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# RESEARCH STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EDUCATING MULTICULTURAL COLLEGE STUDENTS-Ch 3

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# Chapter Three
# Enhancing Success in the Community College: Recommendations from African American Male Students

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on findings from a study which examined factors affecting the academic success of African American male students in the community college. Specifically, this study sought to determine students' perception on recommendations for improving the success of Black males. Data was collected at a mid-sized community college located in the southwestern United States. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight participants, this study identified four primary recommendations. Three recommendations were provided for community college personnel (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff), they included: 1) creating awareness of campus resources; 2) bringing role models to campus; and 3) establishing a Black Male academic success program. One recommendation was specific to African American male students themselves. Participants noted the importance of having a 'right frame of mind', which is both committed to and engaged in academic work. Across recommendations, student responses illustrated the importance of improving students' perceptions of collegiate utility.

# Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been a proliferation of research on African American male students in education (the terms Black and African American are used interchangeably) (Baldwin, Fisler and Patton, 2009; Fashola, 2005). While this has resulted in a growing literature base, in general, research on Black males has largely avoided their status and experience in the community college context (Bush and Bush, 2010; Wood and Turner, 2011). For example, Wood (2010) conducted a meta-synthesis of literature on African American males in the community college. This examination identified only twelve manuscripts which were published on this student group between 1971 and 2009. Of these manuscripts, eight were peer-reviewed journal articles and four were book chapters. This is a particularly interesting circumstance given the majority (63.1 percent) of African American males enter post-secondary education through the community college (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In contrast, the vast majority of literature and knowledge base regarding Black males in post-secondary education is dedicated to the 36.9 percent of these students who attend four-year colleges and universities.

While there may exist some commonalities between Black males in two- and four-year contexts, scholars should be cautious in presupposing homogeny in their experiences as numerous differences exist (e.g., student population, faculty credentials, funding and resourcing, organizational structure, prestige) between institutional types (Wood and Turner, 2011). These differences may serve to impact factors affecting student success, broadly defined, within these institutions. For instance, Flowers (2006) research indicated that Black males in community colleges and universities settings have significant differences in their social integration. He found that African American males in the community college experience lower social integration (e.g., engagement in campus activities, participation in extra-curricular programming) than their counterparts in four year universities. Flowers findings illustrate a need to consider success factors that are unique to Black males in the community college.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, a larger study was conducted which sought to identify factors that were relevant to the success of Black males in the community college. More specifically, the study examined factors affecting the academic success of Black males in the community college. As with extant research on this topic (e.g., Jordan, 2008; Perrakis, 2008), academic success referred to students' grade point averages and successful completion of courses toward their academic goals. One of the goals of the larger study was to identify recommendations that could improve the status of Black males in the community college. This chapter addresses this goal by reporting Black male students' recommendations for improving the academic success of their population. This study is unique in that it presents recommendations based upon the perspectives of Black male collegians. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students which asked them to identify practices that could serve to

enhance the academic success of Black male students in the community college. It is the hope of the authors that these recommendations will serve to inform both community college practitioners (e.g., faculty, administration, staff) and Black male students.

# Review of Literature

Minimal research has examined African American males in the community college. An even smaller body of literature has focused on academic success factors affecting these students (e.g., Beckles, 2008; Faison, 1993; Hampton, 2002; Perrakis, 2008; Travis, 1994). To date, eight total studies have been conducted on this topic. This limited research indicates a need for scholars and practitioners to better understand: a) factors impeding their academic success; and b) strategies to enhance their status. This study addresses both by overview academic success factors (in this literature review) and strategies for Black male success (in the findings).

Across these studies, several major themes and findings are evident. Academic success was operationalized as it related to students' grades (as is the case in this study). Recurring findings/themes in these investigations indicated several primary factors that may affect student academic success. Both Mosby (2009) and Perrakis (2008) found that Black males were more likely to succeed when they felt a sense of belonging to their campus. Mosby (2009) noted that Black males sense of belonging could be negatively impacted by their population size. Thus, when African American males were the only representatives of their racial/ethnic groups in class, they felt isolated. When this occurred, participants noted that they contemplated changing their academic and career goals and/or leaving college.

Overcoming barriers has also been associated with success. For example, Beckles (2008) noted that students perceived that a desire to prove others wrong, those who may not have faith in their ability to succeed, was believed to lead to academic success. In a similar vein, Hampton (2002) found that students who perceived that African Americans benefited from less support than other racial/ethnic groups had higher GPAs. Thus, a perceived need to overcome barriers may impact students' academic performance. Overall, a mindset of dedication to success was identified as leading to academic success (Beckles, 2008; Faison, 1993; Perrakis, 2008). For instance, Perrakis found that as students' dedication to persistence improved, their GPA also increased. Further, students with higher GPAs had statistically significant differences in their dedication to persistence than students with lower GPAs who experienced lower levels of dedication.

Several investigators have noted the importance of a supportive environment cultivated by institutional faculty, advisers, and other personnel (Beckles, 2008; Goins, 1995; Jordan, 2008). In particular, Jordan's (2008) study identified students' perceptions of factors associated with academic success. Jordan's research indicated that students believed they were more successful when faculty members facilitated

interactive classrooms and listened to their concerns. Research also illustrates the importance of peers in positively and negatively impacting students' academic success (Beckles, 2008; Faison, 1993; Jordan, 2008). While Beckles (2008) noted that peers served as a source of support for academic success, Faison (1993) identified a negative correlation between peer group dependence and academic achievement. Jordan's (2008) research served to delineate a rationale for these incongruent findings. Jordan noted that while peer group relationships were identified by students as positively affecting their academic success, the nature of the relationship itself is an important indicator of student success. Relationships that are centered on academic-oriented activities (e.g., study groups, tutoring) were identified by students as positively affecting their success, while non-academic relationships, even with fellow collegians, could deter academic success.

While faculty and peer relationships have been identified as factors affecting academic success, several scholars noted that familial support and encouragement were also important (Beckles, 2008; Mosby, 2009; Hampton, 2002). Findings and themes from previous investigations indicated that students benefit from family support. For instance, Hampton (2002) noted that students with higher familial support benefited from higher grade point averages. Similarly, Mosby (2009) noted that parents and family influenced students' desire to attend college, their career goals in college, and their aspiration to continue toward identified career goals. However, Mosby also found that family members could also serve to detract from success if/when they conveyed negative messages about school or overemphasized athletic commitments over academic achievement.

Several investigators identified the importance of work and financial considerations in relation to academic success (Mosby, 2009; Hampton, 2002; Jordan, 2008). Mosby (2009) stated that financial instability was a concern to African American students. Jordan (2008) noted that when students struggled due to insufficient income, that they increased their hours of employment. Jordan also found that this negatively affected the amount of time Black males were able to dedicate and achieve successfully their collegiate coursework. However, as noted by Hampton (2002) greater levels of employment did not always serve to detract from collegiate success. Hampton found that students whose academic goals were aligned with their employment benefited from higher GPAs than those whose goals and employment was not aligned.

The aforementioned studies provided a conceptual lens for this study. These studies indicated the importance of the following factors in affecting Black male academic success: a) sense of belonging; b) desire to overcome real/perceived barriers; c) dedication to success; d) supportive institutional environment; e) peer relationships; f) familial support; g) financial considerations; and h) work-school balance and alignment. This study elicited recommendations from students for enhancing academic success. These recommendations are conceptualized within the framework of these above factors. The next section provides an overview of the methods employed in this study.

# Method

According to Holloway (1997), qualitative research honors the voices, lives and sociocultural realities of participant's by affirming their role as providers of knowledge. In particular, it is an important approach for understanding the marginality and experience of marginalized groups (Flick, 2006). Given that the purpose of this study was to garner recommendations for enhancing academic success through the perspectives of African American male students, an often-marginalized group, this study elected to employ a qualitative research design. Thus, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-eight Black male community college students.

## Setting and Participants

Data included in this study was collected at Star Valley Community College (SVCC) (a pseudonym). SVCC is a mid-sized community college located in the Southwestern United States with an enrollment of approximately 13,000 students. SVCC is recognized by the federal government as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), an institution which enrolls a high proportion of students of color (O'Brien and Zudak, 1998). As such, more than half of the students attending SVCC are students of color. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the student population is as follows: White, 39 percent; Hispanic/Latino, 32 percent; other, 16 percent; African American, 8 percent; Asian American, 4 percent; and Native American, 1 percent. Across racial/ethnic groups, female students are well-represented, accounting for 59 percent of the student population at this campus. Male students represent only 35 percent of the student population with 6 percent of students not reporting their gender. The gender imbalance between males and females is particularly evident among African American students where males account for only 148 of the nearly 1,100 Black students on campus. Given this circumstance, the 28 participants interviewed represent nearly 20 percent of the total Black male population at this institution.

All participants in this study were African American males. To participate in this study, participants had to be: a) at least eighteen years of age; and b) currently or formerly (within past two years) enrolled as student at SVCC. Participants were selected via a maximum variation sampling technique. This technique purposefully includes a diverse pool of participants in order to elicit themes which are relevant across a varied group of participants (Merriam, 1998). Thus, participants in the sample were representative of diverse ages, majors, and degree goals. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 58 years of age, with a mean age of 24.5 years. While business was the most common major among participants, students were inclusive of numerous major fields including: criminal justice, culinary arts, biological sciences, psychology, liberal arts, architecture, nursing, political science, philosophy, music, computer science, physical therapy, and sociology. Student

degree goals also varied as follows: five participants desired to earn an associate's degree; nine participants had the goal of earning an associate's degree and transferring to a four-year institution; and seven participants planned to transfer to a four-year institution without an associate's degree. In addition to maximum variation sampling, convenience sampling was also utilized. Convenience sampling served as the primary form of contact for the researchers to engage the maximum variation sampling technique. Convenience sampling allows the researcher to acquire participants who are readily available for study participation (Gay, 1996). In this study, the researchers attained participants by hosting a table in the campus quadrangle during lunch which served as a point of contact for participant recruitment.

## Data Collection

Data in this study was collected through a semi-structured interview approach. As noted by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), semi-structured interviews are "generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee/s" (p. 315). Preplanned probes were employed in the interview protocol. Probes served to provide an additional set of sub-questions used to guide participants in better understanding and addressing the general questions in the interview protocol (Brenner, 2006; Johnson and Christensen, 2004). Open-ended concept mapping was employed in this study. Open-ended concept mapping is a technique where participants are given a blank template and asked to depict factors associated with a concept (Zanting, Verloop and Vermunt, 2003). Prior to each interview, students were given a blank sheet of paper and asked to depict factors they believed affected their academic success. Students employed varying forms of depictions including poetry, drawings, listings, and narratives. During the interviews, students were encouraged to employ their concept maps as a point of reference for discussing their collegiate experiences. After each interview, concept maps were collected by the researchers. These maps were utilized as a supplemental form of data in the coding, initial analysis, and final analysis processes.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and concept maps were coded and analyzed via a systematic data analysis technique. This approach allows researchers to identify predetermined research goals, areas of questioning, pre-hypothesized codes, and a conceptual framework prior to data collection (Huberman and Miles, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). As noted earlier, the conceptual/theoretical lens of this study was based upon extant literature on African American male academic success. Thus, the factors identified in this literature guided the process of pre-hypothesizing codes. Throughout the data collection process, additional codes were identified beyond the

pre-hypothesized codes and several pre-hypothesized codes were eliminated. After each interview, the researchers documented important points identified in the interview and concept mapping process (e.g., typing up observation notes). Further, contact summary and document summary forms were employed and used to organize, assemble themes, and support the data reduction process. Coding was implemented in a two stage process; first, the researchers employed basic codes. Basic codes were codes identified in the pre-hypothesizing stage and during the process of data collection. Second, more advanced interpretive and patterned codes were identified. Throughout the coding process, memoing was used to notate important points identified and to describe the relationship between identified codes. After coding was complete, the researchers engaged in an iterative analytic process where codes and visual displays were used to postulate and confirm study findings.

## Validity Measures and Limitations

Two primary forms of validity were employed in this study, member-checks and inter-coder reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checks is a validity measure used in qualitative research where input from participants is sought on preliminary findings. In this study, a focus group session was hosted to gain participants' input, correction, verification, and clarification of findings. Students' input from this stage was incorporated into the final study write-up. Inter-coder reliability was also utilized as a validity measure. The researchers selected portions of interview transcripts which were coded individually first, and then compared for similarities in emergent codes. This process was undertaken to ensure that a high degree of congruent coding was occurring between researchers. Validity measures were particularly important in this study for ensuring that pre-hypothesized codes did not dictate the researchers' ability to identify other important factors impacting Black male academic success in the community college.

As with all research, this study was not without limitations. Since data for this study was collected from the perspectives of students, it is likely participants were unable to discuss recommendations for academic success related to structural issues (e.g., inter-organizational communication, intra-campus politics). Further, given the focus of qualitative research is specificity as opposed to generalizability (see Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003), findings from this study are not generalizable to wider populations. However, findings may provide important insight to determine whether recommendations are applicable in other community college settings. The next section presents findings from this study derived from student recommendations.

# Findings

Findings from this study revealed four primary areas of recommendations: 1) create awareness of campus resources; 2) bring role models to campus; 3) establish a Black Male academic success program; and 4) frame of mind. Three recommendations were provided for community college personnel (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff) while one was specific to African American male students themselves. Recommendations provided are interrelated, as many addressed the importance of utility. Utility refers to students' perceptions that their collegiate endeavors are worthwhile. This underlying concept indicates the importance of societal messages to Black males about the importance of education, for them. Recommendations from Black male students are presented.

## Create Awareness of Campus Resources

A number of participants noted that Black males were often unaware of campus resources (e.g., tutoring, career counseling, mentoring, grants) available to them. Students stated that this served to impede Black male success, especially when they encountered barriers. Barriers identified by students in relation to this recommendation varied; however, they generally focused on academic performance issues as well as solidifying and establishing a plan of action to obtain one's career objective(s). Given this circumstance, students suggested that the campus could enhance awareness of campus resources. In particular, students recommended that the campus host events (e.g., expanded orientation session, one-day seminar) catering to African American male students. The most frequent event format recommended was an orientation format. For example, one student stated the following:

> So, like, so like you know, calling them [Black males] to come in and let them know, like an orientation, let them know the options that are available to them, here at the school and the resources that are there. Yeah, I think like, a lot of people, who like maybe, for the math thing, or who might be like lower in English or something, they feel like, oh well, let them know the options that are available to them, here at the school and the resources that are there.

This student went on to note that many students would be more motivated to enroll, persist, and succeed in college if they were aware of institutional mechanisms designed to support their academic success. Specifically, he stated that this was important for students who struggled in math and English, coursework which he believed were most likely to lead to poor academic performance.

Students believed that these academic awareness events could serve a wide variety of purposes, such as: a) increasing student involvement in campus organizations, thereby imbuing a sense of community among students at the

college; (b) orientating students to academic services (e.g., tutoring centers, mentoring programs) designed to enhance their success; (c) serving as a platform for students to inform campus personnel of their awareness, or lack thereof, of institutional services; and (d) introducing students to key campus personnel who could serve to provide them with information needed to support their success. For example, one participant discussed the latter recommendation stating:

> And the counselors! Show your counselors too. I don't know, maybe they [campus staff] might want to put a couple of pictures up or encourage students to visit their counselors, because counselors are pretty up for [helping you] everything. So those types of things could help, not just young Black men, it could help a lot of people. . . showcase them and say hey, they are here to help you talk to you. Because, I know they are, because they have said it to me, anytime.

This participant noted that campus counselors served to connect students with individuals, services, and provided them with information to navigate campus organizational channels and processes. Students believe that this foreknowledge of resources would allow Black males to feel more confident: engaging in difficult coursework; planning for the future semesters; and believing that the institution was committed to their success. Confidence in academic pursuits serves to affect students perceptions of the utility (or worthiness) of college. Students who do not see success in college as a likely outcome may be less interested in pursuing college. Thus, creating awareness of campus services allows students to see that a system of support is in place which can help make their academic dreams a reality.

## Bring Role Models to Campus

The vast majority of study participants noted that there were negative stereotypes about Black males in education. They believed that Black males were perceived as intellectually inferior, or more commonly stated 'stupid', by society as a whole. Several students noted that these perceptions often caused them to disengage, purposely avoiding class participation. Further, students noted that these perceptions impacted their own confidence in the utility of their educational pursuits. Their ability to succeed in college and the eventual translation of academic success to personal and financial success were questioned.

In order to counter academic inferiority stereotypes and to enhance the perceived utility of college, several students suggested that successful African American males be invited to serve as role models. Students noted that role models could come from many locales, including: (a) representatives of local Black community leaders from varied fields (e.g., dentists, accountants, CEO's, aeronauts); (b) Black males who have successfully transferred from the community college and graduated from a four-year institution; and (c) Black male leaders of campus, especially those in administrative roles. Participants stated that role models could serve as a source of inspiration for students; they could also provide

internships, apprenticeships, career advice, financial advice, and suggestions for succeeding in college.

In particular, students noted that role models who enjoyed financial stability would serve to best motivate Black male students. For example, one student stated that the institution should invite role models:

> who have went here, or, who moved on or graduated, if they look at maybe their success, or how they might just have a house, they're able to make their payment every month, you know, they are living nice, they have a bank account, savings account, and you know, they might not be making as much as some other person not going to school, but they are probably working less, and they have the weekends to do what they want. So, people just coming back and giving an example and just kind of encouraging and motivating people to stick in there.

An important component of this student's statement is the notion that college may not always lead to higher paying jobs, but it may lead to more enjoyable career options. These career options could allow individuals to work fewer hours and have weekends off. This sentiment is echoed by a participant who suggested that the campus bring Black business executives who could discuss how education allowed them to reach their goals, he commented:

> Recruit black males like, the CFO, a black guy, Boeing, He became CFO of the world's biggest aeronautical firm, that's Boeing, and with only just a BS in accounting, actually science and accounting. Yeah, I think his name's James Bell, yeah James Bell. He was in, I shouldn't go like that, he was internal CFO of Boeing with just a BS and ran that whole accounting thing brilliant man with just only a BS. Imagine if I work hard, get that experience, and get a PhD! Work with people, speak different languages, travel the world, what do you think will happen?

As indicated by participants, role models can inspire students to aspire to greater academic and career horizons. They can also serve as a reminder that overcoming obstacles to academic success are possible and that the investment in doing so is worthwhile. Role models may be a visible reminder that students should place confidence in the utility of college.

## Establish a Black Male Academic Success Program

A number of participants stated that relationships with other Black male collegians were important to their sense of belonging to the institution. However, they noted that the nature of their interactions delineated whether the relationships positively or negatively affected their academic success. Participants noted that when relationships were based on academic pursuits (e.g., intellectual conversations, studying, peer to peer tutoring) then the relationships positively affected their success. In contrast, interactions with campus peers that were focused on non-

academic pursuits (e.g., 'hanging out', partying) served to negatively affected success. Thus, students suggested that a university sponsored/supported mechanism was needed to support positive peer-group connections.

As a result, the most common recommendation from students was the establishment of a Black male academic success program. Students suggested that the program have several components: (a) a peer mentoring program that allows more senior students to mentor incoming students; (b) workshops on challenges facing first-generation college students, including data on African American male success in education and in society; (c) creating awareness and usage of campus resources; (d) educating students on campus policies, such as how to understand which classes to take and when to take them; (e) establishing a strong self-determination component that provides open and honest dialogue with students on what is expected to succeed in college and in their future careers; and (f) proactively addressing students needs (e.g., transportation, housing, grades) by providing access to support services and resources.

While most students noted that the program could serve as a point of regular contact among Black males, the rationale for the program/organization varied. Some students suggested that the program focus on building students' self-esteem and confidence. For example one student suggested that this occur through hosting events with performances, he stated:

> Well I'd try to come up with certain activities, probably I wouldn't wanna really, I would wanna like have activities in the school, like to where I know a lotta guys here like to sing or rap or something. I think if you put 'em in a position to where like they could shine a little bit, they'll appreciate that little moment, and they'll feel like they're having success at the school.

In contrast to this perspective, several students recommended that the organization be dedicated to educating Black males on issues facing them in society and in education. The rationale for this mission was to encourage Black males to see the utility of college. For instance, one student discussed the following:

> Provide a program association, in this case for African-American males to have them to believe that what you win by choosing college. You know, in a sense it all depends on how you use, how you view about college. You know, how do you develop a program for minorities basically, so they can, how can I put this, bring ideas in, you know, develop multiple projects for them so they can have a different outlook about college. I mean. . . speaking to minorities out there, asking African-American males out there that, you know what, college is serious. You know, provide steps around, you know, just giving the African-American males numbers, ratios about, you know, why minority males is dropping out, why [they are] unsuccessful, and giving them steps to build and to change that.

In a similar vein, another participant suggested that the association host events which allowed students to see the utility of college. In particular, this student

believed that an enhanced view of collegiate utility could lead to a greater focus (or goal commitment) to one's academic pursuits, he stated:

> Show the rewards of academic process and community college, and try and get like, several different individuals of power to talk about their experiences. And I'll try and get people that can relate, you know what I'm saying? I'll get like, a black man, who you know, started off kind of shaky but then started to focus and then really got rewarded. You know? Like he has everything he wants and you know. Just basically put together an event like that. And also, I'll—afterwards I'll, maybe I'll try and put together like, it's difficult. You know, like everybody could complain about something but when it comes to the solution it's like.

The structure of the organization described by participants ranged from a club to a campus-sponsored program. It should be noted that the campus in which this study was conducted had a university supported minority male club. This organization engaged in many of the activities described by students in this study. As such, this recommendation is based upon a ubiquitous affirmation of support for this campus organization, both from those who participated in it, as well as those who had heard of its operations.

## Frame of Mind

A large number of students in this study discussed the importance of being 'focused'. For these students, being focused suggested that they were both committed to and engaged in academic work. Engagement was typified by studying, attending class, turning in homework, and completing assignments on time. Participants noted a simple relationship between focus and academic success; when they were focused on their academic pursuits they performed well in school, when they were not focused, they performed poorly. Having the right frame of mind for college was the only student recommendation specific to students. Underlying these comments was the need for Black males to have an ethic of self-determination, or as one student stated: "at the end of the day you responsible for your own self, I only tell you so much and you know, you got to find your own way". Another student noted that students had the 'tools' (e.g., resources, institutional support, networks) necessary to enable their success. He also noted the importance of self-determination:

> And it's up to the individual, you know. Definitely up to the individual because you can always make, you can put so much tools in somebody's hands, but it's up to the individual to use those tools. You can advertise it, you can get out, you can speeches and all this, I've heard a lot of good speeches and stuff like that. A lot of programs out there, but if people don't want to use the tool, what can you do?

By having the right frame of mind, participants noted that students should: a) create and maintain a successful environment conducive to studying; b) separate

themselves from in-school (e.g., 'hanging out', skipping class) and out-of school (e.g., neighborhood, external peer discouragement) distractions; c) be emotionally committed to college); d) being resilient to barriers (e.g., poor relations with faculty, difficulty in a class) impeding academic success; and e) seeing the utility of college; in essence, believing that college was a commitment worthy of their effort. In particular, one student summarized many of the above points in his interview. He stated:

> The institut[ion] is giving you all the opportunities. It is put right there in front of you. I think the students need to put themselves in those areas of opportunity. They need to understand you need to be in the right frame of mind. You need to put yourself in the right kind of environment to study. I mean you need to separate yourself from a lot of things whether you want to do good or not. I mean you have to, you got to be focused and ready to go to college, not just wake up and say "I'm gonna go to college." There's a lot involved. There's a lot involved. Time! You know, education. I mean, you've gotta do a lot of things to go to college, and you can get past that, you know, and not be afraid of it. You'll succeed once you do cause there's something that you want . . . . you have to want to learn. . . . Like I said, you gotta have the right frame of mind to come to college before you come to college.

While this student provided a good overview of what was meant by being in the 'right frame of mind', another centered his comments on the importance of being emotionally committed to college. This student compared college to a job, using job performance as a metaphor for academic grades. He stated the following:

> So, we need to change that leisure mind frame, and like, when they start, go like . . . hey, this ain't playtime for you to eat or, you know, talk. This is for you to study. This is a job. And your performance is that report card. You keep on getting that low grade, you know, you gonna slip through the cracks. And those with that 'A' and getting the high grades going excel. You know what I mean, you open the door. You open the door. . . . And that's another reason. Like, people look forward to university, which is not bad, but it's a job. That's how I look at the university. It's a job.

When this student used the phrase 'open the door', he suggested that college was like an open door. He noted that individuals in one's life serve to create opportunities for students to pursue their goals. He suggested that when students avoided capitalizing on these opportunities, the 'door slams, and they're sealed'. The student stated that in the past, he failed to 'walk' through the educational doors that his father, mother and other family members had opened for him. This occurred early in his community college career where he had two consecutive semesters of poor grades. He noted that his poor grades were a result of him not being in the right frame of mind. Now, he said that he was committed to college, seeing it as one large door, noting that he would 'run' through the door by applying himself to college.

As evidenced by this theme, student academic success is both the responsibility of the institution and the student. While institutions are responsible for providing personnel, policies, procedures, programming, and a climate conducive to success, the student is responsible for maintaining the 'right frame of mind'. This mind frame allows them to capitalize on the opportunities afforded to them by the institution.

# Discussion and Conclusion

Harper (2010) indicated that the vast majority of literature on Black males in education is concerned with problems facing this student population as opposed to solutions to their success. He further stated that "Much remains to be learned from those boys and men who, despite all that has been stacked against them, manage to thrive and persist through high school graduation, baccalaureate degree attainment, and even into graduate studies" (p. 2). With this in mind, this manuscript sought to learn from the insights of Black male students. Across the recommendations provided, it was clear that students were concerned with recommendations that reinforced the utility of college.

Overwhelmingly, students' recommendations suggest that seeing college (and other academic pursuits) as worthwhile are integral to Black male academic success. This notion correlates with foundational persistence research on college students from Bean and Metzner (1985) which suggested that utility was imperative to the persistence of nontraditional students (e.g., part-time students, minorities, older students) in higher education. This research has also been affirmed with specific attention to Black males in the community college (Mason, 1994; 1998). The relationship between scholarly findings and the voices of Black male students serves to further illustrate the importance of Harper's (2010) comments. Black males, at least in this study, do possess an understanding of factors impeding their success. Additionally, they are also aware of strategies which could potentially counteract the barriers they face.

While findings from this study are not necessarily generalizable to all community colleges, the recommendations provided may serve as an initial point of conversation on strategies to enhance the success of this population at other institutions. In particular, the recommendations provided may be applicable to institutions concerned with issues related to students' perceptions of the utility of college. Utility should be of concern to community college personnel as it is both directly and indirectly affirmed as an important component to Black male academic success throughout the literature (Beckles, 2008; Faison, 1993; Perrakis, 2008).

In closing, the recommendations provided by Black males proffered four recommendations. An underlying theme connecting all recommendations was the importance of utility. Three recommendations were provided for community college personnel (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff), they included: 1) creating awareness of campus resources; 2) bringing role models to campus; and 3)

establishing a Black Male academic success program. One recommendation was specific to African American male students themselves. Participants noted the importance of having a 'right frame of mind', which is both committed to and engaged in academic work. It is the author's hope that further research will acknowledge the importance of Black male students as purveyors of knowledge and important contributors to strategies for enhancing their success in the community college, as well as in other education settings.

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