Chapter 14

Someone Like Me: The Impact of African American Male Instructors on African American Male Student Success

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role that African American male instructors have on African American male students in the classroom and beyond. The research consistently demonstrates the persistence, completion, and overall success challenges that African American male students have in higher education. However, there are some African American male students who have been successful, and they attribute this success to African American male instructors who served as mentors. The research endeavored to hear the stories of these students, and to allow them to articulate how their experiences with these instructors benefitted them in their academic success. Anti-deficit achievement framework, self-efficacy, and social development theories serve as the conceptual framework for this study. Through the interviews, the students provided feedback that focused on positive relationships and interactions with African American male instructors. The chapter concludes with recommendations for creating such mentoring opportunities for these students in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The plight of African American male students in schools has been documented as challenging and frustrating for them. Their levels of success in academic achievement and ultimately graduation is inconsistent with the success rates of their peers. Disproportionately, this group of students experiences high incidences of disciplinary consequences, including school expulsion. Success at an early age in schooling
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provides the individual with infinite opportunities for the future, but the doors to those opportunities are sometimes shuttered because of the difficult road that many African American male students travel (Bali & Alvarez, 2004; Ferguson & Mehta, 2004; Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Peternel, 2009; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). These realities also limit opportunities for these students to access and be successful at the postsecondary education level. The success rates of African American male students at the postsecondary level are underscored by data showing that low enrollments, completion, degree attainment exist with this group versus their peers (Harper & Harris, 2010; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Bonner & Bailey, 2006).

To paint this picture in such a dismal portrait is not completely accurate. Many Africans have experienced successes that have contributed to them being successful economically, socially, politically, and beyond (Slaughter, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2008). This achievement is visible at the highest level of the political spectrum with the two time elected African American president of the United States, Barack Obama. Despite these challenges, many African American male students have been fruitful citizens who are strong role models, husbands, fathers, and contributors to society (Netherlands, 2005a, 2005b). These types of findings have contributed to the notion of an anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2010). This framework focuses on the notion that rather than focusing on all of the reasons why African American men are not successful, the research begins to focus on those who have been successful. However, the literature over the past twenty years has focused almost exclusively on the negative. The focus has been on those students who have not been successful. Harper (2014) stated the following:

The near-exclusive focus on problems plaguing this population inadvertently reinforced a hopeless, deficit-oriented narrative. Interventions introduced during the 15-year period were based almost entirely on bad data, statistical and observational reports of bad behaviors and outcomes, especially in comparison to other groups (Black women, White undergraduate men, etc.). Well-intentioned educators and researchers invested disproportionate energies into investigating the explanatory undercurrents of Black men’s stagnant enrollments and other troubling outcomes (p. 127).

This work diligently highlighted the shift that needs to occur to truly impact African American men in higher education. The question of “Why do so few Black men succeed in college?” should be flipped on its proverbial research head and the concentration should focus more on the students from this group who were successful. The paradigm is shifted to an emphasis on what variables compelled them to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. These findings highlighted who was supportive and what experiences contributed to an enhancement of their educational experiences and ultimately their academic achievements. A focus on the importance of others in contributing to mentoring experiences to help them to be successful in college is prominent in this conversation.

Of particular importance in this conversation about variables that are impactful in African American male students being successful in college is the element of African American faculty mentoring, but this can sometimes be a challenge despite the literature that demonstrates the success of such programming. Harper (2013) highlights the challenge that exists in aligning African American male students with African American male instructors. There are just not enough of these men available, and the consequences of not making adjustments in this area can be detrimental to these students success. This research is consistent with other higher education research which connotes that it is critical for college faculty to foster campus environments that allow students to experience a sense of belonging (Astin, 1993; Bensimon, 2007; Harper, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pope, 2006; Rendón Linares &
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