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Five Things Student Affairs Administrators Can Do to Improve Success Among College Men of Color

Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D., *University of Pennsylvania*



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FIVE THINGS



FIVE THINGS Student Affairs Administrators Can Do to Improve Success Among *College Men of Color*



Shaun R. Harper

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHAUN R. HARPER is on the faculty in the Graduate School of Education, Gender Studies, and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also serves as director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. He holds a PhD in higher education from Indiana University, and has published nine books and authored more than 90 academic publications. He served on the NASPA Board of Directors and is recipient of the association's 2010 Outstanding Contribution to Research Award and 2012 Robert H. Shaffer Award for Faculty Excellence. The NASPA Foundation recently named him a Pillar of the Profession.

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They are outnumbered at most colleges and universities, their grade point averages are among the lowest of all undergraduate students, their engagement in classrooms and enriching out-of-class experiences is alarmingly low, and their attrition rates are comparatively higher than those of White students in U.S. higher education. Their same-race female peers earn larger shares of degrees at all levels, from bachelor's through doctoral (see Figure 1). Encounters with racism, racial stereotypes, microaggressions, and low expectations from professors and others undermine their academic outcomes, sense of belonging, and willingness to seek help and utilize campus resources. At predominantly White institutions, they may often be in classes where they are one of few students from their racial groups—if not the only one. In recent years, such trends among Black, Latino, Native American, and some Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) male student populations have garnered the attention of student affairs administrators, college presidents, policymakers, and concerned others.

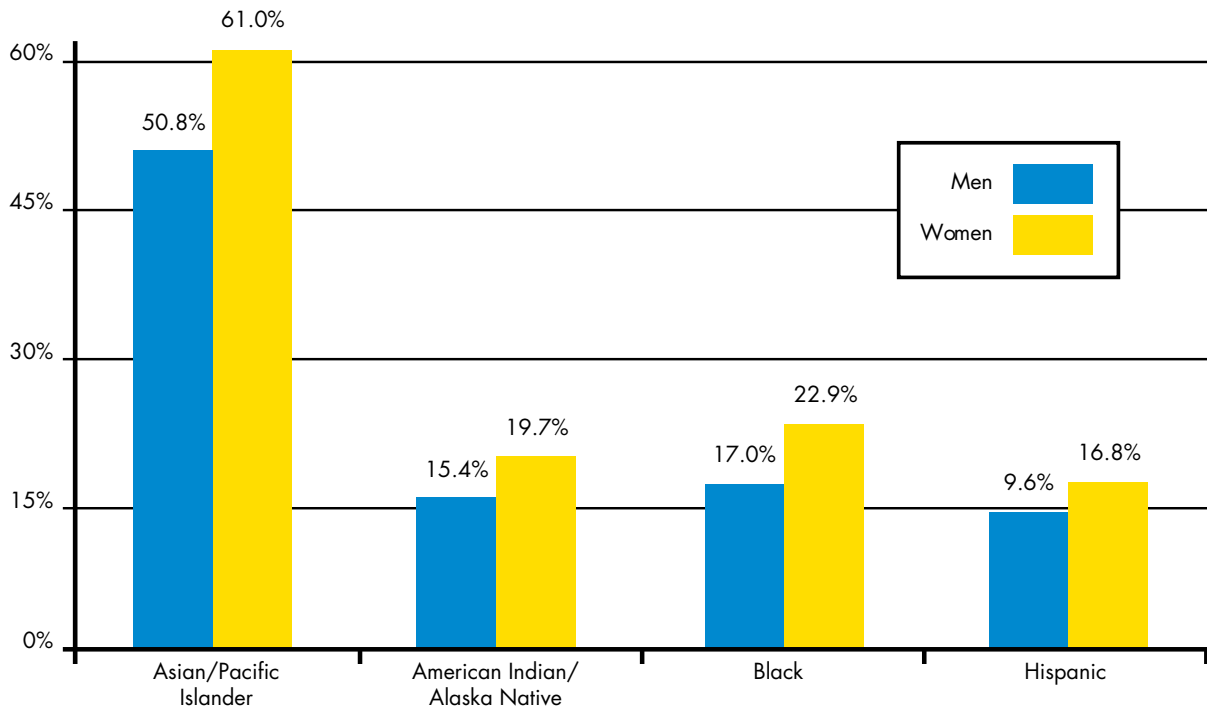
Over the past decade, these issues have been discussed on Capitol Hill; written about in numerous books, policy reports, and journal articles; and examined in sessions at the NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Annual Conference and other national meetings. Institutions have hosted daylong summits for campus constituents, started student organizations for undergraduate men of color, and invested in mentoring programs that connect male students with institutional agents. However, despite these efforts, racial and gender inequities continue to place undergraduate men of color at a disadvantage at the overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities.

In *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education*, a report published by the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, Harper (2012) partially attributed this stagnation to a fascination with deficits and low-performing students. That is, attention

devoted to Black men and other male students of color has mostly sought to understand why they fail, why they are so disengaged, and why they drop out in such high numbers. As noted in the report, although these critically important questions are worthy of ongoing exploration, educators who are interested in Black male student success have much to learn from Black men who have actually been successful. Student affairs professionals and other educators should seek to “understand what keeps them [Black male achievers] enrolled at the institution from year-to-year; why they are so engaged inside and outside the classroom; what strategies they employ to earn good grades and cultivate substantive relationships with professors; and how they manage to transcend environmental, social, cultural, economic, and academic barriers that typically undermine achievement for others like them” (Harper, 2012, p. 25).

This same approach should also be employed in efforts to improve the educational experiences and

Figure 1. Percentage of 25- to 29-Year-Olds Who Attained a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex, 2011



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2011.

developmental outcomes of Native American, Latino, and AAPI male students.

In addition to their deficit orientation, conversations concerning college men of color are often focused on fixing the student without accounting for institutional practices and policies that may diminish his success. “Why are men of color so disengaged?” is the question most often asked, instead of the following: What can institutional agents do to better engage these students? Which institutional philosophies, practices, policies, and cultural norms must be corrected to boost the engagement of these populations? And how can educators and administrators build stronger cross-campus alliances to strategically address troubling engagement trends among male students of color?

This brief advocates for institutional responsibility for student success, with an emphasis on what student affairs administrators can contribute to

ongoing efforts to improve rates of success among college men of color. Although data may confirm that men are in statistically worse shape, readers are cautioned against presuming that everything is just fine among women of color—they, too, have gender-specific needs and challenges, and therefore deserve institutional attention and resources.

Given the complexities and magnitude of issues, student affairs divisions on their own cannot do everything required to improve experiences and outcomes among minority male populations; faculty, academic affairs administrators, presidents and provosts, and policymakers also have roles to play. Nonetheless, student affairs leadership is critical to any institution-based efforts. The next section presents five important steps for student affairs professionals to improve educational success among AAPI, Black, Native American, and Latino male undergraduates.

1 Start with Standards

In recent years, educators have employed a range of efforts to reverse problematic trends among minority male students. These activities have been disproportionately social, focusing on entertaining men of color and creating unity among them. Although it is important to offer safe spaces for these students to socialize in many campus contexts, initiatives that focus on academics, student development, and improving campus climate are also needed. Most minority male campus initiatives are arguably ineffective because they were created and launched in the absence of standards. Well-intentioned educators attempted to do something in response to a problem, but had little guidance for design and assessment.

Harper and Kuykendall (2012) developed eight standards for Black male campus initiatives (see Figure 2). At present, these standards are being used by teams of student affairs administrators, faculty, Black undergraduate men, and other agents at a number of institutions, including: the University of California, Los Angeles; the Community College of Philadelphia; the University of Wisconsin–Madison; North Carolina Central University; Stanford University; as well as 17 community colleges and 4-year institutions in Arkansas. Metrics such as these should be considered before activities are planned, programs are haphazardly created, and institutional resources are wasted. Although these standards were created specifically for Black male campus programs, these standards can be adapted for broader minority male initiatives.

2 Recognize They Are Not All the Same

A justifiable emphasis on Black male undergraduate students has overshadowed the educational needs and experiences of their same-race female peers and

other male students of color. Since 2001, more than 70 peer-reviewed journal articles and at least a dozen books and reports on Black undergraduate men have been published. However, AAPI, Latino, and Native American male collegians have received comparatively less attention in the literature. More sessions on Black men have been presented at NASPA Annual Conferences over the past decade than all other minority male student populations and Black women combined. Furthermore, many institutional initiatives claim to be designed for minority males but often unintentionally default to problems concerning Black men on campus.

Collecting and disaggregating various forms of data is an important way to avoid alienating some students and inadvertently confusing the needs of one racial or ethnic group with those of another.

If an effort is intended for one particular population, it should say so in its title. But if it is marketed as a minority male initiative, attention must be paid to ensuring that it is inclusive. This approach demands that student affairs administrators understand the unique challenges and experiential realities of each minority male population and its subgroups—for example, how Laotian men experience the campus differently from their Vietnamese counterparts, and what support gay Latino men may need that their same-race heterosexual male peers do not. Collecting and disaggregating various forms of data is an important way to avoid alienating some students and inadvertently confusing the needs of one racial or ethnic group with those of another.

Figure 2. Eight Standards for Black Male Campus Initiatives

- I. Inequities are transparent, and data are used to guide institutional activities.
- II. Black undergraduate men are meaningfully engaged as collaborators and viewed as experts in designing, implementing, and assessing campus initiatives.
- III. Actions are guided by a written strategy document that is collaboratively developed by various institutional stakeholders, ranging from undergraduate students to the college president.
- IV. Learning, academic achievement, student development, and improved degree attainment rates are prioritized over social programming.
- V. Initiatives are grounded in published research on college men and masculinities in general and on Black male undergraduates in particular.
- VI. Efforts are enhanced by insights from Black male student achievers.
- VII. Institutional agents engage in honest conversations about racism [and other -isms] and their harmful effects on Black male student outcomes.
- VIII. At every level, institutional agents are held accountable for improving Black male student retention, academic success, engagement, and graduation rates.

Source: Harper and Kuykendall (2012)

3 Remember They, Too, Are Men

In *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice*, Harper and Harris (2010) synthesized decades of research from education, sociology, gender studies, anthropology, and other academic disciplines. Several studies of gender differences among undergraduates highlight numerous problematic attitudinal, behavioral, and developmental trends among male students. Figure 3 contains examples of these trends. Researchers have attributed many of these differences to gender socialization generally and troubled masculinities in particular. Interestingly, institutional activities introduced in recent years to improve the status and experiences of minority male students typically neglect to understand them as men; race is often the sole focus of institutional programming.

Professionals who develop programs and services or advise minority male student organizations should always be mindful of gender. The curriculum for an activity aimed at improving help-seeking trends among Asian American male undergraduates, for example, would be incomplete if it focused simply on the racial group's cultural norms. It is also necessary to acknowledge and deconstruct the ways in which these students, like men from other racial groups (including Whites), have been socialized to think about seeking help as a gendered expression of weakness. Integrating gender into minority male initiatives requires familiarity with innovative educational practices and published perspectives on the topic. Colleagues might consult outlets such as the Conference on College Men (sponsored by NASPA and ACPA–College Student Educators International), the NASPA Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community, the ACPA Standing Committee for Men, and peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Men and Masculinities*, *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, and *The Journal of Men's Studies*). Figure 4 presents additional useful resources.

4 Seek Inspiration, Not Replication

As previously noted, the eight standards developed by Harper and Kuykendall (2012) have been used in the design and assessment of Black male initiatives at 22 colleges and universities. Much about these initiatives is praiseworthy. In *African American Men in College*, Cuyjet (2006) presented nine exemplary programs and initiatives that showed promising results in improving Black male student engagement and achievement. Student affairs administrators can learn much from programs and activities that have proven effective elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize how different campus cultures, resources, institutional norms and politics, and student characteristics may affect the implementation and success of a minority male initiative. Student affairs professionals should be mindful of the specific contexts and unique cast of local actors involved in the development of award-winning,

It is important to recognize how different campus cultures, resources, institutional norms and politics, and student characteristics may affect the implementation and success of a minority male initiative.

nationally recognized programs. Just because something worked well on one campus does not mean that mere replication will produce similar results elsewhere—even in a similarly sized or geographically proximal institution. Instead of merely duplicating “model programs” or “best practices,” colleagues should seek to understand the personal and institutional philosophies, planning, collaborative partnerships, intentionality, and revisions that made these initiatives successful.

Figure 3. Examples of Problematic Attitudinal, Behavioral, and Developmental Trends Among Male Students

In comparison to their female peers, undergraduate men...

Binge drink more

Fight each other and commit acts of assault (including rape and relationship violence) at higher rates

Smoke more cigarettes, experiment more often with hard drugs, and routinely eat less healthy foods

Beat each other more viciously when pledging Greek-letter organizations

Engage in unprotected sex more often and with more partners

Are less inclined to seek counseling or psychological help for their personal and academic problems

Consume higher quantities of and more violent pornography

Discuss health issues less often with friends, and upon the onset of sickness wait longer before seeing a physician

Commit suicide four times more often

Source: Harper and Harris (2010)

Effective programs and practices can be shared through writing and participating in NASPA Knowledge Communities, as well as other professional development activities. By exchanging examples, student affairs professionals can adapt, not copy, the best of what their colleagues have learned.

5 Form Consortia and Alliances

Racial and gender inequities are too pervasive; explanatory factors for underachievement, disengagement, and attrition are too complex; and the learning curve for educators is too steep for an institution to improve the condition of college men of color on its own. Collaboration, both within and beyond the borders of a single campus, is necessary. Examples of institutions uniting for knowledge sharing and collective strategizing include: The African American Male Initiative; the Black Male Initiative, sponsored by The City University of New York; and the African-American Male Initiative, sponsored by the University System of Georgia. Each of these state and system initiatives holds an

annual conference that brings together faculty, academic affairs administrators, student affairs professionals, undergraduate students, and other stakeholders. Throughout the year, they also use electronic resources to address pressing problems concerning male students of color. Similar alliances can be organized within athletic conferences (e.g., Big Ten, Ivy League), among institutions affiliated with a particular religion (e.g., Jesuit colleges and universities), across a state or geographic region, and among similarly sized institutions in comparable locales (e.g., small rural community colleges, city universities with large commuter student populations). Consortia can also be established within existing groups, such as the United Negro College Fund (which comprises 38 historically Black colleges and universities), the Association of American Universities (which includes 62 major research universities), or one of the seven NASPA regions. Also, the popular daylong minority male summits hosted by many institutions could be much richer educational spaces if they involved multiple colleges and universities that remain connected and engaged beyond the events.

CONCLUSION

Some undergraduate men of color will interact with professors who doubt their intellectual competence, expect them to be spokespersons for their entire racial groups, or exclude them (often unintentionally) from enriching educational experiences outside the classroom. Few will be afforded opportunities to take courses with same-race professors (Harper, 2013). Student affairs administrators can do little about these particular problems. Furthermore, Native American, AAPI, Black, and Latino men will find themselves severely underrepresented on campus—a challenge for which admissions officers and enrollment managers, not student affairs divisions, are often chiefly responsible. The ultimate aim of this brief is to make clear the important role of

student affairs professionals in effectively developing thoughtful initiatives and constructing engaging environments, especially outside the classroom, that improve outcomes, learning, development, and sense of belonging for male students of color.

Ideas presented in this brief are offered to improve the educational status of undergraduate men of color. However, these recommendations are not guaranteed solutions that will undoubtedly work all the time for 100% of educators in every institutional context. There is no such thing. Nonetheless, student affairs professionals who reflect on these suggestions, discuss them with colleagues, and use them to design or revise programs and services

(continued on page 10) ►

Figure 4. Additional Resources for Consideration of Gender-related Topics



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Sáenz, V. B., & Ponjuan, L. (2011). *Men of color: Ensuring the academic success of Latino males in higher education*. Retrieved from Institute for Higher Education Policy website: [http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/m-r/\(Brief\)_Men_of_Color_Latinos.pdf](http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/m-r/(Brief)_Men_of_Color_Latinos.pdf)

will be considerably more likely to see measurable progress on their campuses than professionals who continue to rely on daylong summits, mentee-mentor matching, and other fragmented activities. Men of color, like other undergraduates, deserve educators who are committed to their success. Many well-intentioned colleagues have attempted to

demonstrate individual and institutional commitment in myriad ways, yet outcomes have remained stagnant on most campuses. Latino, AAPI, Black, and Native American men will be better served by student affairs educators who do the five things advocated in this brief.

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BRIAN A. SPONSLER is vice president for research and policy for NASPA. As a member of NASPA’s executive team, he oversees the association’s research portfolio and works to cultivate and maintain relationships with institutional partners, higher education researchers, and policy leaders. Prior to joining NASPA, he worked at a leading higher education think tank and has held several campus-based positions in academic advising and athletics administration. His research interests include college access for disenfranchised student populations, student success, structural/geographic impediments to college-going, and policy adoption theory. He holds a doctorate in higher education administration from The George Washington University.

ALEXIS J. WESAW is a senior research analyst for NASPA. In this role, she is the lead project manager and data analyst for RPI initiatives. She also serves on NASPA’s membership team, where she is responsible for guiding internal assessment efforts, the annual member survey, and general data management. Prior to joining NASPA, she worked at a leading higher education think tank and a nonpartisan research center focused on state policy in Georgia. Her research interests include economic outcomes of education, college completion, and metropolitan policy. She holds a master’s degree in economics from George State University.

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NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
111 K Street, NE, 10th Floor | Washington, DC 20002
tel 202.265.7500 | fax 202.898.5737
www.naspa.org