Results of a National Survey of the Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Black Adult College Students

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Abstract

Black adult men are among one of the segments of the population with the lowest college degree attainment rate. Despite this, there are multiple avenues for Black adult men to complete a college degree, including participating in degree completion programs. The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify and describe the challenges and coping strategies of adult Black male college students who were enrolled in a bachelor's level degree completion program in midwestern higher education institutions. With over 150 responses to a research-team developed survey instrument, respondents reported primarily enrolling in these programs to improve their potential for career advancement and were pursuing degrees in either Business or Education. Their primary challenge was self-reported as Lack of Support at Home and the most common response strategy was the use of Peer Study Groups. Respondents also identified Practicing Self Discipline as a primary coping strategy. Study findings provided a baseline of data for future research into how adult Black men approach degree completion as well as introducing the challenge that support at home might be a significant factor in student success.

Keywords: degree completion, adult college student, black adult learners, black college students, college coping skills, college success challenges

1. Introduction

Completion of a degree in higher education has been identified as a life-changing event. Those holding at least a bachelor's degree have not only higher earnings but have been identified as having a better quality of life, better health, are less dependent upon government and social services, and are less likely to have legal troubles (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005;

Burke, Cannonier, & Hughey, 2018; Fry, Braga, & Parker, 2024). And although there have been arguments about whether or not these benefits are the result of in-take variables or the transformative nature of the college experience, there is little debate that earning a college degree can have benefits.

One result of the identified benefits of a college degree is that policy makers as well as institutional leaders have worked to diversity those who are enrolled in college. Some of these efforts are specific to strengthening racial diversity and others are focused on first-generation student enrollment. Some of this work to diverse the academy has been effective, as higher education is enrolling record levels of diverse students.

Higher education student enrollment diversity is highly uneven across racial identifiers. Hispanic and Asian American student enrollment has grown dramatically, as has the enrollment of Black women. The noticeable segment of the population that has been slow to grow in student enrollment has been Black men, whose participation in higher education has remained relatively unchanged for 50 years.

The research on Black male college completion, or the lack thereof, is startling. Black men who do not complete college are more likely to be incarnated, use illegal drugs, have health problems, and parent out-of-wedlock children (Eckholm, 2006; Tolliver, 2020). Tolliver (2020) noted the importance of the family, civic, and peer community of Black men in making determinations to pursue higher education, finding that these community expectations play an important part in the self-determination of the individual. He also found that often community expectations work against a decision for self-betterment, and that a community can actually hold an individual back from making decisions about self-improvement.

As Colbert (2017) and McGowan (2015) noted, the maturation process can vary by individual, and sometimes an individual who is not prepared for college or even high school completion at a young age can mature in such a way that they can realize the value and importance of an education at a later time. For these individuals, the realization of the transformative nature of education can ultimately lead to better life and career outcomes.

The current study was designed to identify and describe the challenges and coping strategies of adult Black male college students who were enrolled in a bachelor's level degree completion programs in midwestern higher education institutions. The findings of this exploratory study can yield important recommendations for institutional leaders, teachers, and Black adult men as they seek to complete their degrees. The study also has the potential to begin a larger conversation and introduce a research agenda that can better improve the opportunities for this population of college student to complete their degrees.

2. Background of the Study

There are two distinct bodies of literature that inform and are important to consider in the study. The first relates to Black men who enroll in college and the other relates to adult college students. The intersection of these two literature bases is small, and therefore it is important to consider how they connect.

The literature base on Black male college students is replete with studies that reflect a variety of challenges. On Predominantly White Campuses, Black men report challenges with feeling a sense of belonging (McPherson, 2023; Zalba, 2023), perceived negative perceptions and stereotyping (Collins, 2023), and that success can often be attributed to finding positive mentors who care for the overall success of the individual (Wiley, 2004).

There are multiple challenges within the Black male community regarding higher education. The first relates to the pipeline of pursing higher education, and as Tolliver (2020) found, this pursuit can be negatively influenced by peers and others who might either not value the pursuit of a college degree or might infer that they do not belong and will not be welcomed on a college campus. Tolliver situated this conversation within the framework of community expectations and noted the importance of everyone from neighbors, teachers, and extended family members in young Black men making a decision to attend college and continue to matriculation.

With the difficulty of recruiting and retaining Black men in higher education, the opportunity then exists to recruit these individuals later in life as adult learners. Both Colbert (2017) and McGowan (2015) stressed that a key to recruiting students to return to education has to do with personal maturity and changing life circumstances, often situated around professional or career opportunities. Although these studies focused on students returning to complete a secondary credential, the findings have direct application to other areas of education, particularly, the decision to return to formal education to complete a postsecondary credential.

Paschall (2020) described the motivations of adult college students through her literature review, particularly noting that intrinsic motivations had a great deal to do with the extent of learning an adult student achieved as well as persistence in degree pursuit. She also noted that higher education has been slower than some other sectors of the economy to embrace older adult students, but yet, this trend is beginning to change.

Cottom (2018) approached the subject of adult college students, particularly those from minoritized groups from an analytical approach of experiences, reports, and literature. She noted that the increasing number of for-profit higher education providers have emphasized their recruitment of minority adults as a predatory practice. These institutions have capitalized on these student's willingness to pay high tuition prices in exchange for degree attainment, regardless of the content or rigor of the degree. In turn, the students who are targeted often enroll and obtain their degrees with a desire to hold the degree and its titling without real concern for degree content. So to some extent, this reciprocal arrangement on the one hand exploits many of the students in the proprietary higher education system, yet those being exploited often do so with recognition of how the system has become what it is.

3. Research Methods

A listing of Association of Public Land Grant Universities was consulted online and those institutions in the mid-west were selected (n=36). As the intent of the study was to explore the experiences of Black adult men, the decision was made to separate and remove the

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (n=3) from the listing, as the cultural dimensions between the HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) was assumed to be different and present different experiences of racial inclusion. The result was a listing of 33 institutions which were then examined online to identify those with online or hybrid bachelor's degree programs targeted at adult leaners. The resulting list was 17 different universities that offered such programs and an email was sent to the coordinator or director of these programs who were identified online. Ultimately, 6 individuals responded indicating that they would allow and assist with data collection.

Data were collected through the distribution, through the program administrators, of a research-team developed survey. The survey was created based on previous studies and the literature of adult learners in higher education. The survey included verifying questions as well as general descriptive information on the individual student followed by a listing of challenges adult students often face when returning to complete a college degree and the response strategies that adult students often use. The first iteration of the survey was pilot tested with an in-person group of Black adult college students. Questions were modified for clarity and specificity, and survey wording was also adjusted. The revised survey was then administered to a group of 30 Black adult college students in an online program who were not participating in the study and that administration resulted in a Cronbach alpha of internal reliability of .7301.

The survey was distributed through the electronic mail system of each of the six program administrators resulting in a total population of 738 possible participants. A reminder for participation in the study was sent after one week and a second reminder was sent five days following that.

4. Results of Data Collection

A total of 162 surveys were completed for a 22% response rate, yet due to missing or incomplete survey data, 138 usable responses (18%) were incorporated into the data analysis. As shown in Table 1, over half of the respondents (54%) were over the age of 35, nearly the same percentage were enrolled full-time (57%) and over two-thirds (78%) had previously completed some college or an associate's degree prior to entering their current program. And nearly 70% of the respondents reported having been enrolled a year or more.

Table 1. Description of Survey Participants

Variable	n	%
Age of Participant		
18-24	17	12%
25-34	46	33
45-54	37	27
55 and older	6	4
Current employment status		
Full-time	79	57
Part-time	32	23

Unemployed	15	11
Full-time student	12	9
Highest education completed		
High school diploma	28	20
Some college	60	43
Associate degree	49	35
Bachelor degree	1	>1
Field of Study		
Business	36	26
Education	41	30
Communications	18	13
Healthcare	24	17
Technology	11	8
Other	8	6
How long have you been enrolled		
Less than 6 months	31	22
6 months to 1 year	13	9
1-2 years	83	60
More than 2 years	11	8
Motivation to enroll		
Career advancement	61	44
Personal fulfillment	9	6
Flexibility of program	50	36
Financial incentives	12	8
Other	6	4

Respondents were enrolled in a diverse array of academic programs, including Business (26%), Education (30%), and Health Care (17%), among others. Over half of those responding indicated that their motivation for enrollment was due to Career Advancement and the Financial Incentives of completing the program (44% and 8% respectively). Just over a third of respondents indicated that their motivation to enroll was based on the Flexibility (36%) of the program's structure, and 6% of the respondents indicated that their motivation for enrollment and working to complete their degree was purely based on Personal Fulfillment.

The second section of the survey included two parts, one that included self-report challenges of completing the degree program and another that included responses to these challenges (see Table 2). Over half of the Black male adult college students reported that the most significant challenge they faced in their degree completion program was the Lack of Support at Home (n=89; 65%) followed by Time Management (n=71; 51%). The fewest respondents indicated that Financial Issues (n=26; 19%) were the most significant challenge. To respond to these challenges, respondents relied on Peer Study Groups (n=76; 55%) and Family and

Friends (n=49; 35%) and were least likely to rely on Community Study Support Groups (n=11; 8%).

Table 2. Program Related Challenges

Variable	n	%
Challenges you have faced in the program		
Time management	71	51%
Financial issues	26	19
Lack of support at home	89	65
Lack of academic support	50	36
Technical difficulties	64	44
Motivation	43	31
Responses to challenges		
Use of academic advisors	22	16
Tutoring services	19	14
Peer study groups	76	55
Family and friends	49	35
Community study support groups	11	8
Other	28	20

The third section of the survey asked respondents to indicate to what extent they used a variety of strategies that have been identified in the literature on student success to improve their own academic performance (see Table 3). The top three strategies identified were Practicing Self Discipline (mean 4.89), Requesting/Using Technology Support (mean 4.76), and Using Study Groups (mean 4.68). Conversely, these respondents agreed least with the using the strategies of Effective Note Taking (mean 3.57), Using Feedback (mean 3.72), and Research Skills (mean 3.73).

Table 3. How Challenges were Addressed

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Time management	4.67	4	5	.1263
Goal setting	4.22	4	4	.5215
Active participation	4.61	4	5	.2426
Effective note taking	3.57	4	4	.8726
Study groups	4.68	4	5	.2818
Self-care	4.08	3	4	.3287
Minfulness and stress	3.87	3	4	.6690

management				
Feedback use	3.72	3	4	.88912
Organizational skills	4.24	3	4	.6500
Research skills	3.73	3	4	.6106
Effective reading strategies	4.19	3	4	.4888
Practice self-discipline	4.89	4	5	.3424
Technology support	4.76	4	5	.3079
Seek support (mentors)	4.23	4	4	.4189

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The survey results provided a portrait of the Black adult male learner in an online degree completion program and this alone is an important finding for the study of adult learners. The profile includes mature adults over the age of 35 who are working full-time and enrolled for the possibility of a better career or financial gain. This portrait may not be any different from other learners in these types of programs, but it does begin to create a baseline or foundation of understanding from which future research can be conducted.

Responding adult learners relied the most on their own self-discipline to improve their academic performance and they noted that their most pronounced challenge came from the home front. To address this challenge, these learners most frequently reported that they relied on peer-groups to address the challenges they face. These findings are suggestive of multiple areas of opportunity and concern for both Black adults and adults across any demographic. Importantly, the challenge of home support might illustrate a cultural appreciation for formal education, which was a major component of Tolliver's (2020) research into community expectancy. Tolliver argued that cultural values and heritage can create importance, or a lack of importance, for continuing education, and that same idea was suggested in this description of lack of support on the home front. Similarly, relying on peer groups has been a major finding in research about adult education performance (Colbert, 2017; McGowan, 2015), and it similarly has been identified in traditional age and high school student behaviors and value creation, including finding and demonstrating value for completing high school (Colbert, 2017).

Based on these study findings, the challenge to institutions is one of building community and demonstrating value to students who participate in online programs. The idea of geographically disparate students means that the online structure must be built in such a way that it promotes interaction among individual learners in a way that is valuable to them. Some of this might be highly structured, but there might also be opportunities to create informal gatherings and connections among students. These might include virtual social hours, but

might also include the offering of in-person events that promote networking and students just getting to know each other. The importance of community is critical and although residential programs often rely on informal interactions to emerge organically, such might not be the case for online learning environments.

Another consideration for program leaders is how they connect learners in the online world. Much of this is dependent on the synchronous and asynchronous delivery of programs and the problem is that the asynchronous programs are often those that are the most appealing to non-traditional learners who require greater flexibility in completing coursework. These learners who need autonomy and independence in taking classes might also be those who are most concerned about finding places that support them. Opportunities such as a Google-Hang Out or virtual cafeterias might be helpful in getting students to connect informally with each other.

Future research into topics addressed in the study might take the form of exploration based on delivery type, further refining topical areas of program delivery, and also exploring age differences among those pursuing degree completion programs. Specifically, asking questions about the expectation of what the degree will result in might be helpful in recruitment programs as well as knowing what kinds of supports are needed for those in the program (aka, career services). And, further research into the motivations of Black adult men who choose to enroll in degree completion programs might provide a better blueprint for recruitment and retention activities that could help them be successful, and subsequently, become role models for others who might otherwise be hesitant to enroll in such programs.

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