Case Study:

Motivation Factors among African American Male Graduates
of a Four-Year University

Abstract

High school graduation rates are lowest among black males. They face several social and educational issues such as peer pressure, educational biases, and other practices that deter them from graduating. As a result, the amount of black males who graduate college is even lower. This has a substantial impact on black men, chiefly in employment opportunities, earning abilities, and social status. The purpose of this case study will be to explore the motivation to complete a four-year degree among black males through observation and in-depth interviews of African American Texas State University alumni.
Introduction

Among minority groups, African American males are severely underrepresented in higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), they make up a mere four percent of the total college enrollment. In addition, only 33 percent of black males attending four-year institutions graduate within six years. Researchers have suggested many explanations for these low achievement levels, including social conditions (Garibaldi, 2007, Bell, 2014), inadequate preparation (Palmer et al, 2010), and financial strain (Cuyjet, 1997, Palmer et al, 2010). This study seeks to understand the motivation of those black males who have not only enrolled in college, but who have completed a four-year degree.

Review of the Literature

Although college enrollment levels among African American men are low, they are growing. However, some sectors of higher education are growing more quickly than others. Specifically, Christian colleges have seen significant increase in African American enrollment the past decade. There are now at least 24 colleges that are members of the Council for Christian colleges at which black enrollments exceed ten percent (The JBHE Foundation, 2004). The author noted that “not one of the nation’s 25 highest-ranked universities or 25 highest ranked liberal arts colleges had black enrollments greater than 10 percent” (2004, 23).

These findings were supported by the research of Butler-Barnes, Williams, and Chavous (2011), who found that racial pride and religiosity were correlated with academic achievement for African American boys. The researchers interviewed 185 boys in the eleventh grade with varying demographics, and their parents were interviewed separately. Each respondent also filled out a questionnaire. The findings suggested that high religious importance can compensate for low
educational utility beliefs, and vice versa, but boys with both pessimistic attitudes toward their educational utility and lower religiosity represented a high risk group. In general, high racial group pride enhanced the positive benefits of holding an optimistic outlook on one’s educational utility.

Cuyjet (1997) found that physical activity is also a motivator among black men. This study analyzed surveys of student perceptions about their college experiences. The 191-item survey gathered self-reported information from students about their background, aspirations, and status in college. It also asked about the facilities they used, the organizations they were involved in, and the quality of their relationships and self-development. The author found that black men self-reported much lower grades than their non-black counterparts. While the amount of students who reported mostly receiving grades of C or lower ranged from 2.7 percent to 11.7 percent overall, the percentage for black males was 18.9. Cuyjet asserted that academic assistance for African American males was one of the more critical needs on college campuses.

Another significant finding from this study was the frequent use of athletic facilities. The study found more than half of those surveyed reported using recreation facilities “often” or “very often.” Cuyjet cited this as a key factor for making the college environment a welcoming one for African American men.

Upon reviewing the enrollment records of African Americans historically, Garibaldi (2007) placed a large emphasis on federally funded pre-college programs. He noted that organizations such as Upward Bound and Talent Search, which are geared towards low-income and minority students, significantly increased the amount of black students in higher education in the sixties and seventies. He also mentioned the popularity of television shows targeting blacks in the
1980’s, specifically “A Different World.” The show, which featured student life in a historically black college setting, had a noticeable impact on the numbers of African American students who enrolled in college, according to Garibaldi. He suggested that all areas of society, including the media, can be a positive measure to motivate black students to continue their education.

Palmer et al (2010) identified several strategies for promoting the participation of African American males in college, many of which aligned with Garibaldi’s suggestions. In addition to recommending the encouragement of African American men to enroll in college prep courses, the authors placed importance on setting them up for success in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Speaking to the importance of this cause, the authors stated that “increasing matriculation and graduation rates for African Americans is not only a matter of equity, but in the context of STEM, it has major implications for competitiveness of the United States in the global economy.” (2010, p. 101)

The study also makes note of the financial strain that minorities often face while attending college. Higher education institutions have continually increased their tuition rates while financial aid for students remains the same. The authors note that the need for policy that stabilizes tuition and addresses the lack of need-based aid is apparent.

One other notable recommendation by Palmer et al was collaboration between colleges and local schools. The CARE program implemented by Florida State University (FSU) was cited as an example. This program connects low income and first-generation minority students with special advisors, daily tutoring sessions, and social events in a seven-week summer bridge program. In addition, academic support services are continued throughout the students’ college career. This
particular program has helped FSU achieve their highest graduation rate ever for African Americans: seventy-two percent.

**Significance of the Study**

The literature is saturated with analyses of black children in primary and secondary schools. Researchers have also delved into the attitudes of African American men currently enrolled in college. However, the number of those who go on to graduate is only thirty-three percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This study will seek to find the black men who have succeeded in earning a degree.

The factors that lead black men to graduate are important to investigate, as they will provide insight for attracting this minority group to college and motivating them to finish.

**Research Questions**

The main research questions for this study are "What factors encouraged you to enroll in college?" "What factors encouraged you to finish college?" and "What hardships did you face in college because of your race and minority status?"

**Methods**

The methodology will include qualitative analysis of information gathered from in-depth interviews and observation. While the focus is on African American males who graduated from Texas State University, researchers will include different perspectives by interviewing and observing female attitudes as well. Three methods of data collection will be involved in this study:
1) Researchers will attend events organized by the African American chapter of the Texas State Alumni Association including mixers, tailgates, and fundraisers. These events will allow the researchers to investigate this population in a natural setting. As emphasized by Creswell (2007), the focus will be on the participants’ perspectives, their meaning, and their subjective views.

2) From the interaction at Alumni Association events, the researchers will find participants who are willing to engage in in-depth interviews. They will allow the participant to suggest a time and place to meet where they would be most comfortable. The interviews of each participant will be recorded with an audio device and later transcribed.

3) Finally, researchers will analyze data on the open Facebook page of the African American chapter of the Alumni Association. The researchers will categorize and identify phenomena to create a coding system for analyzing each of the methods of data collection.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, results will be maintained by peer examination, member checking, and prolonged interaction with the participants. Common themes will be organized within a table and specific quotes will be included to support the results.

**Anticipated Results**

We anticipate high levels of religiosity and racial pride in our sample due to the correlation of these factors and educational success found by Butler-Barnes, Williams, and Chavous (2011).
This will be an interesting investigation since Texas State University is not categorized as a religious institution.

Another anticipated motivational factor is pre-college preparation. Due to Garibaldi’s (2007) findings, we predict that many alumni will have participated in a federally funded program. It will also be interesting to explore the relationship, if any, between Texas State University and the participants’ local high schools. Palmer et al (2010) suggested that programs which unite high schools to local universities increased college access and strengthened college preparedness.

Since African American men report very high usage of athletic facilities (Cuyjet, 1997), it is anticipated that this could be a motivating factor for continued attendance in college.

Although these factors are supported by the literature review, the researchers will be mindful of allowing the participants to express their own opinions rather than suggesting our anticipated results.
References


