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# Increasing the Success of African American Males with Learning Disabilities Attending California Community Colleges

## **About the Author(s)**

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## INCREASING THE SUCCESS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES ATTENDING CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article was to identify strategies to increase the access, progress, and success for African-American males with Learning Disabilities (LD) attending the California Community College. California has the fifth largest population of African American people in the US, including over 1 million African American males. There is a growing body of literature discussing the barriers faced by African American males attending college, particularly in the areas of retention, persistence, and degree attainment. This journal article discusses how to ameliorate the issues regarding African-American males being successful in the community college environment. With special programs such as Umoja, Adult Education Block Grant, and internship programs, so African-American males see instructors who look like them. The California committee college system with innovative strategies of programs can help change the future of African-American males in the community college environment.

### **Introduction**

California is also home to the California community college (CCC) system, the largest public education system in the nation, serving over 2.3 million students in the 2016 – 2017 academic year (Data Mart, 2017). Overall, African American men are underrepresented in post-secondary education, and “those who (do) enroll in college are more likely to attend a community college than a baccalaureate institution. In accordance with this finding, in 2016-2017, a little over 65,000 African American males were enrolled at a community college (Data Mart, 2017) which equates to 43% of the 150,000 African American students enrolled in all of California post-secondary institutions (Ed Trust West, 2015).

However, African American college students in California remain least likely to complete a college degree, but remain the most likely to take remedial and non-credit coursework. They complete courses at approximately 50% of their white peers and only 15% of African American students complete their degree within six years of enrolling as compared to 26% of their white counterparts (Wise, 2011). In an effort to address the achievement gaps of underperforming and at-risk students, the CCCs have historically offered a number of programs designed to support underrepresented students and other groups from special populations, “most notably those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities” (J. Holmes, personal communication, October 30, 2017).

The CCCs student service programs include Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS), which offers a variety of support services to eligible students with disabilities that are over and above those traditionally offered by the college, including registration assistance, academic accommodations, specialized counseling, assessment for learning disabilities, note taker services, and specialized tutoring instruction. The goal of the program is to provide students with disabilities access to college programs and services “so that they can participate as

fully and benefit as equitably from the college experience as their non-disabled peers (CCCCO, 2017)". Over 124,000 students were registered with DSPS in 2016-2017, of which 1100 were African American males, or less than half a percent of all DSPS participants (Data Mart, 2017). Unfortunately, the authors were unable to find specific data regarding this population and their involvement with federal TRiO programs established at the CCCs, programs that may offer supports to college students with disabilities.

### **The Lack of African American male participation in Disability Services**

There is a growing body of literature discussing the barriers faced by African American males attending college, particularly in the areas of retention, persistence, and degree attainment. Some of the barriers are institutional, most notably faculty attitudes, lack of awareness, and few support resources (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012, Harris, Hines, Mayes, & Vega, 2016; Wise, 2011). These same researchers noted some barriers stemmed from students having poor secondary to postsecondary transition planning, the stigma of accessing resources, and the lack of college readiness. These challenges often work to prevent African American males from envisioning the post-secondary setting as a goal, a goal that can seem far more unreachable to the student with disabilities.

**Getting them on the Campus.** There are a number of potential reasons why so few African American male students with LD access disability support services in the community college. The pipeline leading to the college pushes out potential students from enrolling in college due to lack of secondary academic preparation, inadequate special education resources, and the higher high school dropout rates of African American males with special education backgrounds. According to Lynch (2015), there are four primary factors keeping African American males from getting to college:

1. African American boys are more likely to be placed in special education.
2. African American boys are more likely to attend schools without the adequate resources to educate them
3. African American boys are not reading at an adequate level.
4. Punishment for African American boys is harsher than for any other demographic.

These challenges, often left unaddressed, do not facilitate African American males access to college and are likely to be a direct cause for small numbers of this population registering for disability support. The students who could benefit most aren't getting to the community college campus.

Incarceration of AA males in California, There is a direct correlation between African American males in secondary special education and criminality. According to Hing (2015): "(B)lack students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white students...(and) the federal government (agrees this disparity) can't be explained by differences in kids behavior alone. More importantly, just one of those suspension can double the likelihood that students will drop out of school, and increase the likelihood that students end up in prison."

California has the second largest population of incarcerated people in the nation and African American men are dramatically more likely to be imprisoned than any other group in the state. Although six percent of California's adult male population is African American, African Americans are 29% of the state's prison population (Grattet & Hayes, 2016). According to a study by the National Center on Education Statistics (1994), prisoners are more likely than the general population to have a disability — 36 percent of prisoners compared with 26 percent of

the average household population have one or more disabilities, with nearly four times as many inmates as householders reported a learning disability. (p. 34)

In addition, people with disabilities already face obstacles to employment, housing, and education, all variables needed to sustain economic security. A criminal record often brings further obstacles to the formerly incarcerated who live with a disability, while reentry programs may be incapable of serving the formerly incarcerated “often lack the necessary accommodations and connections to community services, making them incapable of meeting the needs of participants with disabilities.

Explanations for the lack of AA male participation with LD in the California community college. The underrepresentation of African American college students with disabilities in post-secondary institutions points to the need to examine variables that influence these students’ transition to college and their retention during college. One explanation that may account for low postsecondary transition for African American males with learning disabilities is their membership in at least two groups that have been historically marginalized in our society: African-Americans and the disabled. Another explanation could be that secondary guidance counselors’ expectations for post-secondary options vary from those of their students, thus guiding students with disabilities to alternatives other than college.

In fact, this may have happened due to their disability status as opposed to the lack of academic ability and “findings indicate clear disconnects between students and counselor expectations during the Individual Transition Plan” (Banks & Gibson, 2016), a plan which provides high school students with disabilities a plan to transition to the post-secondary setting. However these students reach the California community college, it is imperative to utilize identified funding and resources designed to improve the academic success of this special student population.

### **Strategies to use CCC programs and funding sources to support creative collaborations and program enhancements for AA males with LD**

Community College Learning Disabilities program. Per the mandates of federal and state law, the California community colleges provide academic support and access to students with disabilities via the DSPS program. The primary reasons students register with DSPS are to receive reasonable academic accommodation, and to ensure there is an interactive process between the student and disability services which is achieved through an individualized academic accommodation plan (AAP). This plan links the student’s self-identified disability-related educational limitations to appropriate accommodations, services, and academic programs. Accommodations do not automatically renew and must be requested by the student each term the student requires accommodations.

The California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) defines assessment “as a process by which functional educational limitations, academic readiness, and vocational interests, as well as verification of disability are evaluated for a student with a disability (CCCCO DSPS, 2016)”. The system’s approved Learning Disabilities Eligibility and Services Model is used to help verify the eligibility of adult students who have LD. The costs of this assessment vary depending on the campus as some LD assessments are done through classes (\$46 per unit) or free for students enrolled in classes on the same campus. Unlike the assessments used by the K-12 system, where the tools used are normed for students under the age of 18, these assessments are normed for adult learners. Specialists trained on the LD model and certified by the state are the only DSPS staff authorized to give these assessments.

African American males with LD who are registered with DSPPS can have their previous LD documentation reviewed by an LD Specialist and if deemed necessary can use this low-cost or free service to update documentation or provide documentation for students who have never been previously identified. This documentation can be used to support accommodations requests for various testing situations, i.e. employment testing, entrance exams, and professional licensing. This documentation can also be used to support requests for reasonable accommodations in the workplace. “The cost for this service can range from \$3000 to \$5000 if done with a private practitioner, like an educational psychologist, and our students can rarely afford that” (M. Becerra, personal communication, October 31, 2017).

UMOJA Programs. Umoja is a state-funded retention program currently available at over 45 California community colleges that has been designed to address the needs of African-American college students through the implementation of pedagogy and academic programming responsive to the legacy of the African and African American Diasporas. One of the missions of Umoja is to intervene in the academic experience of African American students with mentoring and advising to increase the persistence and retention rates of these students at participating community colleges. In her study of successful African American males in the California community colleges, Wise (2011) found the majority of retention program participants felt these programs should be based on ethnic backgrounds of the students, the primary reason being because students are able “to interact with faculty and peers of a similar background” (p. 103). The value of this type of interaction created a sense of belonging and support, playing a major role in their persistence to completing their academic goals (Booker, 2007).

Upon review of Umoja information from the program’s website and the informal review of websites of the participating colleges, there was no specific mention of support for students with LD. Given one in five U.S. citizens has a disability, along with the impact of the inequality of primary and secondary education for African American students, and the over-identification of African American males in special education, it is more than likely Umoja programs serve students with learning disabilities. Based on the professional experience of this article’s authors, Umoja professionals do refer students to DSPPS, but the apparent lack of specific information or programming that speaks to African American students with disabilities may lead to marginalization of these students within the program. “In a sense, it’s hard enough just championing for African American students, but to stick disability on top adds a whole new layer of challenges” (J. Holmes, personal communication, November 12, 2017).

It might prove helpful to African American males with LD if there were more awareness of disabilities and partnerships with DSPPS at the colleges where Umoja programs exist. By addressing the need for the resource for eligible participants can normalize the process of seeking and using accommodations for academic success and retention. This process could start with the statewide application used to recruit Umoja students which currently does not ask the question about disability status for potential applicants. Although potential students may or may not self-disclose their disability, the question may prove helpful for students who are unsure of whether or not they should disclose, while other students may feel the program is open to working with them inclusive of their disability.

Acknowledging disability may also increase the numbers of Umoja participants from the current 4,000 (Umoja, 2017) by formalizing collaborations with DSPPS. This could include workshops presented by DSPPS learning specialists and academic counselors regarding learning styles assessment, the accommodations process, various supports available to eligible students, and the names of well-known African American figures who’ve lived with disabilities. These

types of collaborations also serve DSPS students who may not know about Umoja and are informed of the program from those DSPS professionals who collaborate with Umoja. Successful collaborations could serve as examples for other retention programs geared towards special populations, including the newly created Inmate and Formerly Incarcerated Education pilot programs (CCCCO, 2017).

Implement student identified supports. There is a growing body of work regarding the educational experiences of African American men in college and successful strategies post-secondary institutions might implement to support this underserved student population (Banks & Gipson, 2016; Ed Trust-West, 2017; Harris, III, F. & Wood, 2014;). Among the promising practices for to support the success of men of color include are “implementing early alert systems (and) ensuring a higher representation of (AA) full-time faculty (and) integrating equity goals and efforts into institutional strategic plans (Harris, et al., 2016)”.

Early Alert. By implementing early alert processes, struggling African American males with LD enrolled in gatekeeper and basic skills courses can be identified and supported early in their college terms. The student support program Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) utilize early alert processes for all students registered in the program. Students must request a mid-term report from their instructors regarding their grades, enabling support counselors to help students identify and overcome academic challenges. Early alert can also be implemented within other student support programs like financial aid, DSPS, foster youth programs, veterans’ affairs, and cultural specific retention programs. Ideally, early alert programs could serve all students, regardless of special population status. This could be an important tool given California’s poor graduation rates of college students in all three of the state’s public education systems.

Increase the Number of DSPS Professionals from Underrepresented Populations:

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), the U.S. public school teaching force is overwhelmingly White (80%) and female (77%), and similarly, White women make up over 80% of U.S. special education teachers (DATAUSA, 2015). Although the authors were unable to unearth formal research regarding the demographics of disability service professionals in higher education nationwide or those working on the CCC campuses, this demographic appears to hold true for the California community college. Hing (2015) and Lynch (2015) surmised this may result in a lack of understanding about African American students and boys. It may also lead to cultural disconnects in recruiting, serving, and retaining African American males with LD in higher education. College faculty, staff, and administrators who serve African American males with LD must be able to acknowledge the society’s messages about race and disability, a goal that might be easier to establish with disability support providers who share some of the same characteristics as their students.

This will be challenging given the numbers of African American men in tenured or tenure track faculty positions in the California community colleges positions make up less than six percent of the system’s instructors (DataMart, 2017). By the same token, it is highly likely these instructors do not have disabilities given the low number of faculty with disabilities nation-wide, which is estimated at a mere four percent (Grigely, 2017). In an attempt to help address the lack of diversity among the faculty ranks in the CCCC system, where it is estimated that 65% of students are people of color yet 60% of instructors are white, some colleges have implemented the Faculty Diversity Internship Program (FDIP).

In 1992, California legislators passed laws to enable community colleges to establish Faculty Diversity Internship Programs (FDIPs) to “promote inclusive efforts to locate and attract

qualified graduate students who are members of monitored groups identified by gender, ethnicity, and disability” (Title 5. Education California Code of Regulations, n.d.). The Chancellor’s Office has set minimum qualifications for faculty members, mainly a graduate degree and professional experience. For those colleges that have established the FDIP, the mission is to train and prepare interns (and degree holders who meet minimum qualifications) who are interested in teaching at a community college and are in search of practical experience for future faculty employment opportunities. These programs are designed to increase the pool of potential faculty candidates who reflect the diversity of the system’s student population, as well as that of their campus(es), and their local communities. By providing mentorship, paid teaching experience, and exposure to the community college environment, the goal is to help build a diverse and representative faculty. The selection of interns should also include active recruitment and support of employees with disabilities.

Potential DSPS faculty, who must meet special requirements, can be recruited from local graduate programs in Rehabilitation Counseling, Special Education, and Social Work to participate in FDIPs. Colleges and college districts can create partnerships with four-year institutions to provide access to their campuses which includes the benefit of identifying potential faculty who are familiar with their campuses, their processes, and their students. Recruits still enrolled in graduate school are able to obtain paid work experience while meeting the internship requirements of their graduate programs, which require supervision by vetted professionals with several years of experience in the field.

### **Integrating equity goals and efforts into institutional strategic plans to fund programs for African American males with LD**

Community College Equity Plans. Starting in 1992, in response to legislation, the Board of Governors (BOG) adopted a student equity policy for the community college system in an effort to ensure that historically underrepresented groups have equal opportunities for post-secondary access, success, and four-year college transfer. In 1996, the BOG required community college districts to develop, implement, and evaluate their own student equity plans. From 2002 through 2006, BOG provided guidelines for equity plan development and required colleges to complete or update their equity plans. In 2014, the governor included \$100 million of funding to help close the achievement gaps (Michalowski, et al., 2014). By providing funding for equity plan efforts, the state wanted to give college districts the authority to spend equity monies where the need was the greatest, while at the same time holding them accountable for the results of their plans.

The Chancellor’s Office has gone a step further in identifying specific student groups who lag behind in academic achievement at the community colleges. “Title 5 regulations specify that colleges must review and address the following populations when looking at disproportionate impact: American Indians or Alaskan natives, Asians or Pacific Islanders, Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, men, women, and persons with disabilities (Title 5, §54220(d), 2016)”. African American males with LD hit three populations on this list, thus programs that can address the specific needs of this population may well have better funding opportunities. It may be beneficial to establish programs to address the Chancellor’s Office’s six indicators of student performance access: basic skills progression, course completion, degree and certificate completion, transfer, and one catch-all category designated as campus-wide initiatives (Michalowski, 2014; Harris, III, et al., 2017).

Adult Education Block Grants. In the 2015-2016 fiscal year, California appropriated \$500 million to the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) and the



California Department of Education (CDE) to provide funding for adult education through the Adult Education Block Grant (AEBG). The funds will be provided to support the implementation of regionally planned adult education programming. After years of neglect, the mission of AEBG is to expand and improve the provision of adult education via consortia made up of adult schools and community colleges. Because the grant is relatively new, the Chancellor's Office and the Department of Education continue to work together to provide implementation guidelines for the consortia.

There are specific activities that are designated for AEBG funds, some of which can address the needs of African American men with LD attending a community college. Among those program activities are:

1. Educational programming in basic skills and programs that lead to a high school diploma or the equivalent;
2. Programs for adults with disabilities;
3. Programs in career technical education that are short term in nature and have high employment potential.

Because Black males in California still lag behind Latinos and White males in high school graduation rates (estimated to be around 62%) and the nationwide rate for students with disabilities dropping out of high school is 19 percent, adult education programming that targets this population could decrease and have a positive impact on these numbers. Targeted programming could also lead to an increase in the pipeline of African American males with disabilities getting to the community college campus and accessing services to support their progress and retention.

In addition, the AEBG funding will encourage the recruitment of adult education students into career and technical education fields that are desperate for employees. The state is anticipating the need for 1.9 million jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four year degree, a figure that is larger than the anticipated shortage of 1 million college graduates (Bohn, 2014). Opportunities for paid apprenticeships and well-paid job opportunities may well serve as an attractant for this student population, as well as create a pathway to transitioning to the four-year campus. The AEBG website also provides examples of promising practices and student success stories which can help provide direction regarding programming.

Student Support Services and Programs (SSSP). The California community college system has been under fire due to its dismal graduation and transfer rates of community college students, found to be at 48% in the academic year 2015-2016 (Gordon, 2017). Given the need for nearly 3 million workers with post-secondary technical training and college degrees, this poor completion rate for all California community college graduates does not bode well for a state with an economy that increasingly requires an educated workforce. In addition, African American students graduate at a lower rate of 36.9% and students with disabilities fare worse (CCCCO, 2012). To address the issues that might be the cause of these low graduation rates, the Chancellor's Office created the Student Success Task Force to study the problem by reviewing current system practices and implementing new ones. In 2012, the state legislation passed the Student Success Act and established the Student Success and Support Program (SSSP) to be funded with \$890 million in state allocations.

The task force's findings included the need for students to be fully matriculated into the community colleges as a way to ensure all students had the information needed to be successful once they arrived on campus. The following services are funded through SSSP and are required to be tracked in order for colleges to maintain their allocations:

- College Orientation
- English and math assessment
- Student education plans (abbreviated and comprehensive)
- Academic counseling /Advising
- Follow-up services, to include outreach

It is thought by demystifying the college onboarding process, more students will identify and use student services and supports that help them navigate their academic pathways. The funding has provided opportunities for the community colleges to hire more counselors, and for special programs, like DSPS and EOPS, to use funding to provide services to underserved populations, i.e. students with disabilities and historically underrepresented students. In fact, one of this article's authors is currently funding two DSPS counselor positions with SSSP monies, positions that would otherwise not exist in a program that is growing by 10% each year.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The academic needs of African American male college students with learning disabilities has been poorly addressed in terms of policies and practice, and until recently, formal research on the topic has been limited. Given the need to support this severely underserved population, there needs to be more specific programming designed to positively impact the success, retention, and progress of these students. Currently, the California Community College Chancellor's Office has programs and funding that could directly serve African-American men with LD for the better. Unfortunately, much like the traditional institutional divisions of instruction and student services, these programs and supports rarely collaborate with each other, nor seek to understand how together they can influence the academic access and success for the African-American men with LD who are currently enrolled in the system.

There are few formal studies on collaborations between the system's funding streams and academic or student support programs. Potential research might include collaborations between culturally specific retention programs and disability support services, to include successful projects and outcomes. Future research might concentrate on incarcerated African-American males in California with LD and successful support programs that identify disabilities and teach students strategies to address disability-related educational limitations. Furthermore, potential research should include how to get African American males with LD into the pipelines for college. What successful strategies can be established, to include funding sources, to guide African-American males with LD earlier in their educational experiences so they can see the community college as an option?

Future research on the established Umoja programs and active collaborations with DSPS would help gather data regarding exactly how many African American students with learning disabilities are accessing accommodations and other support services. Continued research on the effects of California community college funding streams, which are relatively new (starting in 2013 – 2014) and the access, retention, and success of identified equity populations will also prove helpful. Additionally, research on faculty diversity internship programs and their effects of diversifying the system's faculty ranks will be helpful in identifying what, if any, strategies can be employed to recruit male disability service providers of color and who have disabilities to be counselors and instructors. These may seem like small steps, but given these programs have existed for a few years now, we must capitalize on their successes, understand their failures, and use what we learn to serve African American males with LD to their full potentials.

### Conclusion

The authors recognize this article is specific to California and the funding sources and strategies identified to utilize such funding may be difficult to implement in other states. The California Community College system is one of the biggest public education systems in the nation and is a source of education for over 150,000 AA students (DataMart, 2017). One of this article's co-authors started his academic career in this community college system at the campus where his father taught for over 30 years. The other co-author started her professional career working as an administrator and faculty for the college system, and after nearly two decades of supporting students, has watched the system create generations of educated Californians who have gone on to do great things in their communities.

With some minor tweaks, the state can fulfill its obligation to working Californians by closing the skills gap of its workforce through post-secondary academics and training programs. The programs previously discussed remain untapped in their potential to support people who are disproportionately impacted by the lack of access to college, and with determination, practitioners and scholars can be successful in educating African-American male college students with LD. In turn, there might be an increase in their access, participation, and success in California's higher education system.

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