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# The Motivational Factors of African American Men Enrolled at Selected Community Colleges

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## **Keywords**

African American, males, community college



## THE MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN ENROLLED AT SELECTED COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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### **Abstract**

This manuscript is designed to call attention to the realities that are specific to African American male community college students. Using a qualitative research design, focus groups were conducted with 14 African American male students enrolled in an urban community college. This study uncovered that their educational experiences are consumed with personal challenges and academic obstacles. Students were asked to explain their motivation toward persistence at the urban community college. Participants within the study noted that motivational factors such as: (a) improving their life status, (b) societal pressure, (c) “man of the house,” and (d) faculty and staff encouragement, provided them with a sense of urgency to persist.

### **Introduction**

In 1903, W.E.B DuBois published the historic book, *The Souls of Black Folks* and highlighted the experience of an African American male seeking to attain a college degree. In chapter 13, “The Coming of John,” DuBois pointed out how proud and supportive an African American community was for an African American male named John to pursue a college degree. However, DuBois also indicated that John’s quest for attaining a college degree was perplexed because he lacked academic preparation, was unable to acquire financial support, and did not have the maturity and self-confidence to succeed. As a result, John was dismissed from college, but eventually returned and with rugged strength to graduate. However, during his time out of school, John began to question his purpose.

Although DuBois’ description of John’s experience was written more than a century ago, research suggests the experiences of African American male students pursuing a college degree have not improved, especially at the community college level (Flowers; 2006; Hickman, 2008; Jordan, 2008; Pope, 2006; Wood, 2013). Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2007) have posited that the retention of African American male community college students is among the lowest of all ethnic groups nationally.

While research on African American students in higher education has been restricted to their undergraduate experiences at Predominantly White institutions (PWIs), historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and at other senior colleges; little attention has been given to the experiences of Black males enrolled in community colleges (Harper, 2013; Harper, 2009; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2012). Despite the important contribution of these studies, research about the experiences of African American men in community colleges is basically non-existent. In fact, many scholars in the higher education community may have

erroneously assumed that the research on African American undergraduate students at 4-year institutions defined the experiences of all African American male undergraduate students. Such an assumption could not be further from the truth.

What is missing from educational research is the descriptive and detailed reporting on the experiences of African American men at two-year institutions. According to National Center for Education Statistics (2012), 833,337 associate's degrees were conferred in 2009-2010. Of that number, 113,905 (14%) were earned by African American students. African American men made up 36,450 (32 %) of associate's degrees conferred among US residents. Considering the dismal graduation rate of African American men there is a need to improve the amount of African American men attaining an associate's degree from community colleges. This next section will examine the literature that speaks to African American men in society.

### **African American Men in Society**

Scholars declare that underrepresentation of African American male college graduates has serious repercussions not only for African American male students but also for our nation as a whole (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013; Lee & Ransom, 2011). In fact, Hampton (2002) advocates that: "every time African American men do not succeed academically a century is robbed of talents that would enrich the lives of many" (p. 4). According to research, African American male students enroll in college because it provides a means to an end and an answer to their need for academic intelligence, financial stability, and a better quality of life (Wilson, 2009; Harvey, 2002). However, research also indicates that too many African American men are unable to have a better quality of life because they often leave campus before they are able to graduate (Flowers, 2006; Glenn, 2007; Hagedorn, Maxwell & Hampton, 2007; Pope, 2006). For instance, in a 2010 report titled, "The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men of Color," the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center suggested that there are "Three Americas," one characterized by opportunity and wealth, and another characterized by significant social and economic strife. The third America is recognized as primarily male, and comprised of mostly men of color. These men have been identified as "living outside of the margins of our economic, social and cultural systems" (p. 2). They have been labeled as the byproduct of many societal failures including the failure of our nation's schools.

In another report titled, "The Educational Experiences on Young Men of Color", Lee and Ransom (2011) report that the pathway men of color take after high school is grossly represented in unemployment, incarceration, and death. However, their report also indicates that more African American women than African American men attend community colleges. They report, "thirty-three percent of African American women attend community colleges compared to twenty-nine percent of African American men" (p. 34). Although research points out that since the 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement, enrollment of students has increased but the experiences of students of color have not been as robust as those of White students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Sands & Schuh, 2007; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2007; Wood & Hilton, 2012). According to research, many African American men attempt to use the higher education system as a tool for success, but do not succeed (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2014; Harper, 2009). In fact, the National Center of Education Statistics (2010) reports that since 1980 there has been a twenty percent (20%) increase in the enrollment of African Americans 18 to 24 years of age, yet the report indicates that the largest difference between male and female enrollment pertains to African American students. In addition, African American female students account for sixty-

four percent of the African American undergraduate enrollment. The next section will highlight theoretical constructs related to collegiate African American males.

### **Theories Relevant to Collegiate African American Men**

Identity is an important factor in the success of African American male students (Harris & Wood, 2013; Mosby, 2009; Wood & Hilton, 2012; Wood, 2010). Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, and Mugenda (2007), assert that African American students' experiences in-class and out-of-class provide validation to their identity. Mosby (2009) asserted that, while enrolled in college, African American men are conflicted with trying to balance living within two groups, they embrace another identity while abandoning their cultural identity. Similarly, Pope (2006) declared that if African American male community college students are to succeed academically, they have to overcome triple consciousness. Pope used the term "triple consciousness" as an addition to Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness. DuBois defined double consciousness as "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 9). It is the feeling of twoness - being African American and American, with warring ideals in one body while trying not to lose the opportunity of self-development. Pope's (2006) addition of a third conscious suggested that African American men from adverse backgrounds are increasingly aware of the challenges of being first generation college attendees. Recent research advocates noted that African American men experience a fourth conscious, referred to as quadruple consciousness (Mitchell & Means, 2014). Mitchell and Means (2014) asserted that "DuBois' theory of double consciousness does not address the intersections and implications of sexual orientation and its impact on identity development of African American male college students" (p. 28). These scholars have added another conscious to include an additional perspective for how homosexual and bi-sexual African American male college students identify themselves.

Pursuing this further, other scholars have pointed out that it is not the multiple theories of consciousness that influences the academic success of African American male students, it is the change in the "cool pose" of African American men that is impacting their success (Cuyjet, 2006; hooks, 2004;). hooks asserted that "there was once a time when African American men were cool with being defined by the way in which they confronted the hardships of life without allowing their spirits to be ravaged" (p. 147). Other scholars such as Cuyjet (2006); Bonner and Bailey (2006); Kimbrough and Harper (2006), identified "cool pose" as impression management. It is a coping mechanism that empowers African American males to convey control despite the obstacles and situations they may encounter (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006).

On the other hand, Cuyjet (2006) and Hampton (2002) declared that the familial unit serves as a key source of support for African American male college students. These scholars suggested that when African American families establish a positive identity for African American male students, it serves as the foundation upon which the students develop some sense of agency and, in turn, determine where they belong within the academy. Watson (2006) asserted that positive self-images for African American male students are generated from family role models and high expectations. Although Cuyjet (2006) and Watson (2006) pointed out the impact families have on the success of African American male college students. According to Harris and Wood (2013), research is noticeably absent on the impact families have on the success of African American community college students. However, research described community college students as older than four-year college students, less likely to receive support from their parents, and attend school part-time and work full-time (American Associate

of Community College, 2014; Pope, 2006). Wood and Williams (2013) specifically pointed out that African American men who attend community college are more likely to be older, be classified as low-income, have dependents, be married, and have delayed their enrollment in higher education. Although community colleges provide an open door opportunity for students to succeed (Bush, 2004; Dabney-Smith, 2009; Gebru, 2009; Smith, 2010), research described the lived experience of African American men seeking degree attainment at a community college as a challenge (Adams-Mahaley, 2012; Mosby, 2009).

### **African American Men on Campus**

Despite how challenging it may be for African American men to succeed, scholars suggest community colleges serve as the most effective route to degree attainment (Bass, 2011; Gebru, 2009). In fact, some scholars have declared that community colleges serve as the sole opportunity for access to higher education for African American males (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Pope, 2006). Nevertheless, in 2010, Bush and Bush asserted that the research on the academic success of African American male students focused primarily on two schools of thought. The first school refers to individual characteristics and the second is cognitive and non-cognitive variables. The first school of thought has been examined in a variety of ways. For example, Wood and Hilton (2012) examined factors affecting the academic success of African American male students at a community college and found that “a large number of students believe that their success begins with how committed and engaged they are in academic work” (p. 80).

Glenn (2007) found that some of the problems that interfered with the academic success of African American male community college students are related to personal attributes such as lack of positive self-esteem, low achievement motivation, cultural factors, poverty, and inadequate high school preparation. Other scholars such as Harris and Wood (2013) advocated that when students of color do not feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within the institution, they are less likely to maximize their potential or persist through goal completion. Interestingly, in recent years, community colleges have begun to respond to the challenge of creating an environment aimed at African American male students by establishing African American Male Initiative Programs or Black Male Initiatives (BMI) to increase the retention and graduation rate of African American male students.

### **Supporting African American Men**

College presidents who implement these programs are providing a counterattack on the plight of African American men seeking to attain a college degree. These programs can be found across the country at community colleges such as Houston Community College, Maricopa Community College, and Westchester Community College. In addition to offering support to increase retention and graduation rates, some of these programs provide unique services. For example, St. Louis Community College’s BMI program provides specialized orientation activities, peer and community mentoring, tutoring services, special workshops and seminars, stipends, and early alert academic monitoring (St. Louis Community College, 2011). Because this program offers stipends, it is unique from other BMI programs.

In the final analysis, if institutions seek to improve the academic success of African American male community college students, Harris and Wood (2013) suggested five domains that are primary factors that influence success. These scholars identified the five factors as: (a) precollege consideration; (b) the academic domain; (c) the environmental domain; (d) the non-cognitive domain, and (e) the institutional domain. Pope (2006) recommends institutions

seeking to keep African American students engaged and motivated during their quest for successful degree completion should implement the following retention strategies for intervention: (a) academic and social integration; (b) eliminate racism (c) assist students in overcoming triple consciousness; (d) enhance counseling; (e) provide effective orientation programming; (f) evaluate program effectiveness; (g) hire more African American administrators, faculty, staff, and students; (h) create ethnic, cultural, and social support groups; and (i) create programs that connect with African American males' communities.

In conclusion, because community colleges can benefit African American men in their collegiate experience in a variety of ways, focusing on organizational culture should be a top priority (McGarth & Tobia, 2008). According to research, community colleges cannot use off-the-shelf programs as the sole answer to improve the retention and graduation rates of African American male students. McGarth and Tobia suggest before community colleges implement change, they need practitioners and institutions to resolve the learning problems they have by committing to qualitative research strategies. As a result, according to McGarth and Tobia, the findings from these studies will increase the amount of research that concerns the most disruptive experiences African American male community college students encounter transitioning to college; they will identify the types of in-and-out of classroom activities and pedagogical practices that promote academic engagement, and also establish a sense of community. Furthermore, if community colleges do not learn about the dimensions of their campus environment, they will be contributing to another century of African American male community college students questioning their identity, being academically surpassed by women, and being mistakenly perceived as outsiders. Understanding how to increase the motivation of African American men in community college, which impacts their academic success, is beneficial.

### **Self Determination Theory**

Self Determination Theory (SDT) assesses individuals' level of motivation in light of their personality integration. Specifically, it examines how individuals are motivated towards activities, processes, values, and behaviors to fulfill inherent psychological needs (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick & Leone, 2006; Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). SDT posits that three psychological needs affect and motivate human behavior, they include competence (understanding how to obtain desired outcomes and the ability to perform functions which can attain said outcomes), relatedness (the importance of developing and sustaining social bonds, especially those which promote feelings of safety, support, and satisfaction), and autonomy (the capacity and aptitude to control one's action). When examining SDT in educational settings, it provides understanding of student's interest and value for education. Further, SDT has the capability for promoting positive self-efficacy in students. Therefore, socio-cognitive theory is connected as it examines the relationship of self-efficacy and academic motivation.

Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons' (1992) study makes a case for socio-cognitive theory. Within this theory, students' goals are connected to their motivation and achievement. Zimmerman and colleagues underscores the importance of self-efficacy among learners. Self-efficacy is impacted by the goal and the student's inherited ability to obtain his or her own goal. Additional studies observe student learners' causal attribution and their academic motivation. Collectively, educational researchers have concluded that unfamiliar situations impact learners' motivation, future success strategies, thoughts and emotions (Kraft, 1991; Perry, Hechter, Menec, & Weinber, 1993; Wiener, 1984). Accordingly, how students' come to understand certain life's occurrences (illness or fortune) shape their motivation and expectations.

The research on the motivation of African American college students has emerged (Cokley 2003; Garibaldi, 1992; Van Laar, 2000). African American students were understood to make academic and psychological gains from external motivators and attribution patterns. Thus, there is evidence of both internal and external sources used to increase the academic motivation and achievement of African American college students.

SDT advances psychosocial research on internalized motivation by distinguishing self-determined and compliant factors and processes. Researchers made a case that students with internal motivation learn more effectively and have greater initiative than students with an external motivation (Amabile, 1996; Utman, 1997). Griffin (2006) used SDT to investigate explanatory models useful in understanding the academic motivation of high achieving African American college students. Her study showed that students were best internally motivated by external phenomena. This current research contributes to the prior literature by examining the motivation of African American males enrolled at community colleges, through their own voices, which is an area in the literature that is severely lacking.

### **Methodology**

This study employed qualitative methodology. Creswell (1994) expressed that a qualitative study is “an inquiry into the process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2). A narrative research provides “data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual” (Creswell, 2005, p.474). He reminds us that using testimonies from individuals of a marginalized group provides a voice for seldom-heard individuals in education.

Personal narratives are the chosen method because the researchers wanted the subjects to create a bond with their fellow participants (so they can freely share their important stories) (Creswell, 2005). In this study, the researchers sought to learn how African American male community college students encounter and understand their educational experience, and what motivates them to succeed. Students were offered anonymity, allowing the responses to be more candid without fear of repercussions in the future. Pertinent description about data collection, the participants, and data analysis are discussed in this section.

### **Data Collection**

The researchers conducted a focus group interview with the goal of understanding the experiences of African American men who are enrolled in a community college. Wanting to hear from those African American males who were involved in the campus community, the researchers requested the assistance of the coordinator of the African American male group on campus. A major function of the student organization was to increase enrollment and graduation rates among African American males on campus.

Focus group interviews were selected as a narrative approach because it allowed participants to share common academic and social experiences (Bogdan & Bikled, 2003). Additionally, “focus groups are beneficial when the interactions among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are similar to and cooperative with each other” (Creswell, 2005, p215). Focus groups were held for two hours and were facilitated by the researchers. Two individual interviews were also facilitated for those participants who could not make the first group meeting. Study participants were asked a series of 20 open-ended questions

as a way to spur discussion. Participants were encouraged to interact while answering the formal questions and free discussion was also allowed. Following the completion of the formal questions, participants were invited to make further comments. Students were aware their discussion was being recorded. The discussion was transcribed and analyzed in which themes emerged from their statements.

The study was conducted at a Hispanic Serving Institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. A pseudonym is used to protect the identity of the institution. Urban Community College (UCC) is home to 11,592 students from the surrounding area. The self-identified demographics of UCC are as follows: 68% Latinos, 22% African American, 4% other, 3% White, 2% Asian and 1% missing. The student body is comprised of 40% male and 60% female; of which 52% are full-time students and 48% are enrolled part-time. There are 2,594 community college students that identified as African American at the time of the study. Of which 1,215 (46 percent) were male with 690 enrolled as full-time and 525 reported as part-time students. Sixty-two percent of UCC's student body is below the age of twenty-five.

The researchers used a homogenous sampling technique to identify and select study participants. A homogeneous sampling technique directs the researchers to interview individuals based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2005). The sample was drawn from a list of 1,125 eligible African American male students (US citizens, American born or naturalized) currently enrolled. The help of staff members from the Black Male Initiative on campus was sought, as they had an established rapport with the eligible students. The staff emailed and directly contacted all eligible students. From the strategies used, 14 full-time community college students showed interest in participating in study. All 14 participants self-identified as African American (one identified as African American/Latino) who were enrolled in an urban community college at the time of the study. Research participants completed a profile sheet which addressed participant's demographic information, such as home structure, academic information, socioeconomic status, and organizational involvement. The participants ranged in ages from 18 to 41, with an average age of twenty-one. The mean GPA of the study participants was 2.58 with grades ranging from 1.2–3.7. Of the 14 participants, 12 reported that they lived in a single-parent household and 2 reported they lived with both parents. Participants self-identified their social economic status as poor class (9), middle class (2), and working class (3). Six participants reported that their mother has no college education and three reported that their mother has some college education (but did not graduate with a college degree). Three of the participants' fathers had no college education, three had received some higher education but did not graduate with a college degree; two participants did not respond and one indicated that his father has a bachelor's degree.

Data analyses were conducted using procedures prescribed by Creswell (2005). Two thorough readings of the focus group interview transcripts were completed. During the first reading the researchers carefully reviewed the transcripts and identified key situations that impacted participant's motivation to succeed at the community college. The researchers examined the transcripts looking for commonality among the data which were grouped into themes. Creswell (2005) has underlined that "the identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences" (p. 482). Guided by these themes and patterns, 13 major codes and subcodes were assigned. The second reading compared the participant's experiences to the literature. The researchers along with two other colleagues engaged in a series of conversations regarding the participants' experiences. These experts discussed the patterns that existed in the data and constantly referred

to the transcripts to support interpretations. All four (4) researchers were skilled in qualitative research and were familiar with the research; therefore, these qualities helped in establishing the meaning of the males' experiences. To illustrate the realities of 14 African American males while enrolled at a community college, the researchers established thematic categories that captured the essence of the participants' experiences as these themes emerged from this study.

### **Findings**

The participants discussed internal and external factors that motivated them through their time in college. The next group of themes documents how their educational experiences were shaped by their academic and personal commitments. Suggestions for improving African American male experiences at an urban institution are offered in the conclusion. The responses can be grouped into the following themes: (1) improving their life status, (2) societal pressure, (3) man of the house and (4) faculty and staff encouragement.

#### **Improving Their Life Status**

When asked what the reasons were for attending college, the majority of students commented that they are motivated to obtain a better life. Study participants viewed higher education as the means to improve their life status. Again, 12 out of 14 participants reported they were raised in a low/working class household. Their socioeconomic status has not only caused financial challenges but it also provides inspiration for a better future. For example, Darryl stated that his motivation to obtain a higher education degree comes from his family's struggling. Coming from a low income single-parent household, he has witnessed how limited resources promoted hardship thus, he recognized that a college education as a way out.

Darryl comment:

Being in the situation where I had to struggle, meaning that my mom wasn't able to provide the things I wanted for [myself]. So I would always see her going through trials and tribulations.

Tyson added:

I wanted to do better for myself and my family. It's hard to get that job without an education so this is the only step for me to take for a better life for myself and family.

Supporting his peer's response, Israel offered:

I am going to school for me. What's keeping me in school is being able one day to relax, help the community, help my family, and ultimately help myself. I'm tired of struggling. We work 40 hours to pay bills and give someone else our money, that's crazy! That frustrates me. I don't want to work to pay bills. Yeah, we have to pay bills to live but not when there are more bills than money in my pocket. I'm staying in school to get the education to reach a higher level of income.

The participants understood how much more marketable they would become once they obtained a college degree. With this in mind, they would be able to provide for themselves and others. Moreover, they looked forward to earning money so they could stop the cycle of being low-income and to earn a comfortable living for themselves and their families. Through recent events, one participant was reminded of the importance of having financial stability not only for oneself but for others.

Junior shared:

I went to a friend's funeral and I heard family members arguing about paying for this and paying for that. They were like 'Well you said you were going to give money for this and

you said you were going to give money for that. Well I sat back and thought to myself when God said its time for [me] to go, I don't want to leave my family with nothing but a funeral bill. That means your whole life didn't amount to anything. I don't want anyone that I love not be able to be taken care of or have something that doesn't represent my legacy or my hard work why living on this earth. So that is why I am here in school.

Junior used a negative situation as a teachable moment for himself. He saw that limited funds brought about grief that was not associated with the death but more about the expenditures thereafter. As such, he is reassured that higher education will provide better results. He comprehended that a college education would provide financial security for his loved ones (as education has a positive correlation with income). Simply stated, Kojo concluded this section with "at the end of the day, it all comes down to money."

Given these personal reflections, these African American male students are moving in the right direction to increase their socioeconomic status through the pursuit of higher education. The young men in this study were aware that their secondary education was not enough, they recognized that in order to provide for themselves or others a higher education was required. Additionally, many of the participants wanted to end the cycle of being low-income Americans.

### **Societal Pressure**

The participants spoke about how they desired to remain motivated in school regardless of outside influences. Once students left campus and returned to their respective neighborhoods they had regular interactions with associates who were not enrolled in school. These interactions were challenging for some of the men because their peer relationships often tested their commitment to pursuing higher education. One participant shared:

You have this social life with friends who are not in college and they respect you, but little do they know you are trying to be like them, at least the part of trying to make money. But what they don't realize is that fast money won't be there tomorrow.

Especially how brothers are hustling hard and dying daily. Brothers have to realize that I am in school now and its slow money, but what I have will last a lifetime. And you learn that as you go further into your academic career you will get more money. I know that value. My cousins who are on the corner don't know that because they haven't been introduced to that.

This participant recognized the importance of attending school however at times he was often enamored with the material acquisition that others had. The student recognized the long term investment that is required to become educated and the reward it brings but often reminded of how glamorous it may appear when hanging out. Many of the students made reference to moving between two worlds: a world of academics and another of "the streets." One participant shared:

When my friends come around, I take time with them, because sometimes, when I need someone to talk to, the only ones around are the friends who are the freshest dudes on the block, although they might make me feel like the poorest dude on the block.

Another male student echoed similar sentiments that he was the only one of his friends who went to school. And told of the jokes he endured from his friends when he was seen coming home with his book bag.

Participants also mentioned how others had low expectations of them. One respondent described the level of immaturity he displayed in high school and how he did not take his

education seriously; leading his high school teachers and others to believe he was not going to be successful. He stated:

People expect less from us and that gives me a push. I want to separate myself from other people and do better than those people who I went to high school with. I won't be a failure or a statistic. That's why I am here.

The men in this study recognized their role in contributing to other's negative image of them. However, proving those people wrong who doubted them, fueled their motivation. Participants referenced the current statistics and media images of African American men as the popular belief of all men of color. Fighting stereotypes of African American men served as a motivation for these African American men. One student stated "for me I didn't want to be a statistic" as the reason for getting a higher education. The men in this study are confident that they are on the right path and determined to overcome stereotypes. One respondent added "I am going to show them that yes, I am Black and I go to school. I want to show them that we can succeed."

### **Man of the House**

The fact that many of the participants were raised in a matriarchal-led household might have prompted respondents to be motivated to be a better man. Thus, they assumed the position and the responsibilities associated with being the 'man of the house'. Not having a father led participants to become the 'provider.' Nor did they enjoy seeing their mother suffer to make ends meet. One participant responded:

Number one it is our social status, we got to make money to support our families. That's a strong thing for me, and should be for any African American man. It is probable that for every 7 of 10 African American men their mother is on welfare. You are looking at your mom, she is sad and stressed out. Your father is not around that much and you say to yourself "I got to hold things down."

Instead of using the spare money earned from part-time employment to acquire material items, (e.g. sneakers, clothing, going to movies) many participants contributed to the household. They focused on this educational journey to improve their current situations. African American male community college students, like Timothy, are determined to make a successful story for themselves and families.

Some participants described the nature of the usage for money. The participants came from humble beginnings which had implications for their immediate future. One participant mentioned that his father was present in the household but had little financial input. He contributed:

My dad doesn't work. I make more money than him and working 32 hours a week at [a sneaker store]. Mom doesn't work because she is on workman's compensation. I help my mom out. I recently paid her car insurance. That is a blessing to pay her insurance while working at [sneaker store]. I really don't get paid that much but, I rather see my mom driving instead of riding the train.

Clocking an abundant amount of hours at a low salary gave him the capital to pay his mother's car insurance. Regardless of personal sacrifice, this respondent found admiration in helping his mother out. Similarly, another participant stated that he learned at an early age that he was expected to assist with raising his younger brothers because his mother had multiple jobs. Not having a father living in the house, for many of the participants, not only led these men to mature quickly and not having both parents (primarily the father) around also created a huge void in the household finances. Selfishness was not an attribute associated with the men in this study. Not

having an educated male figure in their immediate household prompted them to find positive role models on campus.

### **Faculty and Staff Encouragement**

The men in this study pointed out helpful faculty members and staff as their source of motivation. Faculty member relationships were important to the community college students because family members provided expert advice and served as role models. Time after time, they expressed meaningful interactions with faculty members and were excited about school as a result. They commented:

Coach mostly gives me advice on college by trying to keep me focus. He asks me what I plan to do after college. Basically, telling me to continue my education and not let anything stop me from moving forward. He tells me that I should not make basketball consume me because it is not guaranteed.

I also get support from my (Black male) advisor every semester when I choose classes for the next semester. He has always been straight forward with me. When I am doing bad he tells me that I need to do better and when I am doing well he tells me to keep it up and that he is proud of me.

My freshmen advisor [faculty] motivates me. He is a Black brother, who has been there and done that. When I go to this office he sits me down and say it's like this. He has a doctorate and he says I can be better than him with hard work. If colleges had more professors like Dr. Johnson, it would help a lot of brothers in my neighborhood. Having someone on campus who you can talk to would help stop a lot of dudes from going to jail.

The role of faculty and staff members was paramount, and their interactions with students were reiterated throughout the interviews at varying stages with all the participants. Many participants gave the staff and faculty credit for giving them higher aspirations. They spoke of pursuing advanced degrees as a result of the relationship they developed with school officials. Meanwhile, other participants declared faculty members as the individuals who provided quality and effective mentoring during their time in school. These interactions were proven to be insightful, therapeutic, and essential for their growth and maturation. Academically, these students were held to high standards. Unanimously, the participants stressed the importance of having meaningful relationships with faculty members, as fundamental. The next section will explain the implications within this research.

### **Discussion & Implications**

For this study, African American men enrolled in community colleges derived their motivation from internal and external factors. In agreement with Hwang and colleagues' (2002) study, African American men in this research were able to rise above their challenges and relied on motivation from multiple sources. The study found that these men relied on higher education as the change agent for providing economic growth. These community college students experience a higher degree of stress than their White counterparts because of the many challenges they encountered. For example, improving their life status, overcoming societal pressure, contributing to their household as the "man of the house," and being employed were

their daily obstacles while enrolled in school. However, some of their challenges presented opportunities for development. As such, the lack of positive male figures allowed students to access the faculty and staff on campus for support.

In reference to improving their life status, a significant number of participants discussed their desire to improve their status for both their families and loved ones. This served as a motivational factor for their academic success/persistence. They explained that they were consumed with the daily expenses of living in an urban city. In addition, these students were grappling with the responsibilities associated with being a student and employee to assist with the household. Both roles were important and had a direct competition with one another. The participants were motivated to complete their studies and do well in the classroom, despite having to provide an income for daily living expenses. Therefore, sometimes they dedicated more energy toward their work performance to satisfy their immediate short-term gratification, and their academic performance tended to receive whatever energy remained.

Also, the participants noted that they would like more interaction with like-minded African American males with similar interests. This would serve as a support system in which the males could interact and assist each other outside of the classroom. Having this support system and interaction is essential for building strong bonds. In addition, a support system would allow African American males to also avoid the peer pressure of the “street life” or “friends from the streets.”

The majority of the participants were motivated to persist at the community college because they were the “man of the house.” These men supported their households by working to contribute to household bills. Some of the participants reported assisting with raising their younger siblings because of their parents or parent working multiple jobs. In addition, not having an educated male figure in their household led them to find positive role models on campus.

Faculty and staff who had positive encouragement for these participants was an important motivation for their persistence. Research shows that the impact of positive faculty and staff-student relationships and interaction is vital to the success of African American males (Billie & Carter, 2012). Faculty and staff relationships with these males are essential as a significant number of them do not have male mentors in their lives or father figures within their homes. Most of these students are the first in their families to attend college.

Therefore, institutions and students both can benefit with the recruitment and hiring of African American male staff, faculty, and administrators. These individuals may be familiar with the demands of college and can better advise students. It is important for African American males to receive motivational messages from individuals who understand their paths, as opposing to receiving messages from someone who have not attended college. The presence of African American male mentors has numerous effects, as it shows that success is obtainable. For those African American male students who lack a collegiate male figure in the house, having African American male mentors on campus can fill the void.

The researchers recommend that community colleges develop meaningful work experiences for students struggling financially to earn money while enrolled in school. Beyond having the traditional means of providing work-study placements, institutions of higher education ought to be more creative. For instance, departments need to create a line item within their budgets for employing students. Having students work in academic departments or student services will foster relationships with collegiate personnel. The work-site supervisor can also serve as a mentor for students. As such, the mentor can have routine one-on-one conversations with the student to address personal challenges and offer strategies for overcoming academic and

institutional hurdles (Pope, 2006). Since many participants reported being first-generation college students, reinforcement is needed to keep students motivated.

### **Conclusion**

Data from 14 African American male students enrolled at an urban community college were presented to disclose the experiences of these men as well as identify what motivated them to succeed in college. The importance of providing opportunities for these men to get together to talk about issues impacting others like them was evident through the research. The participants lingered after the formal group in order to continue socializing and discussing what it means to be an African American male in college. Seven of the twelve students asked whether there would be other opportunities for the group to come together and continue sharing their experiences. Community colleges should encourage males to create bonds with each other by hosting counseling staff or faculty led social groups. This would serve two purposes. First, an on campus social group would allow males to connect with others who have similar academic goals. Many of our participants commented on the alienation of being the “only educated” one, only to be confronted with images of other males working on the streets as gang members or drug dealers. By facilitating socialization among African Americans males, they can express their frustration along with recharging their motivation to succeed in an academic setting. The second purpose of such groups would give African American males a further connection with the campus community. Students in the focus group commented that they would like to have such interactions.

Through these social groups, educators can play a role in motivating students toward success (Garibaldi, 1992). As members of society, we must inform students, especially African American males that college is worth the investment. Nevarez and Wood (2010) highlighted the benefits of an education which translates to both personal and societal benefits. These benefits are financial (more earnings), intellectual (one’s cognitive development), and civic engagement (active participation in one’s community), to name a few. Students noted that motivation can serve to support academic success. In addition, motivation served as the key to success.

In conclusion, few would dispute the importance of diversity in research among America’s higher education, just as few would dispute the relative explosion in the minority population within the country. Subsequently, colleges and universities are no exception from the rise of underrepresented groups entering various sectors of public and private institutions. Given the growth of diverse students enrolled in colleges and universities, it is important that institutions of higher education resemble this demographic shift and properly be prepared to support their enrollment, retention, and graduation. Towards this end, the responsibility is placed on the institutions to ensure a successful and enriching educational experience for all students.

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