11-22-2017

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UNDERGRADUATE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES' NARRATIVES ON THE PERSONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING RETENTION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of undergraduate African American male social science majors on the personal factors that influenced their retention in higher education. This was a qualitative study with 15 African American males who were enrolled in three universities in the University of North Carolina system. The data were collected using face-to-face interviews of approximately 45 minutes duration that took place on two separate occasions. The African American males appeared eager to discuss their experiences as freshmen and the factors that influenced them to return to the university a second year. The main findings from this study were that African American males who persisted in the social science majors had inner determination, support from peers, mentors, parents, siblings, and extended families. They also had spiritual support, and learned to navigate through the social science curriculum with a commitment to a career in the social science field. The findings from the study contributes to the field of higher education by informing administrators about some approaches to facilitate the retention and graduation of African American males in social science majors. Future research studies might examine the persistence of other underrepresented students at other universities in social science majors using a mixed methods approach.

Introduction

Degree completion rates for African American males appear troubling. African American female college students tend to excel, while African American males face challenges throughout their matriculation on college campuses (Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012). Starting with their first year in college, the retention of African American male college students has become especially challenging in higher education (Cuyjet, 2006; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012; Sax, 2008; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Over the past 20 years, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) continues to report the lagging retention rates among African American male students attending United States colleges and universities (NCES, 2006). The retention rate for this student population has drawn the attention of college administrators; in fact, there are noticeable differences in degree completion between Caucasians and their counterparts (Sax, 2008). African American women tend to outperform their male counterparts regarding degree completion rates; actually, these females earn approximately twice the number of bachelor and master degrees than African American males (Sax, 2008). The gender gaps in education are becoming greater each year at all levels: elementary, secondary, and postsecondary (Renn and Reason, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of undergraduate African American male social science majors on the personal factors that influenced their retention in higher education. Therefore, the following research question guided this study, what do undergraduate African American male social science majors perceive as the personal factors influencing their retention in higher education? This study was limited to three institutions in the

University of North Carolina System. This study focused on purposefully selected undergraduate African American male students who were enrolled at these universities. The results gathered from African American male students who attended these universities represented only a limited segment of the African American male student population and should not be considered of minority students attending other institutions of higher education.

African American Family Structure

The well-being of African American males is directly connected to family income and school performance. Boyce-Rodgers and Rose (2001) conducted a study with 2,153 students examining the effects of family structural factors on academic achievement. They discovered that parental support was higher for two-parent families than for single parent or step families. Hines and McCoy (2013) conducted a quantitative study with 153 eleventh and twelfth grade African American males from two schools outside of a major city in the northeastern region of the United States. The majority of the participants were either 17 or 18 years old and the average GPA of the participants was 2.62. The purpose of the study was to explore the connection between parenting styles and African American males' academic achievement.

The parents in the study were classified as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neglectful; authoritarian parents were identifying as demanding but demonstrate little warmth; authoritative parents were identifying as having balance high expectations with support and warmth; permissive parents were defined as not placing any limits on their children; and neglectful parents showed little interest in their children's welfare. The findings indicated no significant relationship between parenting styles and enrollment in honors courses. However the results indicated that the fathers' education level and two-parent households were positive predictors of students' GPA.

As of 2011, over 54% of African American children live in single parent households and below the poverty level compared to 35% of Caucasian children (U.S. Census, 2011). The median household income of African Americans is $37,000 compared to $52,000 for Caucasians (U.S. Census, 2011). Based on research, a parent of 25% of African American children will be incarcerated before the child's 18th birthday (Wildeman, 2009).The high school dropout rate for African American males is 52% and approximately 100,000 African American males drop out every year (Kunjufu, 2010).

However, there are examples of low-income, single-parent families whose children achieve academically. Williams and Bryan (2013) conducted a qualitative study of eight urban, African American high school graduates, who were enrolled in an institution of higher education. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 21 years, and all participants lived in households with their mothers with the exception of one who lived with his grandmother. Cumulative high school grade point averages ranged from 2.75 to 4.2. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that contributed to the academic success of urban, African American high school graduates from low-income, single-parent families (Williams & Bryan, 2013). The participants were college sophomores except for one, who was a freshman. The participants were selected because of their shared experiences of growing up on the south side of Chicago amidst poverty, crime, and chronic unemployment. The researchers utilized individual interviews and focus groups.

Six of the eight participants discussed the spankings they received for getting in trouble at school or getting mediocre grades. This punishment helped increase their motivation to excel in school. All of the participants mentioned words of encouragement from their parent(s) that kept them focused on school, they also stressed the high expectations their parents had for their

scholastic performance. Several stated that extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents who were positive impact on their academics. Extended family members helped participants overcome their social, emotional, and financial challenges (Williams & Bryan, 2013). It appears that regardless of family structure, a substantial percentage of low-income parents have high academic aspirations for their children. In addition, teacher expectations and peer pressure were also shown to be important aspects for African American males.

Spirituality and African American Male Students

The role of spirituality in the college lives of African American has become increasingly important in recent years (Dancy, 2010; Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009; Watson; 2006). The coping strategies and problem-solving styles of African American college students are deeply influenced by spirituality and religious involvement (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Dancy, 2010). Constantine et al., (2002) found that African American students were more likely to utilize spiritual strategies to cope with collegiate challenges. Herndon (2003) conducted a qualitative study examining how spirituality affects African American males attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Thirteen African American male students were interviewed and spirituality was found to create a greater sense of purpose and encouraged resilience.

Watson (2006) interviewed 97 freshmen and sophomore male students at three private Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs). He utilized three open-ended essay questions and a 23-item Likert scale questionnaire to his participants. Watson found that spirituality was essential in academic persistence and identity development. Riggins (2008) replicated Herndon's 2003 study among 13 African American males at a southern HBCU. The purpose of Riggins study was to explore the role spirituality had on African American college males who were enrolled in an HBCU. The 13 participants were between the ages of 19 to 26 and were majoring in Computer Science, Criminal Justice, Psychology, and Sociology. The findings consisted of three major themes. The first theme was the role of prayer as a means for guidance and coping with stress; they reported putting their troubles in God's hands. The second theme was spirituality in a social context; they reported openly confessing their faith to others and that their spirituality assisted them in avoiding on campus temptations. The third theme, social support from religious institutions, was described as a valuable aspect of their retention. Participants described receiving encouragement and financial support from their church families.

Dancy (2010) conducted a qualitative study among 24 African American male undergraduate students enrolled in 12 different colleges in 19 Southern states. The participants were upperclassmen between 18-24 years of age, and all maintained at least a 2.5 GPA. They shared membership in the same fraternity and were nominated to participate by fraternity officials. The data were gathered in face to face interviews. Three major findings were reported: (a) spirituality is a source of support and dependency, (b) spirituality is a major anchor for identity, and (c) spirituality can be a source of tension among other identities.

Self-efficacy

Another crucial aspect of identity and retention is the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individuals' confidence in their ability to complete a task. Individuals with self-efficacy believe they have the ability to take action that will produce desired outcomes (Bandura & Locke, 2003). According to Bandura (1997), an individual can gain self-efficacy from achievements, vicarious learning, and social persuasion. Past success creates a sense of achievement and vicarious learning occurs when observing the behavior of others. Social

persuasion involves positive reinforcement for particular behaviors. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to attempt, persist, and succeed at assigned tasks. Students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to succeed in college.

Self-efficacy is important to the success of college students in general. DeWitz (2009) conducted a quantitative study of 344 undergraduate students using the College Self-Efficacy Inventory and the Self-Efficacy Scale and the results showed a positive correlation between self-efficacy theory and student retention. Furthermore, self-efficacy is particularly important to the college success of African American males particularly at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs).

Reid (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 190 African American males attending five research universities. The average participant was a junior with a GPA of 2.97. The purpose of the study was to determine if successful African American male undergraduates in research PWIs also reported higher self-efficacy. A statistical study was conducted to test the hypothesis that African American undergraduates at PWIs who score higher on self-efficacy also score higher on measures of achievement. The Self-Efficacy for Academic Milestone Scale was utilized for the study. The findings indicated that African American males who achieved academically reported higher self-efficacy and were more satisfied with their interactions with faculty. Students with high self-efficacy were more assertive in interacting with instructors (Morris, 2004; Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Methodology

The research design for this study was based on a qualitative approach that included face-to-face interviews with 15 African American male students who were social science majors in three selected University of North Carolina institutions. According to data retrieved from the North Carolina General Assembly website, the University of North Carolina's seventeen campuses enroll more than 220,000 students each academic year. Each year the UNC system graduates more than 30,000 students from over 200 academic degrees (www.unc.edu). This study was conducted at three selected UNC institutions.

The face-to-face interview approach was a purposeful interaction in which the researcher obtained information from participants. The researcher gathered in-depth data about students' experiences and feelings about their freshmen year in college. The research approach was centered on individuals' personal perceptions and experiences. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) structured interviews allow the researcher to utilize a specific set of questions to capture the desired responses from the participants.

Qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret human and social behavior as it is lived by participants in a particular social setting. Qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issues that are studied. Qualitative researchers talk directly to people, observe their behavior and action while in their natural environment. This type of research approach is useful in developing a complex, detailed understanding of the issue, and empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that exist between the researcher and participants in a study (Creswell, 2013).

Selection Criteria

The participants were purposefully selected based on their ethnicity, college major, and classification. The participants who were invited to participate were required to be currently enrolled in one of the selected universities, be of African descent, be a social science major in the College of Arts and Sciences, and had successfully completed their freshman year of college.

The researcher selected the College of Arts and Sciences, because based on research; more African American male students tend to select majors from the College of Arts and Sciences than majors in other colleges and schools within the UNC-System. The participants were required to have an earned grade point average of 2.5 or above. Although, transfer students were not intended to be involved in the study, but during the data collection, the researcher discovered that a few participants were identified as transfer students, and their responses provided valuable insights on the perspectives of the retention of African American male social science majors.

Data Collection

There was a collaboration with Student Affairs, the Registrar's office, and the College of Arts and Sciences, at each university, to select those social science majors who would provide a rich comprehensive perspective of their experiences. With the assistance of the above offices, the researcher was able to purposely select those individuals who met the criteria for the study. Additionally, the ideal participant would have successfully completed at least two years of college and classified as full-time students. Two separate face-to-face interviews were conducted on the participants' college campuses. The interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes each and all interview sessions were pre-scheduled with university officials to ensure not to interfere with the participants' instructional schedules. The consent letters and the questionnaire were made availability before beginning the interview sessions, for the purpose of obtaining demographic background information and to give the students a brief overview of the study. All interviews were tape-recorded and they were informed prior to data collection. Data were recorded anonymously and all participants were assigned a code to ensure confidentiality.

An interview protocol was designed by the researcher based on the gaps found in the literature to obtain data that would be relevant and add to the body of current knowledge. The interview protocol consisted of 22 open-ended questions intended to explore the collegiate experiences of those African American male students. Prior arrangements of convenient time and campus location was discussed and approved before each scheduled interview. The face-to-face interviews focused on the students' perceptions of the personal factors that influenced their decision to return to the university their sophomore year.

Data interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data. It is a process that begins with the development of the codes, the formation of themes from the codes, and the organization of themes into larger units to make sense of the data. The tape-recorded narrative data were transcribed into textual data. The data were coded into recurring patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). Data interpretation included condensation, display, and verification. Data condensation refers to the process of focusing, simplifying, and transforming the data that appears in the full body of field notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other materials. The second major activity was data display. A display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that allows the ability to draw conclusions and take action. The third stream of data interpretation was conclusion drawing and verification. Data verification were utilized to help draw conclusion to the information collected and the interpretation of what things mean. The conclusions were vague at first, however later became more grounded. Final conclusions were not determined until data conclusions were complete (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2014).

Results

The research study consisted of 15 undergraduate African American males who were social science majors and attended one of the three selected universities in the University of North Carolina System. They openly discussed the personal factors they perceived influenced

their retention in the social sciences in higher education. Participants were asked to describe the factors that influenced their academic progression and based on their responses, (a) determination, (b) family support, (c) motivation, and (d) spiritual support emerged as the overarching themes. All stated that having a determined mind-set was the primary force behind their success during their freshman year. Many mentioned that they had parents, friends, and professors who helped keep them focus as the main reasons why they were in college.

Determination

The majority of the participants defined determination as the leading characteristic that kept them working hard and avoiding distractions despite obstacles. They were aware that others may not always want to see them succeed, so it was imperative that they surround themselves with positive people. Determination is strongly related to self-efficacy, therefore the responses from the participants is congruent with the findings by Bandura and Locke (2003) on self-efficacy which is defined as an individual's confidence in their ability to complete a task. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to succeed in college. This study also supports previous studies by DeWitz (2009) and Reid (2013) that found a positive correlation between self-efficacy and student retention. High achieving African American males reported greater self-efficacy and more satisfaction when they had interactions with faculty.

One stated that the freshman year was extremely hard and without patience and encouragement from his parents, it would have been difficult to survive.

> My freshman year was hard work and I had to have patience and encouragement, especially from my parents. It was important that I did not let anyone or anything distract me, because I was on my own for the first time and the environment was different from the high school environment. I have the determination to do great things.

Another stated:

> Hmm…determination. The reason being is because, as a freshman I had to be determined to succeed. I had to have a determined mindset, especially as an African American male. Many people expect African American males to dropout or give up, but with determination I know I will make it through all four years of college.

Participants were asked about major influences that contributed to a successful first year, based on their responses, family support, including the extended families emerged as the recurring theme.

Family Support

Several participants stressed the importance of family support for their college success and retention. The participants stated that their families provided motivation to pursue their goals, guidance to make good decisions, and financial support in terms of money and care packages. The findings from this study supports previous research by Williams and Bryan (2013) that discovered encouragement from parents and extended family members had a positive impact on student retention. They stated that their parents and siblings gave them the encouragement during their freshmen year that helped them to stay encouraged. They mentioned that when they felt overwhelmed, these family members would take time to give them a pep talk and scriptures that would give them the added boost of energy and support to continue. One even gave credence to his step-father whom he mentioned as being the only person who took an interest in his college and career path. Family was the guiding force to their success.

Participants were asked to discuss the role their families played toward their freshman year; they all confirmed that the motivation from their families was all they needed to succeed. One mentioned:

My brother always talked to me about his college experiences and often tells me to
stay focus. He tells me to do better than he did while in college and that he wishes he
would have taken more opportunities and been more involved while he was in college.

Another:

My family members, my sister, my mom, and my father all cheered me on to
keep trucking and never give up.

One concluded:

Definitely my mother, she is awesome and keeps in touch with me every day to
make sure things are going good.

Motivation

A few felt that optimism about academic progress, ambition, resilience, courage, and
sacrifice affected their decision to return to the university the sophomore year. The participants
mentioned important personal characteristics such as: (a) self-discipline, (b) self-motivation, (c)
work ethics, (d) networking, and (e) humility as characteristics that influenced their academic
progression. They also commented the importance of regular contact with family members and
spiritual support from community churches in the form of scholarships, tutoring, role models,
and care packages as a leading motivational factor. The majority were motivated to attend
college by their parents, siblings, and extended families. One stated:

It is my parents and godparents who made sure I did well in college. They pushed me
and made sure that I kept a positive the mindset to fulfil my dreams. My extended family
helped me understanding that in order to get where I want to go, I must get an education,
my family is fantastic. I'm so glad that they motivated me because I am schedule to
graduate.

Another stated:

My brother, who is a law student, always motivates me and tells me how he expects me
to carry on the family education legacy. He tells me to go the extra mile and work
toward those things that I want to achieve. He inspires me to do better and to not settle
for average grades or hang around people who are not headed in the same direction as
me. He inspires me to think before accepting opportunities to make sure I am making the
right decision. He is one of my heroes and is most influential to my successes.

Finally one responded:

My dad really motivates me to do better. He always reminds me to be self-motivated; he
inspires me a lot to just do my best and to keep going. My mom always tells me how
proud she is of my accomplishments. My mother attended college here and was a charter
member of the campus undergraduate Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. She left a legacy
and my brother left a legacy of being a good student. My father attended North Carolina
A & T University and was a drum major; so it's the legacies that my family left that
inspires me to do better. So I think that my brother, my mom, and my dad did a great job
toward my success during my freshman year.

Spiritual Support

The majority of the participants expressed that the support from their church and
spirituality was positive factors to their academic progression. They received emotional support
from their churches in the form of prayers and phone calls. The participants also stated the
importance of attending a church while going to college; they also said that it was common for
the churches close to universities to provided free meals after church services. This study

correlated with the findings of Riggins (2008) and Watson (2006) that prayer was a means of coping with stress and that social support from the churches was a valuable aspect to student retention.

Conclusion

The participants in this study appear to be persisting toward obtaining their degrees despite personal challenges. The study findings have the potential to benefit university administrators as they address the retention and graduation of African American male college students. It is recommended that this study be replicated at other universities from different geographical locations to determine if the results will be similar. It is also recommended that this study focus on African American female students to determine the factors that influence their academic progression as social science majors.

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