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Can I Live: Examining the Self-Worth of Black Men Enrollment in Community College

About the Author(s)

Dr. LaVon Williams is the Associate Director of Student Success Initiatives at Union College. He also teaches undergraduate students at Montclair State University and graduate students at New Jersey City University's Community College Leadership program.

Over the past 21 years, Dr. Williams has encouraged thousands of students to design a plan of action to guide them toward fulfilling their dreams. As a scholar, he has published in the books *Engaging Black Men in College Through Leadership Learning* and *Engaging African American Men in Community College* to discuss the importance of access, equity, and success in higher education.

Keywords

self-worth, black men, community college, hip-hop, student success, lived experience



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Abstract

This study aimed to describe Black men's self-worth and lived experience in community college. According to research, community colleges are the first option for many Black men. Through qualitative research methods, this study examines the believed self-worth of Black men enrolled in community college and matches its findings to Jay Z's (1998) classic song *Can I Live*. Findings from this study identify the internal fight Black men have pursuing an education as a means to achieve upward mobility. Lastly, this study provides insight to aid policymakers, higher education practitioners, and Black families to understand better how to address Black men pursuing an associate degree at a community college.

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Introduction

In 2015, Black Entertainment Television's (BET) hit show *Being Mary Jane* aired a scene where the main character, Gabrielle Union, talked with her date about the state of educated Black men in America. During this segment, the actress pointed out that finding an educated Black man for a companion in America can be "difficult." In response to her feelings, her African-American male date informed her that more Black men are enrolled in college than in the prison system. There is a myth that Black men do not want to pursue an education and prefer a life of crime over attaining an education. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) (2020), since 2006, this myth should have been dispelled because the imprisonment rates of Black Americans have decreased by 34%. However, after her date responded, Gabrielle's character sarcastically replied, "Yes, Black men are in college, *community college* [emphasis added]."

Although the above example was a fictional conversation, it describes some individuals' perceptions of Black men and community colleges. However, community colleges are vital to America's postsecondary education system, especially for Black men (Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Flowers, 2006; Ingram et al., 2023; Williams & Coaxum, 2018). According to research, community colleges are the primary access point for Black men because of their emphasis on teaching, accessibility, low cost, comprehensive offerings, and enabling students to transfer to four-year institutions (American Association of Community Colleges 2022; Barr & Shuetz, 2008; Bergquist & Pawlak, 2007; Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Flowers, 2006; Vaughan, 1982; Warren, 1985; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Despite Black men's rationale for enrolling, they are too often degraded when pursuing progress (Pope, 2006).

From a historical perspective, community colleges play a pivotal role for students and subjects previously excluded from higher education. They are considered the "people's college" and were developed from believing all Americans should have access to higher education, not just the privileged (Vaughan, 1982). However, when Black men enroll in community college, they are often viewed as academically underprepared to succeed (Wood, 2012; Ingram et al., 2023).

Currently, 1,043 community colleges serve over 10.3 million students, providing general and vocational education to students who desire to become intellectually adept and highly skilled (AACC, 2022; Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Kane & Rouse, 1999). Community colleges service over 39% of undergraduates in the United States and 40% of African American undergraduates in the United States (AACC, 2022).

Given that community colleges serve as the most effective route for Black men to achieve degree attainment (Bass, 2011; Gebru, 2009; Ingram et al., 2023; Wedam, 2022), this study seeks to describe their self-worth and the challenges they must overcome to persist and attain an associate degree. At this stage in the research, the lived experience of Black men seeking degree attainment at a community college is generally described as challenging (Adams-Mahaley, 2012; Mosby, 2009; Williams, 2019).

Attaining a college degree can be challenging for Black men because they constantly ask themselves, "Can I live?" They revert to this question because they often experience an educational system that mistreats them (Dubois, 1903; Johnson, 1993; Harper, 2009; Wood,

2012; Wedman, 2022; Williams, 2019; Woodson, 1933). For example, research highlights that the educational experience Black men experience most is the school-to-prison pipeline (Harewood, 2014; Muhammad, 2019). Too often, Black men are given a right-to-fail perspective (Gardenhire et al., 2016; Wood, 2012). This right-to-fail perspective consists of Black men being provided access to enter community college without a corresponding institutional commitment to employ all reasonable means to advance student success (Wood, 2012, p. 30)

When higher education institutions provide access without commitment, it highlights the insincerity of the higher education system to enhance the success of Black men pursuing a college degree. This hypocrisy causes Black men to question the educational system's commitment to propelling their success and society. Billionaire business mogul and entertainer Jay Z (1998) posits similar sentiments in the song *Can I Live* from his classic debut album *Reasonable Doubt*. The content of this song is significant because it paints a portrait of a Black man questioning his existence in the world. Jay Z (2010) describes his take on “live free or die trying,” liberty or death,” and the fabric of what it means to be American. According to research, Black men are more likely to be stereotyped, which affects their ability to excel (Steele, 1999; Williams, 2017). Jackson (2022) reports that higher education is one of society's most significant enablers of the stereotype that Black men can only play basketball and football. Jay Z (2010), known for his ambitious attitude and aspirational lyrics, has been a voice and example to Black men. His “I will not lose” attitude has influenced millions of followers to unleash what he calls a “hustler's spirit.” According to Jay Z (2010), a spirit developed out of “a sense of hopelessness” helps Black men stay focused and avoid traps to diminish their chances of a life plagued with poverty. It is understood that life has valleys and peaks that help you grow.

Although the question of “Can I live?” makes Black men's minds circle for an answer, it generates dual or multiple answers in their minds that will explain their existence. For example, Black men enroll in community college because it is perceived as the only place they can go after high school (Williams, 2017). According to research, Black men consider community college a stepping-stone to a better quality of life. Black men enroll in college to pursue their “ludicrous dreams of getting cream [money]” (Carter, 1998). They view community college as a place to learn while figuring out their next move (Williams, 2017; William & Coaxum, 2018). They are also looking for support. Williams and Coaxum (2018) found that Black men in

community colleges value a place of support and point out that when they have a solid connection with Black advisors, they have a more substantial chance of achieving academic success. For example, students mentioned how their Black male advisor was extremely influential in their progress (Hooks, 2004; Williams, 2017).

Black Men in Community College

In 2011, a report from the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center titled, *The Educational Experiences of Young Men of Color* suggested that male students can take six pathways after graduating high school. These pathways were hierarchically identified as (1) enrollment in postsecondary education, (2) enlistment in the U.S. Armed Forces, (3) employment, (4) unemployment, (5) incarceration, and (6) death. According to research, men of color are overrepresented in the latter three pathways (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2011; Harris & Wood, 2013). However, when Black men choose the first pathway of enrolling in postsecondary education, they are near the bottom of most indicators of student success (Bush & Bush, 2010; Glenn, 2007; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Harris & Woods, 2013; Ingram et al., 2023; Smith, 2010). Although scholars have examined factors that have led to these unacceptable results, too often, research has yet to be conducted at 4-year institutions (Dabney-Smith, 2009; Flowers, 2006; Mosby, 2009; Wood, 2013; Wood & Williams, 2013). Research shows a significant difference among Black men at 2-year colleges and 4-year institutions (Flowers, 2006; Wood, 2013; Wood & Harrison, 2014). For instance, Wood (2013) found that 2-year Black male collegians are more likely to be older, independent with dependents, married, and had to delay enrollment into postsecondary education. Research also indicates a significant difference in age, income, high school GPA, and college entrance scores between Black men at 2-year and 4-year colleges (Flowers, 2006; Pope, 2006; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood, 2013). To put it differently, while Black men share commonalities such as race and gender, research should not depict every Black male experience as monolithic (Wood, 2013).

Understanding that Black male experiences may not be the same when Black men enroll in community college, they are trying to secure economic, political, and social mobility (Bush, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Gebru, 2009; Pope, 2006; Smith, 2010; Wood & Harrison, 2014). In Hip-Hop terms, their enrollment in community college is an attempt to “die enormous than live dormant” (Jay Z, 1998). They attend community 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 (Harvey, 2002; Huerta et al., 2021; Pope, 2006; Wilson, 2009; Williams, 2017). However, when most Black men choose to attend postsecondary institutions, they subject themselves to a personal cost in which their minority status puts them at a degree of risk that is not faced by White students (Butler, 2010; Hickman, 2008; Johnson, 1993; Pope, 2006; Wood, 2013). According to Johnson (1993), the personal cost Black male students experience is being forced into hostile environments that are detrimental to their performance in college. Scholars shared that they cannot be their authentic selves due to the pressure they feel to code-switch or reject their natural language or behaviors by switching to an academic disposition in the classroom or other spaces on a college campus (Huerta et al., 2021). Other scholars such as Myers (2012) and Pope (2006) report that Black men are subjected to racial discrimination at levels greater than other racial minority students, and these circumstances hurt persistence.

Given these points, research indicates that too many Black men are unable to have a better quality of life because they often leave campus before they can graduate (Flowers, 2006; Glenn, 2007; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Huerta et al., 2021; Pope, 2006). Moreover, research suggests that the primary reasons minorities consider dropping out are student-faculty relationships, satisfaction with the academic quality of their education, cultural alienation, academic unpreparedness, lost hope, and isolation from other minorities (Anderson, 2020; Glenn, 2007; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013; Holmes et al., 2007; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Sands & Schuh, 2007; Seinup & Rose, 2013; Wood, 2013; Williams & Coxaum, 2018).

Equally important, researchers point out that many Black male students cannot achieve a better quality of life because they often experience a “cooling out” process at community colleges (Clark, 1960; Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Pope, 2006). According to Pope (2006), “cooling out” is a practice postulated by Clark in 1960 that refers to community college officials encouraging students to pursue vocational and remedial tracks rather than transfer programs (p. 216). It is a procedure institutions use to “let down hopes gently and explosively” (Clark, 1960, p. 547). Clark (1980) implicated that the cooling out process helps to “legitimate inequality by using academic standards in hidden ways to block the upward mobility of the poor and minorities” (p. 26). In *Can I Live*, Jay Z (1998) cleverly highlights that Black men experience the cooling-out process in society when trying to achieve success. He highlights this process when

he declares this double entendre, “my sh*t butter and for the bread they want to toast me,” to describe Black men’s negative tension when they are confident in their abilities (Jay Z, 1998). Scholars such as Dubois refer to this experience as double consciousness. As a result, many Black male students receive an education that prepares them for occupations that relegate them to lower-middle to middle-class jobs with little opportunity for advancement (Page, 2010; Pope, 2006).

On the other hand, scholars attribute most Black collegians’ attrition to the feeling of having to prove themselves in college because of a lack of support (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Harris & Wood, 2013; Huerta et al., 2021; Pope, 2006; Strayhorn, 2008; Wood, 2013). According to Wood (2013), this also affects Black men who do not leave college. Researchers point out that regardless of whether Black male students attend 2-year or 4-year colleges and exhibit motivation for high achievement, Black men do not produce higher college grade point averages (Flowers, 2006; Jackson, 2011; Woods, 2013). Given these points, researchers found that minority students believe the most institutional support they can receive is through a student support service (Williams & Coaxum, 2018).

Discovering Black men believe support service programs provide the most support for student success (Gardenhire et al., 2016; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Pope, 2006; Williams & Coaxum, 2018), scholars have also noted Black men with a “right frame of mind” is an essential factor affecting academic success (Wood & Hilton, 2013). According to Wood and Hilton (2013), more Black men believe that being “focused” enhances academic success as community college students. These scholars found that Black men suggest being focused is “being committed to and engaged in academic work” (p. 80). Wood and Hilton also highlighted that having the right frame of mind for college was the only specific student recommendation students advocated for achieving success. In other words, students know they can live and achieve their potential.

Although scholars have found that Black men recommend having the right frame of mind to enhance their success, it is not easy. For example, Jay Z (1998) describes this challenge when he declares, “While people watching me.... I keep my head both of them where they are supposed to be.” According to research, Black men’s experience as college students can make them dissatisfied, alienated, and ostracized (Anderson, 2020; Butler, 2013; Harris & Wood,

2013; Hill & Boes, 2013; Pope, 2006; Smith, 2010). Researchers have pointed out that Black men receive societal messages that depict them as lazy or disinterested in education (Harris & Wood, 2013; Wood, 2012; Madhubuti, 1991; Smith, 2010). Scholars have asserted that the experiences Black male students have in class and out of class perpetuate a right-to-fail perspective and a consciousness that others view them as academically inferior (Anderson, 2020; Dubois, 1903; Huerta et al., 2021; Madhubuti, 1991; Wood, 2012; Woodson, 1933). Simply put, the consciousness of Black college men is perplexed because of double consciousness.

Effects of Double Consciousness

According to Dubois (1996), double consciousness is a peculiar sensation of “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 9). It is “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (p. 5). It is the feeling of being Black and an American. Research characterizes double consciousness as a metaphor to explain the burden of race and racism on African Americans in American society (Swaidan, 2010). Researchers describe double consciousness as understanding oneself and one’s surroundings (Hickman, 2008; Johnson, 2013). It is when your mind is infested with sick thoughts that have “dual levels like duplexes” (Carter, 1996). Black people have had to employ double consciousness for survival (Reynolds, 2010). Research has pointed out that double consciousness is taught in Black families as protection from racial encounters (Billingsley “Billingsley, 1965; Black, 2012; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Dubois, 1996; Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Reynolds, 2010; Toomer, 1965). Moreover, whether I can live also suggests two thoughts for Black men; it questions their existence and capability for achieving success.

Swaidan (2010) describes the process of double consciousness as expending energy walking a “racial tightrope.” In other words, double consciousness can be exhausting because it generates a sensation that to be an African American is to bear the racial burden. It places African Americans in a precarious status. It creates an extreme desire to excel while revealing to African Americans that they are limited to a glass ceiling, requiring them not to challenge the dominant culture and to wear a mask to conceal their feelings, motives, and thoughts.

To put it differently, double consciousness keeps most Black men from actively participating in the educational pipeline toward upward mobility because they are reminded of the strong possibility of academic failure (Hickman, 2008, p. 22). Research asserts that for many

Black men, their experience through the educational pipeline consists of adopting a White way of thinking to be successful (Hickman, 2008). Similarly, researchers found that Black college men are trying to balance living within two groups and are challenged because they must embrace one identity while abandoning their cultural identity (Mosby, 2009, p. 7). Under these circumstances, Black men must perform self-checks regularly to ensure that personal behaviors do not substantiate possible stereotypes that the majority often subscribe to minorities (Reynolds, 2010). From a historical perspective, this disposition is not new; researchers have noted that when African Americans enroll in school, the thought of inferiority is drilled into them in almost every class and every book they study (Anderson, 2020; Dougherty, 2008; Woodson, 1933). For this reason, Hooks (2004) declares that Black men cannot achieve success because they cannot think creatively about their lives because of uncritical acceptance of narrow life scripts shaped by patriarchal thinking (p. 86).

Pursuing this further, managing double consciousness is a struggle for Black men because their dialect and environment can create multiple levels of consciousness (Jordan, 2008, p. 90). For instance, Pope (2006) indicated that in higher education, many Black male students (especially at the community college level) are first-generation students from adverse backgrounds. He asserts that the effects of double consciousness and their adverse experiences create triple consciousness, which can significantly impact their success (p. 227). On the other hand, Mitchell and Means (2014) declare that certain Black men experience more than double or triple consciousness. According to Mitchell and Means (2014), “Dubois’ theory of double consciousness does not address the intersections and implications of sexual orientation and its impact on the identity development of Black gay and bisexual men” (p. 28). As a result, Mitchell and Means suggest that Black male students who are gay or bisexual must move between four dominant states of consciousness. These scholars assert that Black male students who are gay or bisexual “seek acceptance and do not want to be stereotyped, harmed, outed, or ostracized” (p. 29). Mitchell and Means (2014) declare that Black men who try to achieve academic success while experiencing these multiple levels of consciousness are experiencing quadruple consciousness (p. 29).

Educational Malpractice

Researchers argue that no matter how privileged and established a Black person or family is, it is challenging to escape prejudice and discrimination (Anderson, 2020; Billingsley & Billingsley, 1965; Dubois, 1996; Hooks, 2004; Johnson, 1993; Madhubuti, 1991). For example, the American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU; n.d.) describes the educational pipeline Black men participate in as a school-to-prison pipeline that systematically makes it difficult for Black men to achieve academic success. Scholars suggest the educational pipeline affects Black men because they experience the school-to-prison pipeline more than any other ethnic group (Sturm et al., 2010). Research points out that the American educational system can arguably be seen as a power system that structures and assigns paths to students depending on their class within society (Mosby, 2009, p. 10). For instance, the educational system has long been viewed as a system that teaches propaganda that kills the aspirations of African Americans and dooms them to vagabonds and crime (Woodson, 1933, p. 6). Not only has the educational system been identified as a killer of aspirations, but research also argues that “no one seems to know of a way to effectively and consistently engage young Black males in classrooms” (Kazembe, 2014, p. 36). The school-to-prison pipeline increases the double consciousness of Black men because it reminds them of the stereotypes and social status they have as Black and American in society (Hickman, 2008; Emdin, 2016). Experiencing this treatment creates such a level of reflection that Black men must consistently ponder, Can I live?

Methodology

This qualitative research was designed from an advocacy/participatory worldview. The researcher sought to provide an action agenda that could reform the lives of Black men enrolled in community college. According to Creswell (2008), an advocacy/participatory worldview addresses essential issues of the day, such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation. The focal point of this study is to provide insight into the unique realities and perspectives of Black men enrolled in community college. This article infuses Jay Z's (1998) hypothesis from the song Can I Live to match their perspectives. In the song Can I Live, Jay Z (1998) discusses ambition, stagnation, the risk of death, and the possibility of a life lived to the fullest. He describes the process of a Black male defining their self-worth by separating what is authentic from fear and paranoia, what is a part of the plan, and what is

reckless (Carter, 2010). In addition, a short answer questionnaire was collected to share evidence of Black men through their voices to define their self-worth. Black men enrolled in a community college were asked: a) Can I be successful? b) Do I have the qualities to succeed? and c) Is a degree going to enhance my future? The literature review for this research consists of (a) student and practitioner conversations, (b) peer-reviewed articles, and (c) public scholarship through reputable higher education organizations from internet-based searches of publicly available resources and publications.

Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at Lauryn College (LC) (pseudonym), a community college in the Northeast of the United States. LC serves a diverse population of over 8,200 students and is considered a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The racial/ethnic makeup of the student body is as follows: Hispanic/Latino (39.7), Black (28.8%), White (17.5), and Asian (4.2%). Given the student population of Lauryn College, it is also considered a Minority Serving Institution (MSI).

Students in this study are participants of Lauryn College's student success initiative, which is dedicated to influencing over 500 Black men by exposing them to history and cultural experiences to increase their educational attainment. One of the ways the program seeks to improve students' performance is by hosting weekly meetings. Students' ages range from 18 to 58 years old and represent a variety of majors. Over the past year, the program has held 26 weekly meetings and averaged 40 Black male participants. During a meeting, students were given a 14 short-answer questionnaire defining self-worth. Twenty-four students completed the questionnaire and shared their believed self-worth, uncertainty, and goals.

Findings

Results from this questionnaire suggest that Black men in community colleges believe they will be successful (can live) more than they disbelieve in their abilities. Forty-five percent (45%) of the Black men saw themselves as successful, while 37.5% did not believe they were successful, and 16% were unsure about identifying as successful. Students who believe they are successful assert they are on the right track because they are getting an education and working on themselves. For example, when Dameon was asked if he sees himself as successful, he stated, "I'm in school (college) right now and I've had old principals tell me I won't get through high school." Kam expressed that he is successful because he works hard to finish his work on time.

Sam believes he is successful because the major he is enrolled in is in high demand. Romeo points out that he is successful because of the trials he has faced in life academically and socially. He believes his will to never give up on his goals and will to persist are all components of success. Shawn states he is successful because he is attaining an education and working on himself daily. Kevin declared he is successful because he has a 5-year plan for his future.

On the other hand, some students highlight that they do not see themselves as successful because they are unsure of their future, need to be independent, and compare themselves to others. For example, Joe does not think he is successful because he struggles in college. He believes that even if he graduates from college, the uncertainty of having a successful career may not provide the life he truly wants. Similarly, Thomas believes he is not successful now because his definition of success consists of being financially stable and "doing things on his own." Students such as Eric and Ray do not believe they are successful because they are not happy where they are currently in life. Eric suggests he is unhappy because he has not accomplished his goals, while Ray maintains that he does not see himself as successful because he knows he can be better than where he is currently. Willy does not see himself as successful because he has seen and heard people do more with less. Omar declares he is unsuccessful because he is still young and has yet to do much in the real world.

Although more students believe they are successful (45%) than unsuccessful (37.5%), most believe they have the necessary skills to succeed. When asked if they believe they have what it takes to succeed, 20 out of 24 respondents (83%) agreed they have the capability, intelligence, and significance to reach the highest level of success. If Black men believe they can succeed, why are so many Black men unsuccessful at attaining a college degree (especially at the community college level)?

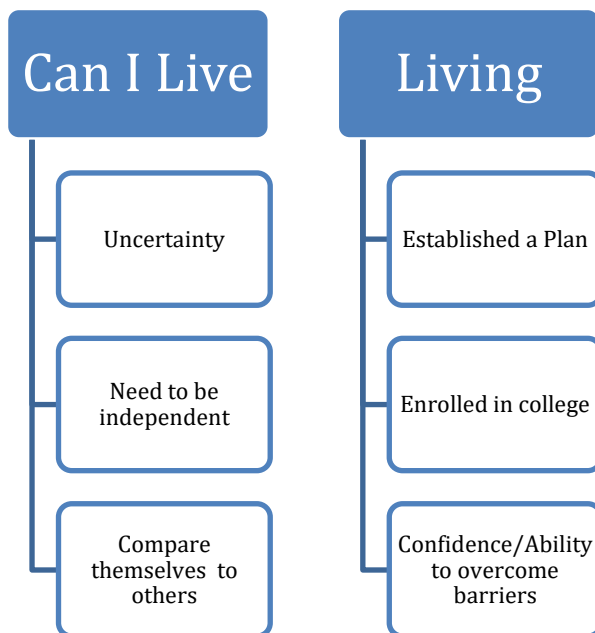
Understanding that Black men are often criticized for their behavior and mistreated through the school-to-prison pipeline (Wood et al., 2021), students were asked if their daily behavior shows self-respect, integrity, dignity, and self-worth. Findings suggest that Black men continue to experience double consciousness. For example, Romeo mentions that he has "two personalities: one that's carefree at times and lets loose but on a more consistent level, my behavior shows self-respect and integrity." Randy acknowledges his level of consciousness by admitting, "Not every day I am great, but I have to get it done and push through." Nuri expressed

that he must look for other areas besides school to self-educate himself and feel respected. Harry believes he shows self-respect but knows he will get knocked down constantly. He said, "I think my problem is not what if but when." He declared he needs to remember his self-worth and try to keep pushing no matter what. Thomas affirmed that he is vital to his family and friends but not significant to the world.

Reviewing the responses from students indicates that the complexity of double consciousness has influenced their thought processes and identity. It amplifies the realization that African Americans are considered a "problem" in our society (Black, 2012; Delgado, 1992; Dubois, 1903; 2006; Ervin, 2008; Gooding-Williams, 2009; Hickman, 2008; Post, 1990; Swaidan, 2010; Woodson, 1933). Nevertheless, it strengthens the ambition of African Americans to achieve academically and professionally despite discovering that any time African Americans compete, they are taking a risk against a system and opponents that can change the rules at any time. As a result, Black men in this study have shown they have at least two warring ideals about achieving success. Figure 1 (below) identifies their thought process as Black men enrolled in a community college and how they doubt and believe they can achieve success.

Figure 1

Double Consciousness of Black Men as Community College Students



Discussion

Being a Black male community college student is an opportunity for upward mobility. When Black men enroll in college, they have mixed feelings about their chances of achieving their desired outcome. This uncertainty can cause many students to question their existence in various spaces. They asked a) Can I be successful? b) Do I have the qualities to succeed? and c) Is a degree going to enhance my future? For Black men, these questions can hinder or spark their willingness to achieve. When Black men fail, research suggests negative results can form from a misunderstanding of the cool pose, stereotype threat, and institutional racism (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Major & Billson, 1992; Hooks, 2004; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Welbeck & Torres, 2019).

Major and Billson (1992) state that a cool pose is a way of surviving in a restrictive society (p. 2). These scholars pointed out, "Being cool is an ego booster for Black men comparable to the kind white men more easily find through attending good schools, landing prestigious jobs, and bringing home decent wages." Findings suggest that Black men misunderstand the cool pose and resist educational structures because another culture imposes them. Black men often display an unconscious protest the dominant society. To educate students on the correct understanding of the cool pose, Black men on college campuses must serve as mentors to help students understand their coolness (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Williams, 2017; Williams & Coaxum, 2018). Research suggests that boosting the success of Black men in community college requires focusing on mentoring, advising, study skills, leadership training, and workshops. However, among these five components, the most significant is mentoring (Gardenhire et al., 2016). When Black men have other Black men as mentors to educate and demonstrate that they can attain a college degree regardless of all the barriers and distractions they may have encountered, it will reflect the correct understanding of being cool.

Stereotype threat is another barrier that was identified as preventing Black men from achieving success. Research points out that stereotype threat creates anxiety regarding Black students' ability to perform academically (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Welbeck & Torres, 2019). Again, increasing the number of Black-educated men (mentors) on a college campus can also help to decrease students' feeling like they do not belong in an academic setting (especially with an increase in Black faculty). Community colleges must acknowledge and address that Black

men experience at least two warring ideals while pursuing a postsecondary degree. Concepts such as stereotype threat, cool pose, and double consciousness highlight that Black men constantly must choose their perception and how they are perceived in the world. By intentionally promoting Black excellence throughout the academic curriculum, advertisement, and positions of power, institutional leaders will begin to reduce the level of questioning that transpires in the minds of Black men on their campus. The level of questioning will reduce because students can see an institutional commitment displaying that Black men are welcome on campus and belong on campus (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harewood, 2014; Harper, 2012; Welbeck & Torres, 2019).

Addressing the duality Black men experience pursuing a degree is extremely important because institutional racism practices such as microaggressions, bias, and the lack of institutional leaders taking responsibility for assuring all college students receive fair treatment on campus are often absent. Colleges must assess how and what is needed to be the best place for Black men to develop. They must create an atmosphere emphasizing that Black men's success is our success. Postsecondary education is a personal investment that students make toward their career and life ambitions. Higher education institutions need to understand the population they serve because they are not asking or accessing the right questions (Gardenhire et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2020). Historically, Black men have been let through the front door of higher education to be let out through the back door to achieve success (Shropshire & Williams, 2017). Black men questioning if they can live without being a problem is significant because Black men experience a revolving door when pursuing an education. They must attempt to live without others treating them like invisible men or incompetent.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the answer to Jay Z's (1998) question, Can I Live? Is yes. However, it requires an internal ambition to live enormously instead of dormant. Black men must use their gift of double consciousness to push forward. For example, Gooding-Williams (2009) highlights Dubois' theory of double consciousness as often misunderstood and should also be viewed as a gift (p. 78). In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Dubois (1903) stated that African Americans are "born with a veil and gifted with a second-sight in this American world" (p. 9). The gift of second sight is seeing the world and social groups differently than one's own (Gooding-Williams, 2009, p.

78). Gooding-Williams (2009) points out that Dubois' reference to second sight describes African Americans' ability to see reality as White Americans see it, and they can see themselves and as White Americans see them (p. 78). Dubois concludes that second sight allows African Americans to be both Black and American without being cursed, spit upon, or having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in their face (p. 9). This study found that most Black men believe they can become successful. Institutional leaders must create environments that allow Black men to execute their beliefs. Given that mentoring has been found to be the most useful and sought-after form of support for Black men pursuing a college degree, committing to mentoring, providing financial support, academic support, and the utilization of cultural capital will benefit Black men to transform the pondering of "Can I live" to "I am living."

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