quickly recognized how these skills transferred to their classes and improved their academic performance. Although studying and academic preparation time occasionally competed unsuccessfully with the participants’ leadership commitments, they still believed that active out-of-class engagement positively affected their grades. Had they not been involved, they would have had more time to waste, the men suggested. Although the mean grade point average (GPA) for the sample was 3.32, the participants all believed that they had the potential to have a GPA of 4.0. On the other hand, they realized that involvement had assisted them in getting the grades they had gotten and, more important, had made them more savvy, attractive, and competent than uninvolved 4.0 students. One University of Illinois student asserted, “I’m satisfied with my overall experience, given that I have been very active with a 3.2. I wouldn’t cut any extracurricular activities to boost my GPA up a few points, because I believe that college is about more than grades.”

In addition to talking about the serious outcomes-related matters, Jibreel could also reflect on some of the other “cool perks” that came with being a student leader. Involvement afforded all the participants numerous opportunities to form meaningful relationships with faculty and staff on their campus. They were particularly well known to their university president. In fact, many of the high achievers enthusiastically recalled having dinner at the president’s home; sitting in meetings with the president; calling the president’s office and being put through to the president’s direct extension or cellular phone; and being able to solicit recommendation letters for graduate school and various awards directly from the president. In addition to the chief campus executive, the participants also consistently spoke of relationships they had with other senior administrators at their university. “Not many students can say they’ve worked with the provost because . . . provosts are usually very distant people.”

Through their leadership in student organizations and attendance at various national conferences, the participants were afforded opportunities to meet several celebrities and dignitaries, including Maya Angelou, Ray Charles, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Halle Berry. Some of these interactions included meals, intimate one-on-one conversations, and special backstage access. Besides being “cool” and exciting, meaningful contact with high-profile campus administrators, celebrities, and dignitaries afforded opportunities for learning. Many students spoke of the lessons they had learned about leadership, organizational management, strategic planning, and problem solving by working closely with administrators. Similarly, insights into life, politics, careers, and the history and current state of the nation had emerged in their interactions with some dignitaries. This exclusive access offered substantive opportunities to hear new perspectives and learn from accomplished professionals.

The high achievers enjoyed additional benefits. Collectively, the thirty-two students had been awarded more than $489,000 in merit-based scholarships and awards. They believed that their involvement and

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demonstration of leadership, coupled with their exceptional academic records, allowed them to rise to the top of applicant pools in several competitions for highly sought-after honors, monetary and otherwise. Moreover, the relationships they built with faculty, administrators, and staff often came with offers to provide recommendation letters and “the inside scoop” on awards. Similarly, involvement aided them in securing internships and jobs after graduation. Participants recalled how impressed employers had been with their lists of clubs and activities. In employment interviews, participants had also been able to offer relevant examples of leadership and learning situations from their experiences in student organizations.

Although his research was not conducted exclusively with student leaders, Richard Light would surely find consistency between Jibreel’s reflections and the findings in Making the Most of College. They both would walk away from the conversation in full agreement that students who take advantage of an institution’s resources and engage in a multitude of educationally purposeful activities have the most powerful and sustainable learning experiences during and after college.

**Enhancement of Undergraduate Experience Through Engagement**

Ohio State is a large school, and for someone like me who is self-motivated, a large school is wonderful. You can do whatever you want to do. If you want to start a student organization, all you have to do is find two other people and an adviser, and it’s done. It’s like being a kid in a toy store because there is so much to grab.” Cullen offered this expression of his satisfaction with the array of resources and options his institution had offered. Mike, another Ohio State student, felt that he too had been exposed to options and experiences that would have been somewhat limited at a smaller university. Each student leader discussed how his campus had allowed him to select from an assortment of resources that added value to his undergraduate experience. They were very pleased to have had the opportunity to select the out-of-class experiences that best matched their personalities and interests. They did not feel confined to a narrow selection of activities and organizations. Thus, their overall feelings about their university were positive, which is often not the case among many racial or ethnic minority students at PWIs.

The high achievers each recognized and appreciated that they were enrolled in one of the finest research universities in the country. David admitted, “I decided to come to Purdue because I always wanted to be an astronaut; that is my dream. And Purdue is known for producing astronauts like Neil Armstrong and Gus Grissom... When you think of astronauts, you think of Purdue University.” He was convinced that the Purdue name, along with his academic and out-of-class credentials, would enable him to fulfill that dream someday. In addition to the lifelong benefits associated with the institutions’ reputations, the high achievers spoke at length about the high-quality educational training they received, again both inside and outside of the classroom.

“I owe Indiana University a debt for the education I’ve received thus far,” Brian noted. Similarly, Michael believed his solid academic preparation, internship experiences, and campus involvement record at Michigan State would enable him to compete successfully for admission to a top-tier MBA program and, more important, to perform well in that program. Other students talked about being well equipped to stand alongside the best students—African American and otherwise—from Ivy League institutions and other top universities in internships, graduate programs, and careers after college.

Again, without exception, the participants appreciated the options, opportunities, and resources that their university offered. Christopher, a senior English major, happily reported that he was graduating from Indiana University “regret-free” : “I’ve had conversations with people, and they’ll say, ‘Man, I wish I would’ve done this or I wish I would’ve gotten involved in that.’ My thing is ‘Well, why didn’t you?’ I feel like I’ve done everything.
that I’ve wanted to do here in college, plus a whole lot more. I don’t regret taking advantage of everything that IU had to offer. I don’t think I would change anything about my experience here.” The other participants shared similar sentiments, and most reported having no regrets. A few of the high achievers admitted to having only one misgiving—not getting involved sooner. As previously mentioned, some students waited until the second semester of their first year or even their second year to become actively involved on campus. Despite the positive lessons learned from their high school involvement experiences, many were initially fearful that “too much, too soon” would complicate their academic performance in college. However, neglecting to become immediately involved had the exact opposite effect on their grades. University of Illinois student Darron believed he could have earned straight A’s had he gotten involved earlier, because he had received nothing less than an A− after becoming active on campus. Moreover, Cullen suspected that he could have become president of the student body at Ohio State had he gotten involved sooner. Although their academic and involvement records were already impressive, the high achievers still wished they could have given more to their campus communities through leadership and active engagement in campus organizations. Raymond stated, “If I had to do it all over again, I’d try to do more. If there were thirty-six hours in a day, I’d be in more organizations and I’d do even more stuff to positively impact the campus. I am happy with what I’ve done with the time I was given here at the University of Michigan.” These students’ positive feelings toward their undergraduate institution are important to note because the voices of African American students who have similarly positive experiences are rarely heard.

**IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE HIGH ACHIEVERS**

The preceding discussion makes clear that active engagement in multiple venues for learning significantly enhances the undergraduate experience for African American males. Despite the clarity of this point, Marshawn Wolley and I note in a 2002 *Association of College Unions International Bulletin* article that few African American men hold leadership positions and are actively engaged at PWIs. This assertion was confirmed when administrators were asked to identify high-achieving African American male students who met the aforementioned criteria for this study. Reportedly, each campus had fewer than nine, and administrators at two universities could identify no more than four. A study of African American female student leaders would have yielded a considerably larger sample, I was told. This gender imbalance is consistent with the following findings that emerged from Michael Cuyjet’s analysis of data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire: (1) African American men spent significantly less time looking in their campus newspapers for notices of involvement opportunities, attended fewer campuswide programs, and participated in clubs and organizations less frequently than did African American women, and (2) the female respondents served on more committees and assumed more leadership roles in student organizations than did their same-race male counterparts in the sample.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, my colleagues and I report that African American men at historically black colleges and universities devote significantly less time to reading, studying, preparing for class, and completing written assignments, and work less hard to meet instructors’ expectations than do African American female students. Simply put, recent evidence clearly suggests that most African American male students neglect to make meaningful and productive use of their out-of-class time. Without exception, the thirty-two student leaders in my study spoke of widespread disengagement and time wasting among their African American male peers on the six campuses and confirmed that African American women, in comparison with their same-race male counterparts, were dramatically overrepresented in student organizations and campus leadership positions. One participant noted, “The brothas on this campus aren’t doing anything.”

In an edition of *Black Issues in Higher Education* (May 10, 2001) focused on the current plight of the African American male collegian, several authors reported several alarming statistics in regard to underrepresentation, disengagement, and high attrition rates. In that issue, Ronald Roach suggested that “brothers are not keeping up” (p. 19). The African American men in my study not only kept up but in many cases made more of college than most other students on their campus. My intent in this article is not to divert attention away from the urgent needs and critical issues faced by African American male undergraduates. However, in fairness to African American men everywhere, it is important to illustrate that we are not a monolithic group whose members all make the same choices, approach college education in the same ways, or respond identically to predominantly white learning environments.

The thirty-two high achievers confirmed that most of the seemingly irreversible trends that disadvantage many of their same-race male peers could be overcome or at least slightly muted by intentionally choosing to
devote one’s out-of-class time to a variety of meaningful learning experiences. Getting involved and assuming leadership positions were typically not motivated by the lure of fame, résumé enhancement, opportunities for scholarships and awards, possibilities for interaction with celebrities and university presidents, or the chance to compete for internships and jobs. Getting involved and assuming leadership positions were rewarding for their own sake and are experiences likely to be remembered and appreciated by the students for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, they will probably continue to benefit from the valuable lessons they learned and to rely on the practical competencies they acquired through active out-of-class engagement.

Realizing that many undergraduates do not aspire to serve in major leadership roles, it is unrealistic to expect every student to become engaged in the same ways as the student leaders described herein. However, given that more than two-thirds of all African American men who begin college never finish, it is especially critical to ensure that they are encouraged to at least try some of the strategies that worked for Cullen, Keely, Jibreel, and others. An extensive list of practical approaches to increasing African American male participation in campus activities is offered in the Association of College Unions International Bulletin article by Marshawn Wolley and me. Among the approaches are empowering African American male student leaders to aggressively recruit their uninvolved peers; conducting campus-specific research on the reasons behind disengagement trends; establishing a collaborative African American male engagement task force that includes students, faculty, and staff from various campus units, including athletics; and prominently featuring African American male student leaders in campus publications and events. It is also incumbent on faculty, staff, and administrators to identify high-achieving African American men on their campus—even if there are only a few—in order to understand the motivation behind their leadership involvement and active engagement, which will offer clues for appealing to other African American male students.

The high-achieving student leaders introduced in this article are an honor to know. I am confident that they will emerge in the future as chief executive officers, politicians, attorneys, astronauts, physicians, African American community spokespersons, and world leaders.

NOTES