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January 2012

Black Male Student Success in Higher Education: A  
Report from the National Black Male College  
Achievement Study

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# Black Male Student Success in Higher Education

A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL BLACK MALE COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT STUDY | SHAUN R. HARPER, Ph.D.

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# Message from the Author

Black men's dismal college enrollments, disengagement and underachievement, and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education. Perhaps more troubling than the problems themselves is the way they are continually mishandled by educators, policymakers, and concerned others. Amplifying the troubled status of Black male students at all levels of education has, unfortunately, yielded few solutions. Thus, educational outcomes for this population have remained stagnant or worsened in recent years. This is attributable, at least in part, to the deficit orientation that is constantly reinforced in media, academic research journals, and educational practice.

For nearly a decade, I have argued that those who are interested in Black male student success have much to learn from Black men who have actually been successful. To increase their educational attainment, the popular one-sided emphasis on failure and low-performing Black male undergraduates must be counterbalanced with insights gathered from those who somehow manage to navigate their way to and through higher education, despite all that is stacked against them—low teacher expectations, insufficient academic preparation for college-level work, racist and culturally unresponsive campus environments, and the debilitating consequences of severe underrepresentation, to name a few.

I am delighted to share with you this report from the largest-ever qualitative research study on Black undergraduate men. The National Black Male College Achievement Study is based on 219 students who have been successful in an array of postsecondary educational settings. I was fortunate to interview them on 42 college and university campuses across the United States. They had much to tell me about the personal, familial, and institutional enablers of their achievement. Offered herein are some of the most important things I learned from these achievers. Deeper insights into their journeys and undergraduate experiences are offered in my forthcoming book *Exceeding Expectations: How Black Male Students Succeed in College*.

Included in this report are details about the research design and methods; information on the full sample and participating

institutions; profiles of a few students I interviewed; a summary of key findings from the study; and implications for educators, administrators, families, and policymakers.

This study was made possible through the support of seven research grants; each funder is listed on the inside front cover of this report. I will forever appreciate their generous sponsorship of the most intellectually exciting project I have ever undertaken. I am especially thankful to Lumina Foundation for its contribution to the production of this report and financing the next phase of my research on Black male achievement. My sincerest gratitude also belongs to the graduate research assistants, past and present, who have worked with me on data analysis, dissemination, and planning for this project: Keon M. McGuire, Dr. Tryan L. McMickens, Dr. Kimberly A. Truong, Dr. Andrew H. Nichols, Dr. Stephen John Quayle, and Dr. Christopher B. Newman. Most importantly, I salute the 219 Black men who each spent 2-3 hours telling me about their lives and educational trajectories. No one has taught or inspired me more than them.

Thank you for taking time to read this report; feel free to pass it along to others who may find it useful and instructive. Please direct your questions, feedback, and reactions to me via e-mail at [sharper1@upenn.edu](mailto:sharper1@upenn.edu). This report and my other publications on Black male college achievement are available for download at [www.worksbepress.com/sharper](http://www.worksbepress.com/sharper)

Warmest Regards,

Professor Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D.  
Director, Center for the Study of  
Race and Equity in Education



# Message from Dr. Robert M. Franklin

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, the esteemed sixth president of Morehouse College, helped mentor an entire generation of young leaders on our campus – many of whom were, to quote the title of Dr. Mays's autobiography, "born to rebel." These students were educated not to assimilate to the status quo, but to challenge and compel it to change for the betterment of all. Mays observed that at Morehouse, "there is an air of expectancy" that every young man on campus was capable of becoming exceptional as a leader, as a professional, and as a human being. That is the spirit that animates this wonderful report on Black male student achievement in higher education.

This report is unique and important in many ways. It summarizes data that scholars and policymakers must engage to responsibly improve life prospects for young men of color. It also provides key findings that educators, families, community leaders, and other advocates can begin to replicate and adapt for young people. And it offers bright ideas and useful resources for additional study and understanding.

For years, Morehouse has understood and practiced many things that work and are highlighted in this wonderful document. What works? Messaging. Mentoring. Monitoring. Ministering. Money. We have seen the same young men whom others gave up on come alive here on our campus.

We know that providing positive success messaging, group mentoring, the careful monitoring of progress, compassionate ministering when wounds must be addressed, and the strategic investment of money to support academic progress work. We feel the burden of insufficient resources and the capacity to do more.

*"It is conceivable, therefore, that some American youth, confused and frustrated, as I surely was, may get a glimmer of hope from reading these pages and go forth to accomplish something worthwhile in life in spite of the system"*

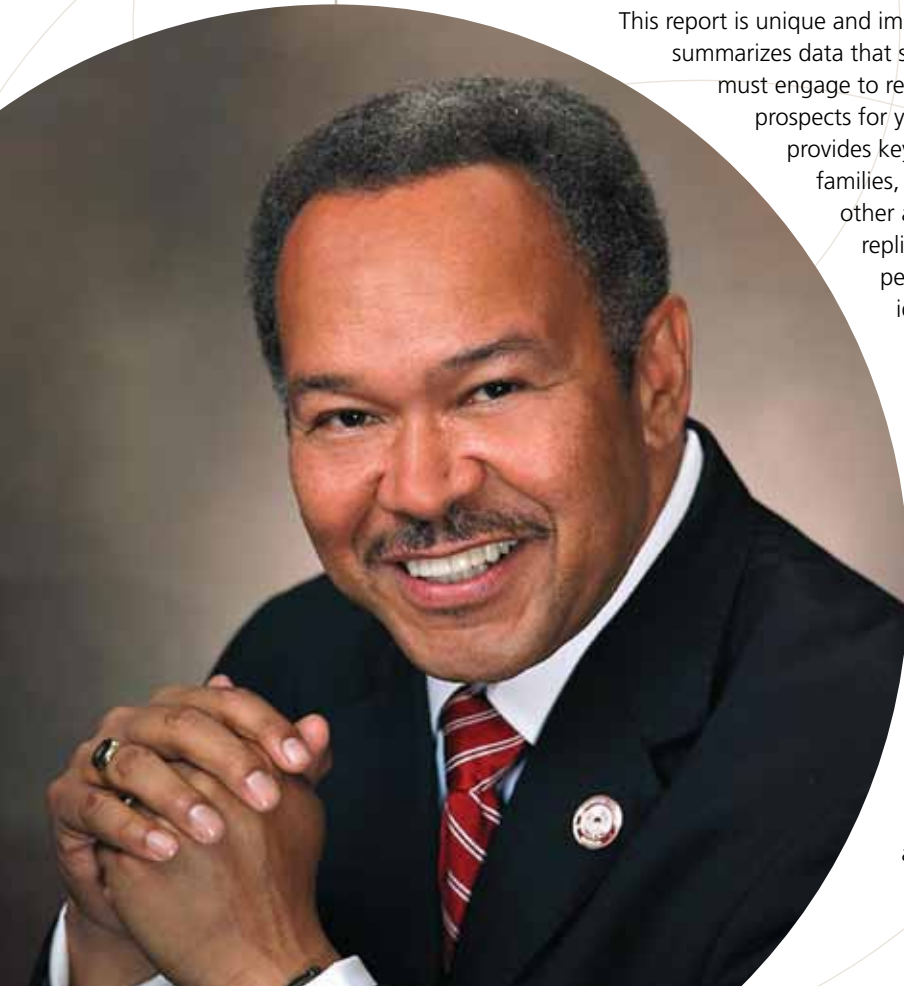
– from *Born to Rebel*, the autobiography of Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays

One final note: I appreciate the photograph on the front cover of the report. Like similar documents, it shows a young African American boy who is full of promise and potential. It humanizes the cold sterility of statistics and facts. At the end of the day, we need to be reminded that we are dealing with human lives, and they belong to all of us.

I commend Professor Harper for this tour de force of knowledge, research, insights, ideas, and advocacy. Morehouse stands ready to advance the work in which we must all share to improve young Black men's lives and educational outcomes.

Most Sincerely,

Dr. Robert M. Franklin  
President, Morehouse College



# Beyond Bad News about Black Male Students

The purpose of this report is to provide an anti-deficit view of Black male college achievement. Therefore, little attention will be devoted to reminding readers of the extent to which Black men are disengaged and underrepresented among college students and degree earners. Here is a summary of problems and inequities that are typically amplified in public discourse, research journals, policy reports, and various forms of media:

- Only 47% of Black male students graduated on time from U.S. high schools in 2008, compared to 78% of White male students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).
- Black male students are often comparatively less prepared than are others for the rigors of college-level academic work (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Loury, 2004; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009).
- In 2002, Black men comprised only 4.3% of students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976 (Harper, 2006a; Strayhorn, 2010).
- Black men are overrepresented on revenue-generating intercollegiate sports teams. In 2009, they were only 3.6% of undergraduate students, but 55.3% of football and basketball players at public NCAA Division I institutions (Harper, 2012).
- Black male college completion rates are lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education (Harper, 2006a; Strayhorn, 2010).
- Across four cohorts of undergraduates, the six-year graduation rate for Black male students attending public colleges and universities was 33.3%, compared to 48.1% for students overall (Harper, 2012).
- Black men's degree attainment across all levels of postsecondary education is alarmingly low, especially

in comparison to their same-race female counterparts (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1:** Postsecondary Degree Attainment by Level and Sex, 2009

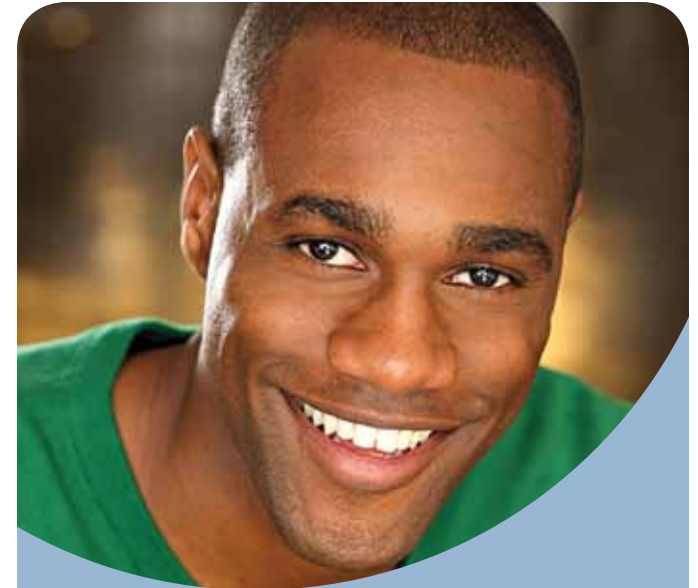
	BLACK MEN %	BLACK WOMEN %
Associate's	31.5	68.5
Bachelor's	34.1	65.9
Master's	28.2	71.8
First Professional <sup>1</sup>	38.0	62.0
Doctoral <sup>2</sup>	33.5	66.5

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education (2010)

- Black men's representation in graduate and professional schools lags behind that of their Latino and Asian American male counterparts. For instance, during a 30-year period (1977-2007), Black men experienced a 109% increase in post-baccalaureate degree attainment, compared to 242% for Latino men and 425% for Asian American men; the comparative rate of increase for Black women was 253% (Harper & Davis III, 2012).
- Black undergraduate men, like some other racial minority students at predominantly white institutions, routinely encounter racist stereotypes and racial

<sup>1</sup> For example, J.D., M.D., and D.D.S. degrees

<sup>2</sup> Only Ph.D., Ed.D., and academic doctorates



## Anything but Bland

**James R. Bland, Florida A&M University**

Several hundred people follow @jrbland on Twitter. They know him as an actor, writer, director, and Co-President of Hometeam Entertainment, LLC. Most professionals in the film and entertainment industry choose to pursue only one role at a time—they either act or direct or lead the company, but rarely all three concurrently. But few people who knew James Bland when he was an undergraduate student at Florida A&M University would likely be surprised that he simultaneously plays four different roles in his profession. In fact, some might rightly observe that it was at FAMU that James learned how to effectively multitask and maximize his time. Only a few days after arriving on campus, he ran for and was elected vice president of the freshmen class. From there his campus involvement snowballed; it culminated with James being elected vice president of the entire Student Government Association his senior year. In the interview, he was asked to name three things he figured out during his first year in college about what it took to be a successful student. Becoming socially and politically connected and maintaining a disciplined focus on goal attainment were two of his responses. "I also learned that you have to grind, because if you don't hustle, somebody will come in right behind you to take what you want," he said. Surely, James took these lessons with him to Hollywood after college.

microaggressions that undermine their achievement and sense of belonging (Bonner II, 2010; Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007).

- In comparison to their same-race female counterparts, Black men take fewer notes in class, spend less time writing papers and completing class assignments, participate less frequently in campus activities, hold fewer leadership positions, and report lower grades (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004).

These are pressing problems that indisputably warrant ongoing scholarly examination, aggressive intervention, strategic institutional leadership, greater transparency and accountability, and bold policy responses. However, also needed are instructive insights from Black men who have experienced college differently—those who actually enrolled, were actively engaged inside and outside the classroom, did well academically, graduated, and went on to pursue additional degrees beyond the baccalaureate. Who are they, and what can they teach us? Unfortunately, their journeys to and through college have been overshadowed by the alarming statistics reported in this section.

# Reframing Black Male College Achievement

This national study moves beyond deficit perspectives on achievement by highlighting persons, policies, programs, and resources that help Black men succeed across a range of college and university contexts. Instead of adding to the now exhaustive body of literature and conversations about why Black male enrollments and degree attainment rates are so low, this study sought instructive insights from engaged student leaders who did well and maximized their college experiences. Emphasis in the study was placed on understanding how Black male achievers managed to gain admission to their institutions, overcome hurdles that typically disadvantage their peers, and amass portfolios of experiences that rendered them competitive for internships, jobs, and admission to highly-selective graduate and professional schools.

In the interviews, considerable emphasis was placed on the students' pre-college experiences and the role that family members, peers, and significant others played in the formation of their college aspirations. Questions then captured chronologically what the 219 men experienced, who supported them, and which interventions enhanced their educational experiences and enabled them to succeed. Understanding what compelled them to become actively engaged, both inside and outside the classroom, was chosen

over the popular approach of asking why Black men are so disengaged on college campuses. Likewise, instead of focusing on the resources, social and cultural capital, and pre-college educational privilege that some participants lacked, the study explored how they acquired various forms of capital that they did not possess when they entered their respective colleges and universities – this was especially interesting, as 56.7% of the participants came to college from low-income and working class families. The study also explored how these students negotiated popularity alongside achievement in peer groups and thrived in environments that were sometimes racist and often culturally unresponsive. Table 2 shows a sample of commonly asked questions that were reframed to amplify the upside of achievement.

Administrators (provosts, deans of students, directors of multicultural affairs, etc.) nominated and student body presidents helped identify Black male undergraduates on the 42 campuses who fit the profile described on Page 8 of this report. Each student participated in a 2-3 hour face-to-face individual interview on his campus, and some follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone. Only two of 221 nominees declined the invitation to participate in this study.

TABLE 2:

## Deficit-Oriented Questions

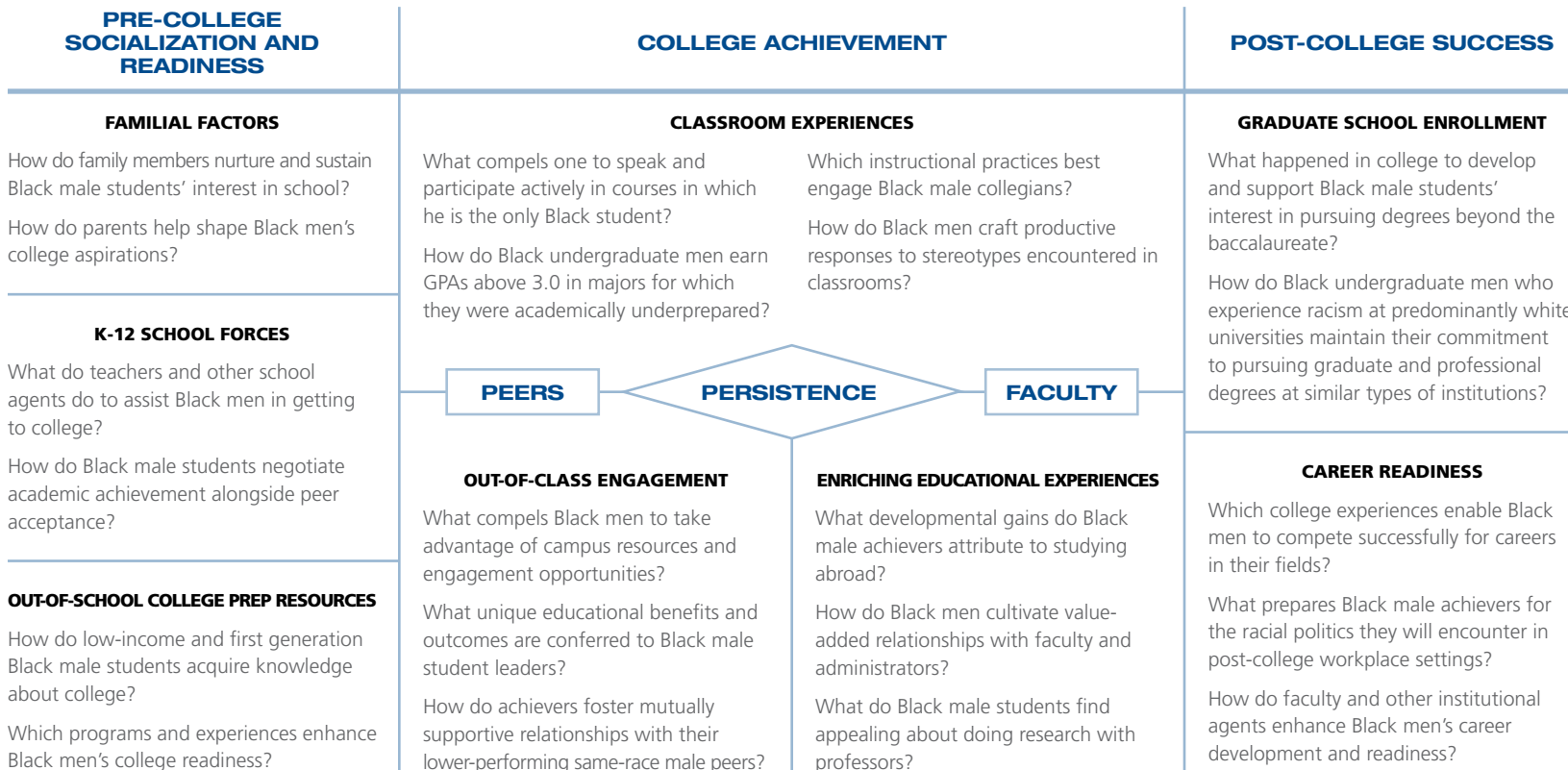
- ▶ Why do so few Black male students enroll in college?
- ▶ Why are Black male undergraduates so disengaged in campus leadership positions and out-of-class activities?
- ▶ Why are Black male students' rates of persistence and degree attainment lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education?
- ▶ Why are Black male students' grade point averages often the lowest among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups on many campuses?
- ▶ Why are Black men's relationships with faculty and administrators so weak?

## Anti-Deficit Reframing

- ▶ How were aspirations for postsecondary education cultivated among Black male students who are currently enrolled in college?
- ▶ What compels Black undergraduate men to pursue leadership and engagement opportunities on their campuses?
- ▶ How do Black male collegians manage to persist and earn their degrees, despite transition issues, racist stereotypes, academic underpreparedness, and other negative forces?
- ▶ What resources are most effective in helping Black male achievers earn GPAs above 3.0 in a variety of majors, including STEM fields?
- ▶ How do Black men go about cultivating meaningful, value-added relationships with key institutional agents?

# Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

Here is a framework that researchers, educators, and administrators can use to better understand Black male student success in college. It is informed by three decades of literature on Black men in education and society, as well as theories from sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education. The framework inverts questions that are commonly asked about educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and Black male student attrition. It includes *some* questions that researchers could explore to better understand how Black undergraduate men successfully navigate their way to and through higher education and onward to rewarding post-college options. This framework is not intended to be an exhaustive or prescriptive register of research topics; instead, it includes *examples* of the anti-deficit questioning employed in the National Black Male College Achievement Study. Insights into these questions shed light on three pipeline points (pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success) as well as eight researchable dimensions of achievement (familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out-of-class engagement, enriching educational experiences, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness). Each dimension includes 2-4 *sample* questions. Given what the literature says about the significant impact of peers and faculty on college student development and success (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), particular attention should be devoted to understanding their role in the undergraduate experiences of Black male achievers. A version of this framework has been adapted for the study of students of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (see Harper, 2010).





# Participating Colleges and Universities

Interviews were conducted with Black male undergraduate achievers at 42 colleges and universities in 20 states across the country. Six different institution types are represented in the national study.

Knowing more about the overall status of Black men on each campus is essential to understanding challenges the 219 achievers successfully navigated. Collectively, the 30 predominantly white institutions in the study enrolled nearly 322,000 full-time undergraduates; only 2.9% of them were Black men. At the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (excluding Morehouse, one of three men's colleges in the study), undergraduate women comprised nearly two-thirds (63%) of Black student enrollments.

Across the 42 institutions, only 58% of Black men graduated within six years, compared to 70% for all undergraduates on the same campuses. At the time this report was written, all but two of the 219 participants in the study had earned their bachelor's degree; three have since received doctorates.

Here is a list of participating colleges and universities, along with data on enrollments and graduation rates for Black male undergraduates on each campus:

## Public Historically Black Universities

41 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
Albany State University	1074	34.7	34.9
Cheyney University	525	41.6	23.8
Florida A&M University	3308	39.5	28.4
Norfolk State University	1501	34.7	22.1
North Carolina Central University	1607	31.0	32.9
Tennessee State University	1932	30.8	34.1

## Liberal Arts Colleges

45 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
Amherst College	65	3.9	95.7
Claremont McKenna College	26	2.3	85.7
DePauw University	64	2.7	61.5
Haverford College	40	3.4	85.7
Lafayette College	71	3.0	57.1
Occidental College	50	2.7	77.8
Pomona College	54	3.5	77.8
Saint John's University	19	1.0	33.3
Swarthmore College	48	3.2	83.3
Vassar College	24	1.0	80.0
Wabash College	55	6.0	66.7
Williams College	82	4.1	100.0

## Highly-Selective Private Research Universities

41 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
Brown University	171	3.0	85.7
Columbia University	236	3.7	77.5
Harvard University	252	3.5	93.5
Princeton University	156	3.2	88.9
Stanford University	309	4.7	88.0
University of Pennsylvania	307	3.0	91.2

## Public Research Universities

32 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
Indiana University	534	1.9	45.8
Michigan State University	993	3.0	57.0
Ohio State University	998	2.8	43.1
Purdue University	571	1.9	46.3
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	795	2.6	62.5
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	626	2.5	63.5

## Private Historically Black Colleges & Universities

42 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
Clark Atlanta University	813	24.1	39.5
Fisk University	173	23.4	43.2
Hampton University	1557	33.8	43.0
Howard University	1422	21.6	61.7
Morehouse College	2536	95.4	60.7
Tuskegee University	932	38.1	38.8

## Comprehensive State Universities

25 PARTICIPANTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK MALE UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MEN AS % OF FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATES	BLACK MALE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona	301	1.8	36.4
California State University, Long Beach	453	1.9	30.5
CUNY Brooklyn College	704	7.8	31.8
Lock Haven University	142	3.1	25.0
Towson University	484	3.4	64.6
Valdosta State University	737	8.9	35.4

# About The Achievers

The national study included 219 Black male undergraduates who had earned cumulative grade point averages above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and active engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs), and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements. Tremendous diversity is represented in the sample, as evidenced by these participant demographics and family characteristics:

## Class Standing

Freshmen	1.4%
Sophomores	17.3%
Juniors	35.2%
Seniors	46.1%

## Average College GPA

3.39

## Undergraduate Major

Business	20.7%
Education	2.6%
Humanities	12.9%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	32.7%
STEM <sup>1</sup>	23.3%
Other	7.8%

## Born Outside the U.S.

8.9%

## Attended High School Outside the U.S.

4.0%

## High School Type and Racial Demographics

Public - Predominantly Black	28.6%
Private - Predominantly Black	5.9%
Public - Predominantly White	17.2%
Private - Predominantly White	16.1%
Public - Racially Diverse	27.4%
Private - Racially Diverse	4.8%

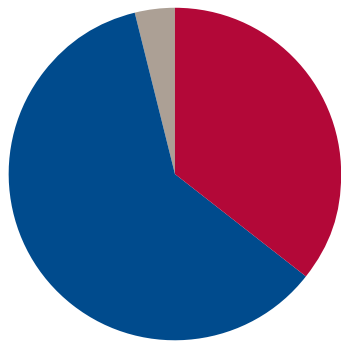
## Immediate Post-Undergraduate Plans

Enroll in Graduate School	54.8%
Work Full-Time	31.1%
Unsure at the Time	14.1%

## Ultimate Degree Aspiration

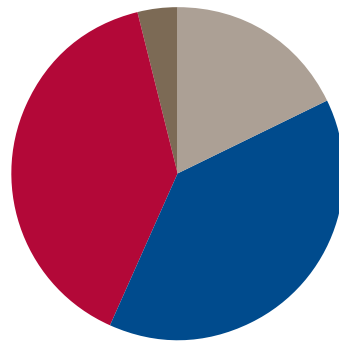
Bachelor's Degree	3.8%
Master's Degree	48.8%
Doctorate	47.4%

<sup>1</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.



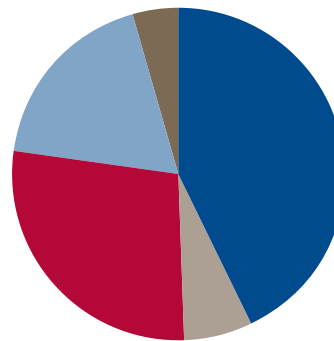
## Family Structure

Single Parent	35.8%
Two Parents	60.5%
Other Caregiver	3.7%



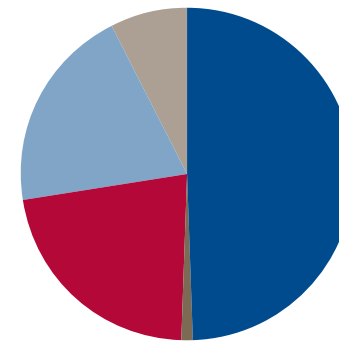
## Socioeconomic Status

Low Income	17.8%
Working Class	38.9%
Middle Class	39.5%
Affluent	3.8%



## Mother's Highest Education

No College Degree	43.0%
Associate's Degree	6.5%
Bachelor's Degree	27.9%
Master's Degree	18.3%
Doctorate	4.3%



## Father's Highest Education

No College Degree	49.5%
Associate's Degree	1.1%
Bachelor's Degree	22.0%
Master's Degree	19.9%
Doctorate	7.5%

*73.2% of participants graduated from public high schools*

*More than half were from low income and working class families*



## **Rubin Pusha III**

---

B.S., Albany State University,  
2007

M.S., Indiana University, 2009

Candidate for the Doctor of  
Jurisprudence Degree (J.D.),  
Indiana University Maurer  
School of Law

# Key Findings

Interviews with the 219 Black male achievers yielded over 4,500 single-spaced pages of transcript data. Thus, furnishing details on everything found in the study is beyond the scope of this report. Instead, six categories of major findings are described in this section. A more elaborate presentation of data, including illustrative quotes from the interviews and more extensive participant profiles, are offered in my forthcoming book, *Exceeding Expectations: How Black Male Students Succeed in College*.

## Getting to College

When asked, “Did you always know you were going to college?” the overwhelming majority of students responded, “Yes—it was never a question of *if*, but *where*.” Parents consistently conveyed what many of the participants characterized as non-negotiable expectations that they would pursue postsecondary education. From boyhood through high school, parents and other family members reinforced to the achievers that college was the most viable pathway to social uplift and success. Interestingly, nearly half the participants came from homes where neither parent had attained a bachelor’s degree. Although they had little or no firsthand experience with higher education, these parents cultivated within their children a belief that college was the only allowable next step after high school.

In the interviews, participants were invited to talk about what their three best Black male childhood friends were presently doing with their lives. Few achievers had a trio of same-race best friends who were all enrolled in college—some of their friends had dropped out of high school, others had gone to college but dropped out, and a few were incarcerated. When asked what differentiated their own paths from those of their peers who were not enrolled in college, the participants almost unanimously cited parenting practices. Their friends’ parents, the achievers believed, did not consistently maintain high expectations and were not as involved in their sons’ schooling. By contrast, most of the achievers’ parents and family members more aggressively sought out educational resources to ensure their success—

tutoring and academic support programs, college preparatory initiatives, and summer academies and camps, to name a few. As noted earlier, 56.7 percent of the participants grew up in low-income and working class families. Hence, many of the educational resources parents accessed on their behalf were available at no cost.

The participants’ early schooling experiences almost always included at least one influential teacher who helped solidify their interest in going to college. Several told stories about how a few educators went beyond typical teaching duties to ensure these young men had the information, resources, and support necessary to succeed in school. Noteworthy, however, is that some of these educators neglected to invest in other

## Obama 2.0

### Ryan Bowen, Occidental College

Both are smart, both are multiracial, both attended Occidental College, and both were elected president—one of the United States of America and the other of the student body at Oxy. During his first year of college, Ryan Bowen found himself constantly engaging questions related to his identity, as many of his White peers attempted to convince him that he “wasn’t really Black.” These and other experiences compelled him to organize numerous programs focused on race, identities, oppression, unity and solidarity, and social justice. In the interview, he said, “I think about race like most of the day, every day. I see things in racial and gendered lenses. Sometimes I get frustrated by being one of very few people who is willing to engage the complexities of race on this campus.” Talking about these topics in semi-structured intergroup dialogue programs helped Ryan craft productive responses to the racism and racial stereotypes he encountered on campus. In addition, he was involved in meaningful photojournalistic and social justice projects in Haiti, Rwanda, Cuba, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Ryan says Barack Obama inspired him to pursue the presidency of the Associated Students of Occidental College. He was only the second Black person in the institution’s history to be chosen student body president. Ryan presently owns a photography business in New York City. His work has been featured in the Huffington Post as well as on CNN, Fox News, and ABC.



Black male students in comparable ways. Put differently, the achievers benefitted from the favor of their teachers in ways that most of their same-race male peers did not. Many participants felt teachers (especially White women) were incapable of engaging meaningfully with more than one or a few Black male students at a time—only these teachers’ favorites received such attention. Most considered themselves among the lucky few to have had teachers who, for some reason, thought they were worth the investment. It seems important to acknowledge here that the participants did not receive preferential treatment from teachers because they were among the highest-achieving students in their schools. In fact, fewer than 20 percent had participated in K-12 programs for the gifted and academically talented; only 49.3 percent had taken an Advanced Placement course in high school; and some graduated from high school with cumulative GPAs below 3.0. However, most participants were actively involved and held leadership positions in school clubs and campus activities, a theme that is revisited in a later section of this report.

Bryan Barnhill II, a low-income student at Harvard, attributed his college readiness to initiatives such as the Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program and the Summer Engineering Academy sponsored by the University of Michigan’s Minority Engineering Program Office. Others in the study named several publicly and privately funded programs in their home states and communities that offer racial/ethnic minorities, first-generation college goers, and lower-income students early exposure to higher education. The participants, especially those from rural and urban areas, said these types of initiatives were extremely valuable. Without these programs, some achievers insisted that they would not have been prepared to compete for admission to college. Moreover, early exposure to higher education via programs hosted on college and university campuses helped participants form their expectations. That is, many entered their freshman year with a set of

expectations for how college would be and what was required to succeed.

### **Choosing Colleges**

As noted earlier, this study was conducted at six different institution types—small liberal arts colleges, large public research universities, highly selective private research universities, comprehensive state universities, private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and public HBCUs. The participants cited myriad factors that influenced their choices of where to apply and ultimately enroll.

Those who chose liberal arts colleges and highly selective research universities often did so because they had the academic credentials to gain admission and, more importantly, because they were granted financial aid that enabled them to afford tuition at those institutions (more details are offered in the next section).

Despite their legacy of providing access to students who might otherwise have few or no other postsecondary options, HBCUs were deliberately chosen by many participants in this study. Put differently, they were not these men’s only college options. Some applied exclusively to HBCUs because the institutions have upheld longstanding reputations for providing supportive educational environments to Black students. Others, especially those who attended predominantly white high schools, applied and were admitted to a range of institutions, but ultimately decided a Black College experience would be best. A few participants were offered admission to Princeton and Stanford, but instead chose Morehouse or Howard. There were some noteworthy differences by the types of HBCUs participants chose. Those at the six private HBCUs were much more likely to have applied to a range of institutions, whereas men at the six public institutions were more likely to have applied to only one institution or exclusively to public HBCUs in their home states.

Similarly, participants who chose comprehensive state universities often pursued a smaller and more local or regional set of college options. Men at the public research universities often chose them because they were perceivably the best and most affordable institutions to which they were admitted; most were in-state residents. Many of them also applied to comprehensive state universities and public HBCUs, but thought that attending a public flagship university would offer a wider array of post-college career options.

When asked who helped them most in searching for and choosing a college, most participants named their parents, extended family members (for example, cousins who had gone to college), and high school teachers. Surprisingly, few said their guidance counselors. After this was brought to their attention, the overwhelming majority of participants explained that their counselors were more harmful than helpful. Accordingly, some counselors told these students that applying to elite private institutions like Williams College or Brown University was pointless because they stood no chance of being admitted. Instead, they were encouraged to apply to comprehensive state universities and HBCUs. Several students at the 18 elite private colleges and universities said that they would not have been at those institutions had they taken seriously the advice their guidance counselors offered. Some others on those same campuses reflected on how their counselors discouraged them from applying to HBCUs. Similarly, students at the HBCUs who had also been admitted to predominantly white institutions said their guidance counselors tried to convince them that attending a Black College would somehow disadvantage them. When asked about the race of their counselors, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated they were White. Many who attended public high schools had limited access to their guidance counselors because the student-to-counselor ratio was so large. As noted earlier, more than 73% of participants in this study graduated from public

high schools. Some students at the liberal arts colleges and elite private research universities had the benefit of participating in programs like Prep-for-Prep that gave them access to counselors who could advise them on their college searches, and those who attended private high schools often enjoyed a larger supply of guidance counselors.

### **Paying for College**

Two-thirds of Black men who start at public colleges and universities do not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial groups in higher education (Harper, 2012). Explanations for this are complex and attributable to an expansive set of factors. One problem that has been well documented in the *Journal of College Student Retention*, the *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, and other publications is that many students drop out of college because they cannot afford to pay tuition and other educational expenses. Across all six institution types, men in the national study attributed much of their success to being able to pursue their bachelor's degrees without the burden of financial stress. For example, overall, fewer than half (47.8%) of Black men at the private HBCUs in the sample graduate within six years. Participants on those campuses reported that many of their peers withdrew for financial reasons or transferred to less expensive public institutions.

Men at the comprehensive state universities and public HBCUs were considerably more likely than were participants elsewhere to work off-campus jobs. This might help explain, at least in part, why Black male six-year graduation rates were lowest on those campuses (37.3% and 29.4%, respectively). Low-income and working class students at the Ivy League universities, Stanford, and the liberal arts colleges often benefitted from campus policies that permit students whose parents earn below a certain income threshold (for example, \$50,000) to attend at no cost. Moreover, achievers who attended DePauw University, Lafayette College, and other institutions that host the Posse Scholars Program found tremendous relief in knowing their tuition and fees were covered by their fellowships. At other institutions, especially the public universities,

participants financed their undergraduate education by applying for as many scholarships and fellowships as possible, working in paid summer internships away from their campuses, and by pursuing paid student leadership positions on campus (for example, being a resident assistant or a cabinet-level officer in student government). Common among the 219 participants was an aggressive habit of applying for as many opportunities as possible, including those that helped them alleviate financial stress during their college years.

### **Transitioning to College**

Participants believed they were successful in college because they got off to a good start. Some entered their institutions through summer bridge programs that brought them to campus 6-8 weeks before the start of their freshman year. These programs allowed them to take introductory courses, become acquainted with resources their institutions offered, and get acclimated to predominantly White environments before thousands of their White peers arrived for the start of fall semester. Bridge programs made large institutions feel smaller and easier to navigate, the participants recalled. They also allowed newcomers to interact with faculty and administrators, as well as older same-race students who served as peer mentors.

Black male student leaders also played an important role in helping the achievers transition smoothly to their colleges and universities. In the interviews, several participants named same-race peers, namely juniors and seniors, who reached out to them early in their first semester at the institution to share navigational insights and resources, connect them to powerful information networks, and introduce them to value-added engagement opportunities on campus. Several achievers agreed that these peers were more influential than were their assigned academic advisors, who often helped only with their course selections. It was peers, mostly older Black men, who helped the achievers figure out how to succeed. "I started with this macho mentality that I could do everything on my own and I wasn't going to ask for help," one participant confessed. But he went on to tell how he learned in a Black men's discussion group led by older students that



## **First in the Family**

### **Raymond Roy-Pace, Lock Haven University**

"I am tired of seeing so many people around me, as far as like family and friends, fall by the wayside. I think me succeeding is not only good for me because I can do things I like to do, such as travel and have nice things, but it would also help somebody else who is in the same environment that I came from realize success is possible." This was Raymond Roy-Pace's response to the interview question about what inspired him to go to college. He was raised by his grandmother in North Philadelphia, where few of his peers graduated from high school, let alone enrolled in college. Raymond interacted with few Black men who had attended college before he went to Lock Haven University. As the first person in his family to attend college, Raymond felt tremendous responsibility to do all that was required to attain his bachelor's degree. He made the dean's list his first year, which assured him that he was capable of handling the rigors of college-level work. At Lock Haven, he played on the football team until he suffered a career-ending injury. He then wisely invested his out-of-class time in clubs and organizations, including Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. After college, Raymond returned to his home community to be the inspirational figure he talked about in the interview. He still proudly resides in North Philly.

**Figure 2:** Race/Gender-Specific Gains and Outcomes

## Active Engagement Specifically Helps Black Undergraduate Men:

- Resolve masculine identity conflicts (Harper, 2004)
- Negotiate peer support for achievement (Harper 2006b)
- Develop political acumen for success in professional settings in which they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2006c)
- Develop strong Black identities that incite productive activism on predominantly white campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2007)
- Acquire social capital and access to resources, politically wealthy persons, and exclusive networks (Harper, 2008)
- Craft productive responses to racist stereotypes (Harper, 2009)
- Overcome previous educational and socioeconomic disadvantage (Harper, 2007; Harper & Griffin, 2011)

asking for help was not a sign of weakness. “They told me I would really look weak if I quit college because I was too proud to ask for help. They also made sure I knew exactly where to go to get exactly what I needed to be successful. Now, I say the same things to Black male freshmen when they join our group.”

### **Matters of Engagement**

In our 2009 book, *Student Engagement in Higher Education*, University of Maryland Professor Stephen John Quaye and I cite over 30 years of research that showcases educational benefits conferred to students who are actively engaged on college and university campuses. Researchers such as George Kuh, Alexander Astin, Nancy Evans, Vincent Tinto, Marcia Baxter Magolda, Ernest Pascarella, and Patrick Terenzini have found that active engagement produces educational benefits and gains in the following domains: cognitive and intellectual development, moral and ethical development, practical competence and skills transferability, racial and gender identity development, and college adjustment. Not surprisingly, these and other scholars have also found that students who devote more time to academic-related activities outside of class earn higher grade point averages. One of the most widely acknowledged profits of engagement is its nexus with college student persistence. “We know one thing for certain: Students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than are their disengaged peers to persist through graduation” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 4).

Participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study were all extensively engaged student leaders on their campuses. Because of the well-documented benefits associated with educationally purposeful engagement, having a lengthy record of leadership in multiple student organizations, developing meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, and participating in enriching educational experiences (for example, study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs) were all criteria for participation in the study.

The achievers attributed much of their college success to their engagement experiences. Out-of-class experiences had spillover effects on academic performance for almost all the students interviewed. That is, the men believed they earned higher grades because they had less time to waste, interacted frequently with academically-driven others, and had reputations to uphold. Moreover, establishing relationships with faculty who advised clubs and organizations in which they held membership compelled the achievers to work harder to impress those same professors when they took their classes. Also, participants felt these faculty members treated them better in class because of their substantive interactions outside the classroom. Additionally, being a highly engaged student leader also introduced the achievers to networks of peers (within and beyond their same race) who shared notes, study strategies, and other resources that proved helpful in difficult courses.

In addition to naming the same benefits noted in the higher education and student affairs research literature, the 219 participants in this study cited at least seven race/gender-specific gains and educational outcomes associated with engagement. These are listed in Figure 2 and have been written about in the publications cited therein.

Despite their own high levels of leadership in student organizations and campus activities, participants almost unanimously asserted that their same-race male peers were considerably less engaged. Instead, the majority of Black undergraduate men devoted their out-of-class time to playing video games and sports, pursuing romantic relationships, and gathering socially with others in designated hangouts on campus. The achievers believed disengagement was a major factor in explaining poor academic performance and high rates of attrition among Black undergraduate men at their institutions. Their comparatively higher rates of engagement not only influenced how the achievers approached their academic endeavors, but also afforded them opportunities to compete successfully for jobs and internships, study abroad programs, and coveted slots in highly selective graduate and

professional schools. Many participants recognized ways in which they had been privileged at the expense of their lower-performing, less engaged Black male peers on campus. Because there were so few Black men with academic and engagement records comparable to theirs, the achievers were recurrently rewarded with experiences that conferred upon them additional developmental outcomes and educational benefits.

### **Responding Productively to Racism**

In our 2011 article published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, co-authors and I introduced the term “onlyness,” which we defined as “the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (see Harper et al., 2011, p. 190). Nearly all the participants who attended one of the 30 predominantly white institutions in the National Black Male College Achievement Study had been in classrooms where they were the only Black student. Some liberal arts colleges enrolled fewer than 50 Black undergraduate men; hence, several achievers said they could count on one hand the number of Black male students they saw on campus in a given week. Onlyness engendered a profound sense of pressure to be the spokesperson or ambassador for people of color in general and Black men in particular. Being one of few Black men with whom White students and professors interacted led to a set of common experiences that threatened the participants’ achievement and sense of belonging. Despite being among the most visible and actively engaged student leaders on campus, men interviewed for this study were not exempt from racism, stereotypes, and racial insults. Several participants were presumed to be academically underprepared. Therefore, their White peers picked them last (if at all) for group projects, and professors were surprised (and sometimes skeptical) when they did well on assignments. Even those with near-perfect high school and college GPAs talked about

how their White classmates made remarks like, “The only reason you got into this university is because of affirmative action.” Consistent with findings from other research on Black achievers in college (Bonner II, 2010; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009), participants at the predominantly white institutions felt pressure to prove they were admitted because of their intellectual prowess, not their race. The achievers also described how they were constantly asked which sport they played. Some had grown accustomed to being congratulated repeatedly on Mondays if the football or basketball team beat its weekend opponent. Moreover, numerous White students seemed certain that the achievers were rap and hip-hop music connoisseurs, spoke and understood slang, could teach them how to dance, or knew where they could purchase marijuana. Regardless of their backgrounds, it was usually assumed by peers and professors alike that the participants grew up in high-poverty urban ghettos and fatherless homes. A few were even called niggers on campus. Being student body president, for example, did not afford immunity from these and other racist encounters. With the exception of the affirmative action claims, these experiences were as common at highly selective institutions as they were at comprehensive state universities, and on urban and rural campuses alike.

Claude Steele, eminent psychologist and dean of the Stanford University School of Education, has written extensively about the anxieties some students experience as they think about confirming negative stereotypes regarding their racial/ethnic groups, which in turn affects their academic performance; this has been termed “stereotype threat” (see Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotypes are especially harmful when students internalize and agonize over them; those who identify most closely with academic achievement are especially vulnerable to stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Taylor & Antony, 2001). Most participants in the national study

consciously resisted the internalization of racist assumptions that peers and others had about Black men. Instead, they often responded by asking perpetrators to explain the basis of their presuppositions—for example, one participant at the University of Illinois asked a White classmate, “I’m not even tall, so what made you assume I was on the basketball team?” The strategy was to make perpetrators do the work of confronting their own assumptions and biases.

The achievers decided against responding in anger or waiting until hours later to reflect on a racist encounter; many became skilled at simultaneously embarrassing and educating their peers through the thoughtful act of calmly questioning their misconceptions. This was one of many racism response strategies that had been taught by their same-race peers, usually through predominantly Black or ethnic student organizations, during summer bridge programs or minority student orientations, and via Black men’s discussion groups (for example, Black Men United at the University of Pennsylvania and H.E.A.D.S. at the University of Michigan). These clubs and organizations were also spaces where other students of color shared stories about racist experiences and collaboratively strategized ways to respond effectively to similar situations. Furthermore, these were also venues in which the participants’ intellectual competence and sense of belonging were affirmed. Interacting meaningfully with other academically talented Black student leaders confirmed their individual and collective talents, the achievers reported. This proved useful when they encountered stereotypes and onlyness in various spaces on campus, including classrooms.





**Samuel Z. Alemayehu**

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M.S., Stanford University, 2008

CEO and Chairman, 4AMT  
Mobile Technologies Inc., the  
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# Additional Findings

Presented in this section are short responses to eight questions readers may have about the Black male achievers who participated in this study. Each response will be explained in greater detail in my forthcoming book, *Exceeding Expectations: How Black Male Students Succeed in College*.

## ▶ **What was the most surprising finding?**

Most surprising and most disappointing is that nearly every student interviewed said it was the first time someone had sat him down to ask how he successfully navigated his way to and through higher education, what compelled him to be engaged in student organizations and college classrooms, and what he learned that could help improve achievement and engagement among Black male collegians. As noted earlier, 219 of the 221 men who were nominated for this study agreed to participate; this alone confirms that achievers are willing to share insights into success if they are invited to do so.

## ▶ **What differentiated the achievers from their Black male peers?**

Participants did not deem themselves superior to or smarter than their less accomplished, disengaged same-race male peers. In fact, most believed lower-performing Black male students had the same potential, but had not encountered people or culturally relevant experiences that motivated them to be engaged, strive for academic success, and persist through baccalaureate degree attainment. In many interviews, achievers asserted, “The only thing that makes me different from them is that I was lucky enough to have [parents who maintained invariably

high expectations, an influential teacher, access to a college preparatory program, a peer mentor who shared the secrets of success, or life-changing opportunities to travel or establish meaningful relationships with college-educated adults who possessed tremendous social capital].” The achievers thought it was unfortunate that more Black men in their home communities and on their college campuses had missed these same opportunities. In many instances, they claimed it was serendipity, not aptitude, that largely determined which Black men succeeded.

## And the First Ph.D. Goes to...

### **Cullen Buie, The Ohio State University**

As an undergraduate student at Ohio State, Cullen Buie was president of the National Society of Black Engineers, academic excellence chair for Lambda Psi honor society, a peer mentor for the Office of Minority Affairs, a founding member of the Association of Black Leaders for Entrepreneurship, a new student orientation leader, and the student representative on several university committees. He spent his summers interning with Polaroid, Proctor & Gamble, and Dow Chemicals, and participated in a research exchange program in Brazil during the fall term of his senior year. Moreover, he devoted many hours to doing research with Dr. Gregory Washington, a Black male professor in the OSU College of Engineering. Cullen now spends his time studying microfluidics, microbial fuel cells, and biofuels; his research has been published in scholarly venues such as the *International Journal of Heat and Mass Transfer* and the *Journal of the Electrochemical Society*. After earning his bachelor’s degree, Cullen accepted a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship that paid for his pursuit of a master’s degree and Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering at Stanford University. Though several others are presently enrolled in graduate programs, Cullen was first of the 219 participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study to earn a doctorate. After attaining his Ph.D., Dr. Buie began a tenure-track faculty position at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Professor Buie now holds an endowed chair at MIT, where he teaches, mentors students, and does research.





## Chaney Goes to the NBA

### Chris Chaney, Princeton University

Chris Chaney loves sports, especially basketball. When he was not engaged in planning the annual Princeton University State of Black Men in America Conference, developing his communication and leadership skills alongside others in the Black Men's Awareness Group, or working hard to keep his GPA above 3.0, much of what was left of Chris's time was devoted to sports. The Princeton Varsity Club presented him its Distinguished Undergraduate Athletic Service Award as well as the Spirit of Princeton Award for his contributions to the University community. Chris did not aspire to become a professional athlete, but instead focused his career ambitions on the business side of sports. As an undergraduate student, he founded and later became executive director of The Ivy Sports Symposium, an annual sports business conference that rotates among Ivy League schools. Immediately after graduating from Princeton, he accepted a full-time job in Global Marketing Partnerships at the National Basketball Association, where he worked with clients such as Coca-Cola and Nike. This role at the NBA inspired Chris to launch Chaney Sports Group (now Chaney Sportainment Group), a boutique sports and entertainment agency of which he now serves as president and chief executive officer. His internationally focused agency engages in a broad range of corporate consulting projects, including sports mergers and acquisitions, merchandising and licensing, marketing strategy, and sponsorship sales. Chris presently resides in Germany, though his work takes him all around the world. In December 2011, *Forbes* magazine named him one of the top 30 entertainment executives under the age of 30.

### ► What about structured mentoring programs?

Several participants were involved in structured mentoring programs sponsored by Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the YMCA, alumni chapters of historically black fraternities and sororities, and other entities before they went to college. However, none said anything about their postsecondary institutions' structured mentoring programs as they named people, experiences, and resources that aided their college success. Put differently, no participant attributed even a fraction of his college achievement to a program that systematically matched him with faculty, staff, or peers with whom he was to routinely meet. Instead, they reflected mostly on relationships they cultivated with professors and high-level administrators (for example, the university president or dean of students) through engagement in clubs and enriching educational experiences. Student leadership positions gave these men access to campus officials on whom they could rely for advice, recommendation letters, advocacy, and insider knowledge about institutional policies and procedural loopholes. Such people became mentors to the participants, but the relationships were not fostered via a matching service coordinated by an office on campus. Furthermore, students who had done collaborative research, service learning, or study abroad trips with faculty spoke extensively about how those instructors played mentoring roles in their lives. Working closely on educationally purposeful tasks outside the classroom afforded the educators and achievers substantive opportunities to learn about each other, which added value to the students' achievement trajectories in myriad ways.

### ► How many were in Historically Black Fraternities?

Sixty-five of the 219 achievers (29.7%) held membership in one of the five National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities—Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, or Iota

Phi Theta. A few campuses, particularly the liberal arts colleges, had no Black fraternities; this partially explains why there were not more fraternity men in the sample. However, the majority of participating colleges and universities had two or more active NPHC fraternity chapters. Given their espoused purposes (scholarship, achievement, leadership, brotherhood, community service, etc.), it seems that the fraternities should have been ideal engagement venues for men such as those who participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study. But several students thought their time and talents were better invested elsewhere. Many felt that the current members' behaviors contradicted the purported principles of their fraternities. For example, a participant at Purdue University noted that each NPHC fraternity had a cumulative chapter GPA below 2.7; his was 3.78. Others believed they could develop their leadership skills or do community service through one of the several hundred other clubs and organizations on campus. Most unattractive were reports of physical hazing. When asked, "Why haven't you joined one of the Black fraternities on campus?" the overwhelming majority of non-members responded that they had no interest in being hazed.

### ► Were they religious or spiritual?

Nearly all were Christians; three were Muslims. Two participants were ordained ministers, some were sons of pastors, a few sang in their colleges' gospel choirs, and others led weekly bible study for their peers on campus. The majority of achievers attended church during their time in college, though doing so was difficult amid their academic and campus leadership commitments. While their religious engagement sometimes wavered, most participants said they prayed often and had become noticeably more spiritual in college. One of the most interesting findings in the study pertains to attribution for their success. Several achievers had what I have termed a *spiritual locus of control*, meaning they believed their lives, academic

*Most surprising and most disappointing is that nearly every student interviewed said it was the first time someone had sat him down to ask how he successfully navigated his way to and through higher education, what compelled him to be engaged in student organizations and college classrooms, and what he learned that could help improve achievement and engagement among Black male collegians.*

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accomplishments, and destinies were predetermined by God. On the one hand, they recognized that certain choices they made (for example, studying instead of partying all weekend) influenced their outcomes. Yet, on the other hand, they attributed their success to God's favor and plan for their lives. Even in describing things that parents, mentors, and influential others did that positively affected their college success, several men quickly followed up by saying God had placed those people in their lives as part of some larger purpose. Almost without exception, the achievers spoke extensively about God "working things out," "ordering their steps," and "directing their paths." They credited God for their high GPAs, scholarships and honors, leadership positions to which they had been elected, and the unusual opportunities they had been afforded.

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#### ▶ **What were their views on masculinity?**

Unlike what much of the literature reports on young Black men's gender performance, participants in this study did not define their masculinities through acquiring material possessions, the number of women with whom they had sex, or dominance in competitive activities with their male peers (drug trafficking, sports, weightlifting, video games, etc.). Instead, most achievers felt the true measure of a man is his willingness to assume responsibility for leading his family and community. Student leadership roles, especially those that involved advancing Black communities, offered the achievers a platform to exercise this version of manhood. Competitiveness was evidenced in their pursuits of top leadership positions on campus. Though theirs was seemingly more productive than other expressions

of masculinity, some may rightly observe that the participants in this study subscribed and aspired to traditional, hegemonic gender scripts.


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#### ▶ **How were their relationships with Black women?**

Every participant spoke favorably of his friendships with Black women. In fact, many reported that their same-race female peers were hugely influential in their college success. They also spoke fondly of collaborative relationships they had established with women through study groups and planning campus activities, community service initiatives, and student protests. Despite this, many achievers held misogynistic views of Black women. Some were in romantic relationships with Black women, but the overwhelming majority of heterosexual men in the sample were single. With the exception of the three men's colleges, participants elsewhere described a shortage of Black couples on campus; in most instances, they could be counted on one hand. When asked why they and so few other Black heterosexual men were in serious romantic relationships with Black women, numerous participants unashamedly asserted there was a shortage of attractive Black women who were worthy of dating. They also believed Black women were too interested in relationships that would lead to marriage; they just wanted to have fun, which usually was a codeword for sex.

#### ▶ **Were any of them gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexualities?**

Only six participants were openly gay when interviews were conducted. No achiever said he was transgender. Some men (fewer than 10) decided against disclosing their sexual orientations while the digital recording device was on, but talked about questioning their sexualities or being gay or bisexual once the interview ended. These men, as well as heterosexual and openly gay participants, believed there were enormous social risks associated with being gay and out on campus. Most suspected that other Black students would ostracize them, vote against them in campus elections, or discredit their leadership. These fears were expressed least often among participants on the liberal arts campuses, and were most pronounced at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Non-heterosexual Black male students were perceivably less supported by same-race peers at institutions with higher numbers of Black students. Hence, participants reported that many men who had sex with men claimed to be strictly heterosexual.



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A.M., Harvard University, 2011

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# Recommendations for Improving Black Male Student Success in College

In its 2010 publication, *A Stronger Nation through Higher Education*, Lumina Foundation commits itself to “The Big Goal” – increasing the proportion of American adults with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025. President Barack Obama, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The College Board, and others have joined Lumina in advancing efforts to improve rates of postsecondary education attainment in the United States. Getting more people to college is a necessary, yet insufficient step. Ensuring that those who enroll actually complete degree and certificate programs is the only way to actualize the big goal. As noted in an earlier section of this report, across four cohorts of undergraduates, two-thirds of Black male students who began baccalaureate degree programs did not graduate within six years, which is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial groups in higher education (Harper, 2012). High rates of attrition among this population undermine current efforts to increase the number of college-educated adults in our nation.

Postsecondary educators, leaders, and policymakers must do more of what works to enroll, retain, educate, and graduate Black male students. But they cannot do so without better understanding what helps these men persist through degree attainment. Over a five-year period (2004-2009), nearly a quarter million bachelor’s degrees were conferred to Black men in the U.S., a number that is undeniably insufficient. Perhaps more problematic, though, is that few of these 249,294 college graduates have likely been invited to explain how they successfully navigated their way to and through the institutions they attended. Hence, asking those who have been successful to talk about what helped them succeed is the most powerful recommendation I have for anyone who endeavors to improve the status of Black male students. As mentioned in the previous section, the most disappointing finding in the National Black Male College Achievement Study was that few participants had been consulted for helpful and potentially instructive insights into success.

Popular responses to the Black male college achievement problem include starting a structured mentoring program (a matching service), forming a committee to determine why Black men are so disengaged and why they

drop out in such high numbers, and hosting a daylong Black male summit on campus. Unfortunately, these efforts have done little to improve educational outcomes and degree attainment rates. Moreover, they did not emerge as noteworthy contributors to achievement and persistence among the 219 men who participated in this study. There are no simple solutions to problems such as those described on Page 3 of this report. As such, most institutions continually struggle to eradicate educational inequities that disadvantage Black male students.

Offered in this section are recommendations for parents and families, educators, administrators, policymakers, and others who wish to improve Black undergraduate men’s educational outcomes and degree attainment rates. Several dozen useful implications could be derived from this 42-campus research study. But the 12 presented below align best with findings summarized in earlier sections of this report. Additional recommendations for policy and practice are included in my forthcoming book.

## **Consistently High Parent Expectations**

Parents and family members must convey to Black boys as early as possible that college is the most reliable pathway to success. Even parents who have not experienced college firsthand should consistently articulate to their sons a non-negotiable expectation that they will enroll in a postsecondary institution immediately after completing high school. As the study participants noted, the question was never *if*, but *where* they would attend college. Hearing this repeatedly from an early age helps young men craft future aspirations that minimally include attaining a bachelor’s degree. In families and communities where there are few college-educated role models, it is especially important that boys know there are more 18-24 year-old Black men in college than in prisons, the number of Black men graduating from college has more than doubled over the past 30 years, and the overwhelming majority of degree earners have experienced sustainable success in their lives and careers.

## **Equipping Families with College Knowledge**

Policymakers and foundations should invest in community-based initiatives that help parents, particularly those who did not attend college, better

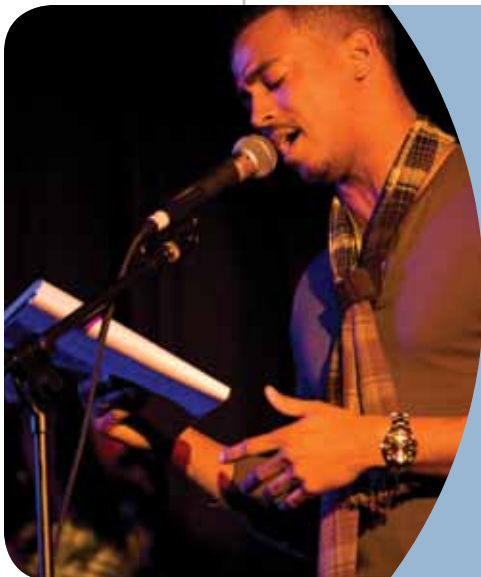
understand what is required to strengthen their children's readiness for higher education. Nearly all the Black male students in this study were successful because their family members somehow figured out what questions to ask about college, wisely enrolled them in college preparatory programs (most of which were available at no cost), and recognized how maintaining high expectations could enhance the development of college aspirations. Free education courses for family members that focus on these topics are needed in low-income communities. These could also be sites where families learn about differences between various types of colleges and universities, as well as Prep-for-Prep, the Posse Scholars Program, college scholarship opportunities, and income threshold financial aid initiatives that enable students from low-income backgrounds to attend expensive postsecondary institutions at no cost. Additionally, these programs could assist parents in thinking strategically about ensuring their children not only get to college, but also graduate within six years of enrolling.

### **The Preparation (and Remediation) of K-12 and Postsecondary Professionals**

K-12 teachers, high school guidance counselors, and postsecondary faculty and administrators share at least one thing in common: they graduated from college. In fact, many have completed master's and doctoral degree programs that supposedly prepared them for their current roles. Moreover, Whites comprise the overwhelming majority of educators and administrators at all levels of education. Achievers interviewed for this study said these professionals often engaged in practices that had harmful effects on Black male students' aspirations, college choice processes, and educational

outcomes. To be fair, it is unlikely that many of these educators were challenged by their former instructors to critically examine their assumptions about Black men and communities of color. For example, guidance counselors who deem certain Black students "too good" to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities probably never had conversations about the racial implications of this perspective when they were students in counselor education programs. Likewise, most college faculty took few (if any) courses in their Ph.D. programs that adequately prepared them for teaching generally and engaging diverse student populations specifically. As a result, they entered college classrooms with unconscious biases concerning Black men and taught in ways that alienated students of color.

Programs that prepare teachers, counselors, K-12 and higher education administrators, and postsecondary faculty must add to their curricula more courses that prepare these professionals to do more of what is required to reduce racial inequities in education. Also necessary is the remediation of bad educational practices employed by current professionals who have already graduated from degree programs that insufficiently prepared them to work effectively with racial minority students. Professional development programs, journaling and reflective self-study exercises, and facilitated discussions are some ways this can be done. Also, the University of Southern California Center for Urban Education's collaborative, reflective, and data-driven Equity Scorecard process could help educators recognize how their individual and collective actions undermine equity in general and disadvantage Black male students in particular (see Harris III, Bensimon, & Bishop, 2010).



## **Renaissance Man Turned College Administrator**

### **Jonathan Michael Cox, Hampton University**

Jonathan Michael Cox was a college student-athlete, an activity in which he found tremendous satisfaction and accomplishment. Despite his athletic talent, this Hampton University student refused to have a one-dimensional undergraduate experience. Instead, he boldly committed himself to being a scholar, actively engaged campus leader, and student-athlete, a trio of roles that some may view as impossible to balance. Jonathan helped coordinate campus events, traveled for athletic competitions as well as student leader retreats, joined Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, did community service, and ultimately graduated from Hampton with a 3.92 cumulative grade point average. When asked what he gained from approaching college this way, he replied, "Most immediately, I think I've gained a future career because I've always struggled with deciding what I want to do in life. I've always been a person who is good at many things, but rarely exceptional or especially terrible at anything." As he predicted during his interview, Jonathan went on to pursue a master's degree in college student affairs administration at Penn State University and a subsequent career in higher education. He presently serves as assistant director of multicultural affairs at Wake Forest University. But unlike most busy university administrators, Jonathan somehow finds time to write and perform poetry, sing in front of live audiences, play musical instruments, cook, exercise, tweet, blog, and travel. He plans to begin a Ph.D. program (and who knows what else) in Fall 2012.

## **Connecting Black Male Teens to Effective College Preparatory Experiences**

Parents should seek out precollege preparatory programs for their sons (for example, university-sponsored Saturday academies), as many Black male achievers said these initiatives enhanced their college readiness. Cautionary note: not all college prep programs achieve the same results. Best are those that include all the components that Perna (2002) found to be effective predictors of college enrollment. Many of these initiatives presently exist, but there are at least two noteworthy shortcomings. First, they are often underfunded, which limits the number of students who can participate in the no-cost versions. Federal, state, and local governments, as well as foundations, corporations, universities, professional athletes and other philanthropists, can help expand participation rates by investing more money into programs that show evidence of effectiveness. Second, many of the programs that target low-income families and students who would be the first in their families to attend college are disproportionately female. Thus, program administrators should strive for greater gender balance by marketing more strategically to parents of Black boys.

## **Removing Financial Barriers to College Success**

The overwhelming majority of participants in this study had time to be engaged in enriching educational experiences because they did not work off-campus jobs. Also, because their financial aid packages were sufficient enough to cover the cost of attendance, most did not accrue significant student loan debt. Financial aid officers should help students find alternatives to loans and off-campus work. For example, the achievers applied for numerous external scholarships, which ultimately paid educational costs not covered by Pell Grants, work study, and other common forms of aid. It seems important to highlight the nexus here between financial aid and student engagement. Put simply, these students were able to compete successfully for external scholarships and well-paid summer experiences because they had strong GPAs, impressive records of campus leadership and engagement, and stellar recommendation letters from faculty and high-level administrators who knew them well. Black men are typically underrepresented in paid student leadership roles (Harper, 2006c; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006) and resident assistant positions that come with free room and board (Harper et al., 2011). Administrators in student affairs and residence life should use differentiated marketing approaches to creatively entice more Black men to apply for these positions that would alleviate financial stress and simultaneously produce a well-documented set of developmental gains.

One participant said he applied to Stanford because he accidentally discovered that he could attend at no cost since his parents' combined income was less than \$35,000. Colleges and universities that offer loans-free and income threshold institutional aid initiatives, as well as those that

host the Posse Scholars Program, should do a better job of ensuring that Black male achievers and their parents, high school guidance counselors, and leaders in Black communities (pastors, NAACP and Urban League chapter presidents, 100 Black Men of America, alumni chapters of Black fraternities, college prep program directors, etc.) know these opportunities exist. Targeted outreach campaigns and information sessions held in predominantly Black communities could help increase awareness and ultimately applications to these institutions. Lastly, in the current era of declining state support for public institutions of higher education and proposed reductions to federal spending (which would negatively affect Pell Grants), policymakers should more thoughtfully consider how these choices undermine efforts to increase postsecondary attainment rates in our country. Committing more public resources to educating Black men instead of incarcerating them is one sensible policy proposal.

## **Building Summer Bridges to Student Success**

More institutions should create programs that effectively bridge Black male students' transitions from high school to college. The version of these programs participants spoke most favorably about cost them nothing, occurred the summer between their high school graduation and first year of college, lasted 6-8 weeks, were residential, and targeted racial minority, first generation, and low-income students. These programs should allow students to take a pair of credit-earning introductory-level courses; expose students to resources, important institutional agents, and engagement opportunities; and include peer mentors who can advise newcomers on effective ways to navigate the campus, cope effectively with oneliness, respond productively to racism and stereotypes, and identify funding opportunities (internal and external) to help offset their college expenses. At some institutions, these bridge programs were part of TRIO Student Support Services, a federally-funded initiative. Hence, policymakers should make certain the federal budget includes ample funds to support and expand participation rates in TRIO programs. As with other initiatives advocated in this section, bridge program directors should employ differentiated outreach techniques to ensure gender balance.

## **Assuming Institutional Responsibility for Black Male Student Engagement**

In defining *Race-Conscious Student Engagement*, I argued the following:

The popular approach of only determining what students do to become engaged must be counterbalanced by examinations of what educators do to engage students. Put differently, questions concerning effort must be shifted from the individual student to her or his institution. Effective educators avoid asking, what's wrong with these students, why aren't they engaged? Instead, they aggressively explore the institution's shortcomings

*Committing more public resources to educating Black men instead of incarcerating them is one sensible policy proposal.*



*Although the 219 participants in this study took it upon themselves to become engaged, they confirmed that the majority of their same-race male peers did not feel as comfortable or motivated to do the same. The achievers believed most other Black male undergraduates were smart enough to be actively engaged inside the classroom, but were intimidated by the threat of confirming stereotypes concerning their intellectual aptitude.*

and ponder how faculty members and administrators could alter their practices to distribute the benefits of engagement more equitably. (Harper, 2009b, p. 41)

Presently, the onus for Black male student engagement is placed almost entirely on the student. In a self-directed fashion, he is expected to seek out resources, engagement opportunities, and enriching educational experiences that will best prepare him for post-college success. It is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect that the majority of students (Black, male, or otherwise) will engage themselves in this way. This misplaced onus for engagement helps explain, at least in part, why only 48.1% of all undergraduates who enroll at public postsecondary institutions graduate within six years and why completion rates are nearly 15 percentage points lower for Black undergraduate men.

Although the 219 participants in this study took it upon themselves to become engaged, they confirmed that the majority of their same-race male peers did not feel as comfortable or motivated to do the same. The achievers believed most other Black male undergraduates were smart enough to be actively engaged inside the classroom, but were intimidated by the threat of confirming stereotypes concerning their intellectual aptitude. Moreover, they suggested that others would have enjoyed doing culturally-relevant research with faculty, but did not have the confidence to approach professors about these and other potentially rewarding engagement opportunities outside the classroom. Given this, postsecondary educators and administrators must assume greater responsibility for engaging this population. Instead of waiting for Black men to find their way to the Office of International Programs, for example, professionals from that office should go to Black

men's groups and ethnic student organization meetings to do presentations on study abroad opportunities. Similarly, instead of expecting the lone Black male student to initiate a conversation after class, the professor should invite this student to her office; express genuine interest in knowing more about him and his aspirations; and find ways to connect this young man with substantive out-of-class engagement experiences that will advance his goals. Given the well-documented nexus between engagement and student retention (see Harper & Quayle, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), institutional agents must assume greater responsibility for engaging undergraduates who complete college at low rates.

### **Supporting Ethnic Student Organizations**

Campus administrators should ensure that Black Student Unions, undergraduate chapters of the National Society of Black Engineers, and other ethnic student groups are funded at levels that enable them to thrive. Numerous Black male achievers first developed their communication and leadership skills in these groups before branching out to more mainstream activities and organizations. Reliable advisory support also increases the effectiveness of these organizations and allows students to cultivate valuable relationships with faculty and administrators beyond the classroom. Lastly, campus officials should help defend the necessity of these groups when their existence is questioned or they are accused of promoting separatism. Without them, even fewer Black undergraduate men would be engaged and retained.

### **Venues for Brotherly Bonding and Peer Support**

Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) and groups like the Harvard Black Men's Forum bring students together

in comfortable spaces that allow them to validate each other's experiences, seek and share advice, and talk about topics relevant to Black men on campus and in larger social contexts. Many undergraduates also locate same-race peer mentors in these groups. In my view, every campus I have visited could benefit from having some structure that unites Black men. The design and activities of these groups vary—some are entirely discussion-based, while others do social programming and cultural activities. In any case, participants reflected fondly on how these groups increased their sense of belonging and offered them occasions to fellowship with others whom they may never see in classrooms or elsewhere on campus. These groups function best when they have a Black male faculty or staff advisor who helps facilitate dialogues and ensures the members know about valuable resources and opportunities. One shortcoming of Black male student groups is that they tend to not be viewed as welcoming or affirming spaces for gay male students and others whose behaviors may seem inconsistent with hegemonic masculine norms. Advisors and group leaders should challenge members to foster a culture that is inclusive of all masculinities and forms of diversity among Black undergraduate men.

### **Addressing Toxic Campus Racial Climates**

Racism and racial stereotypes pose serious threats to one's sense of belonging, engagement, academic achievement, and persistence. Instead of suggesting that educators equip students of color with resistant response strategies such as those employed by Black men interviewed for this study, I insist here (as I have done elsewhere) that campus leaders must do more to enact espoused institutional values concerning equity and inclusion. This demands honest discussions about the realities of race on campus, systematic climate assessment activities, widespread dissemination of

assessment data, collaborative planning and programming, and accountability at all levels of the institution. Moreover, inviting Black men and other students of color to speak publicly about stereotypes and racist encounters on campus would make these issues more transparent. But institutional agents must then be willing to assume individual and collective responsibility for addressing institutional practices and norms that cyclically reproduce racial inequities. The responsibility for addressing toxic racial climates should not belong to the chief diversity officer, the office of multicultural affairs, or people of color—it must be owned by all units and every person on campus. Attempting to improve the status of Black undergraduate men without confronting racism in predominantly White campus environments is likely to produce few, if any, measurable gains.

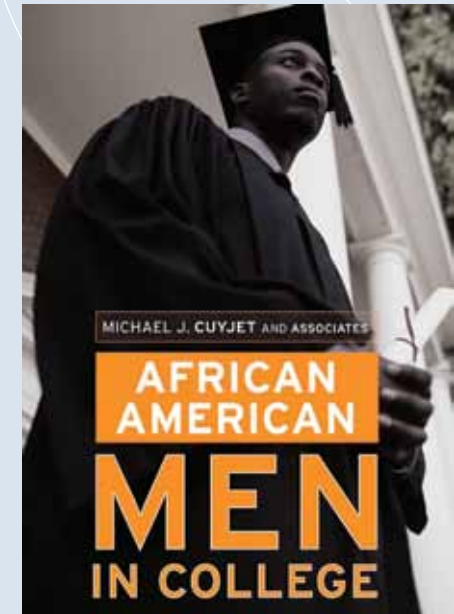
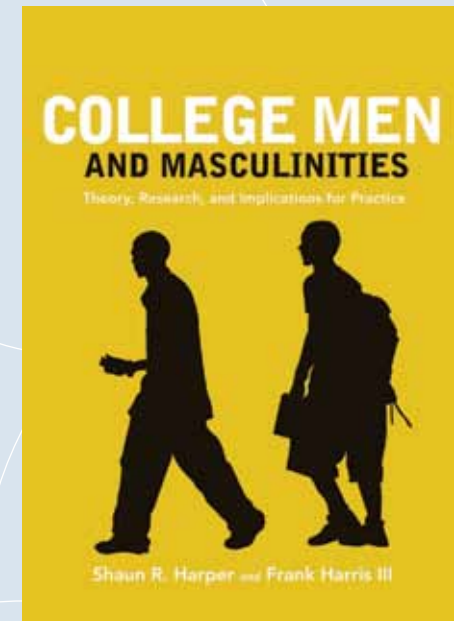
### Remembering Masculinities

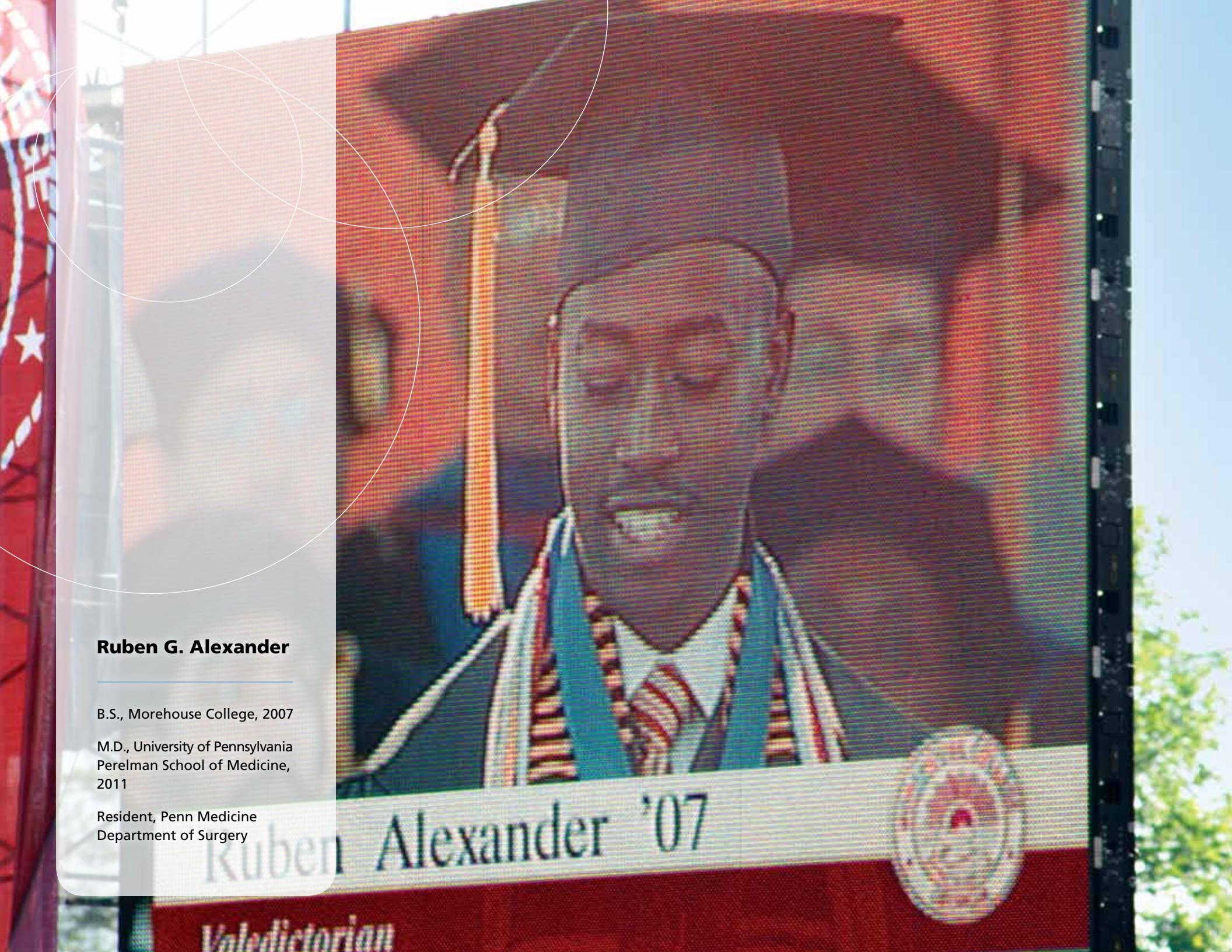
In our 2010 book, *College Men and Masculinities*, San Diego State University Professor Frank Harris III and I argue that sending “college-educated men into the world with troubled masculinities, underdeveloped gender identities, and erroneous assumptions concerning women and other men with whom they co-occupy society makes contemporary institutions of higher education one of the guiltiest culprits in the perpetual maintenance of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia in America” (p. 13). A complete Black male student success agenda therefore must focus equally on getting young men to college, through college, and ensuring they become better people in the process. Poor help-seeking tendencies and disengagement are often byproducts of troubled masculinities. Similarly, the misogynistic perceptions of Black women expressed by participants in this study, as well as those in Kimbrough and Harper’s (2006) research, are attributable to problems in male students’ prior gender socialization. Black men’s groups are ideal sites for engaging these issues. Most especially, these should be settings where advisors and peers disrupt sexist and other problematic perspectives on women. In individual interactions, counselors, advisors, faculty, and others must be mindful of how prior masculine socialization and perceived threats to one’s manhood may be affecting his attitudes, behaviors, choices, and aspirations.

### Creating Affirming Spaces for Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning Students

As noted on Page 3, Black undergraduate men already encounter numerous threats to their college achievement. Being ostracized by one’s peers for being gay or bisexual also undermines engagement and sense of belonging, two key predictors of persistence. Postsecondary educators and administrators must consciously construct safer, more affirming environments to support these students. Gay and heterosexual men alike at the HBCUs were certain that peers, faculty, and administrators would be staunchly opposed to having openly gay students serve in major leadership roles on campus. In Fall 2009, HBCUs enrolled a total of 78,347 Black male undergraduates. The reality is that more than a few of these students are gay, bisexual, or questioning; some may even be transgender. Therefore, campus leaders must work more responsibly to ensure these Black men are treated respectfully and receive the support required for high achievement. Beyond the HBCUs, study participants elsewhere, to varying degrees, reported that men who had sex with men often claimed to be heterosexual because they were afraid of the social ramifications of disclosing their sexualities. Energies one invests into pretending to be something he is not could be redirected to more academically purposeful endeavors that lead to degree attainment and post-college success. Given this, educators and administrators should facilitate dialogues about homophobia for their colleagues and students; bring Black gay, lesbian, and transgender speakers to campus; and consider ways to better support gay and bisexual students who may desire to pursue leadership roles on campus. Moreover, diversifying the institution with more LGBT faculty and staff could increase sense of belonging among LGBT students.

### Recommended Readings





**Ruben G. Alexander**

B.S., Morehouse College, 2007

M.D., University of Pennsylvania  
Perelman School of Medicine,  
2011

Resident, Penn Medicine  
Department of Surgery

# Conclusion

If nothing else, this report confirms there are Black male students who succeed in and graduate from college – James Bland, Rubin Pusha III, Anthony Jack, Ryan Bowen, Raymond Roy-Pace, Samuel Alemayehu, Professor Cullen Buie, Chris Chaney, Dr. Ruben Alexander, and Jonathan Cox were among them. Since interviewing these ten achievers and the 209 others, I have met hundreds (if not thousands) of Black men who had similar records of college achievement – some are my friends, fraternity brothers, undergraduate mentees, graduate students, research collaborators, and faculty colleagues. These men exist, but their stories of achievement are rarely solicited. This must change if educators, policymakers, and concerned others are to make serious progress in improving rates of success among this population. No one is a better source of instructive insights on what it takes for Black men to succeed in college than Black men who have actually succeeded in college.

Like the 219 students who participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study, there are undoubtedly others on campuses across the country whose transcripts, résumés, and post-college ambitions completely contradict popular narratives of Black male hopelessness. They are somehow debunking longstanding caricatures of Black undergraduate men as lazy, unmotivated, underprepared for college, intellectually incompetent, and disengaged. Find them. Ask them how they got there. Understand what keeps them enrolled at the institution from year-to-year; why they are so engaged inside and outside the classroom; what strategies they employ to earn good grades and cultivate substantive relationships with professors; and how they manage to transcend environmental, social, cultural, economic, and academic barriers that typically undermine achievement for others like them. Invite them to give voice to the racism, severe underrepresentation, and low expectations they and their same-race male peers routinely encounter in classrooms and elsewhere. Find out how they sustain confidence, resilience, and goal commitment. Try to understand from their points of view what the institution must do to foster a greater sense of belonging and improve

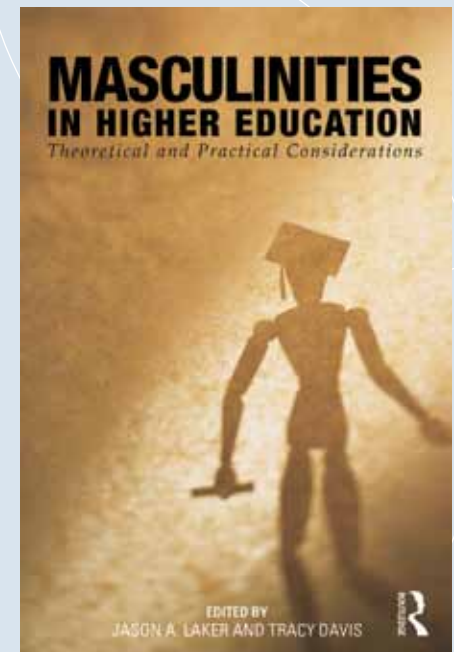
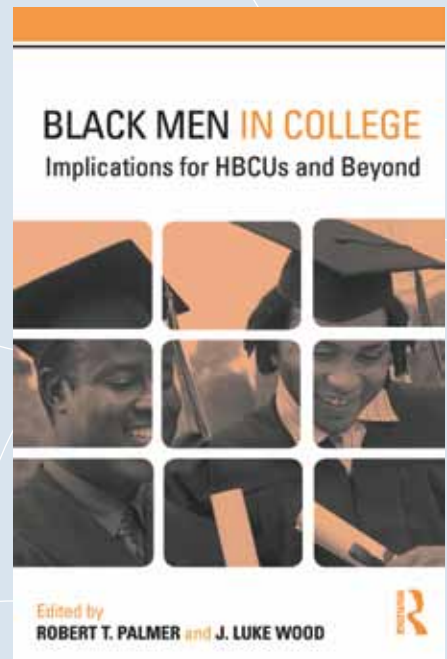
rates of academic success among Black male students. Their perspectives are guaranteed to be useful.

The data on which this report is based were collected one campus at a time, in face-to-face interviews with one individual student at a time. As Morehouse College President Robert M. Franklin so eloquently wrote, “we are dealing with human lives” in education. Concerning Black men’s lives in college, each deserves to be more responsibly handled by educators, social scientists, journalists, and the American public – the achievers, dropouts, disengaged, low performers, campus leaders, student-athletes, heterosexuals and gay men alike. It is my hope that this report helps advance a better understanding of an important population of Black men whose lives are often overlooked.

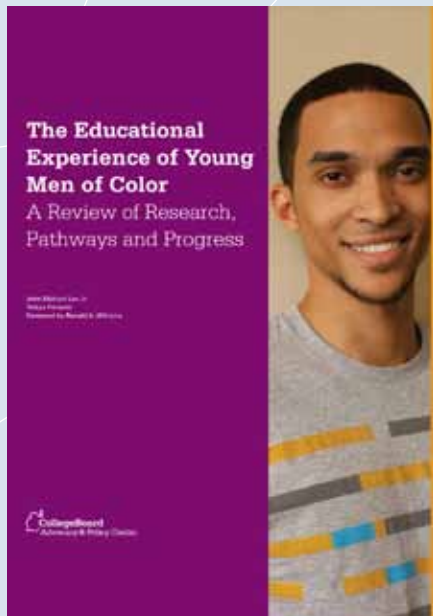
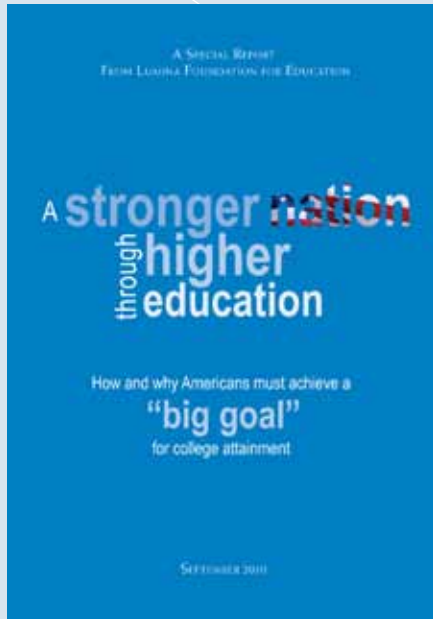
My plea for a paradigmatic shift in the way achievement is studied could be misunderstood as a call to discontinue longstanding efforts to raise consciousness concerning Black male disadvantage. For sure, more anti-deficit research is needed, but so too are additional studies that help explain in far more complex ways why Black male students perform lowest on most traditional measures of achievement, why many white educators expect so little of them, and how social forces (for example, poverty and access to healthcare) impact their educational outcomes. In sum, I advocate a more balanced and multidimensional understanding of Black men’s lives in schools and other social contexts.

Neither this report nor my forthcoming book (*Exceeding Expectations: How Black Male Students Succeed in College*) is intended to be a final statement on Black male college achievement. Much more remains to be written and critically examined. While several important insights and recommendations are offered herein, useful others are yet to be discovered.

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## Recommended Readings



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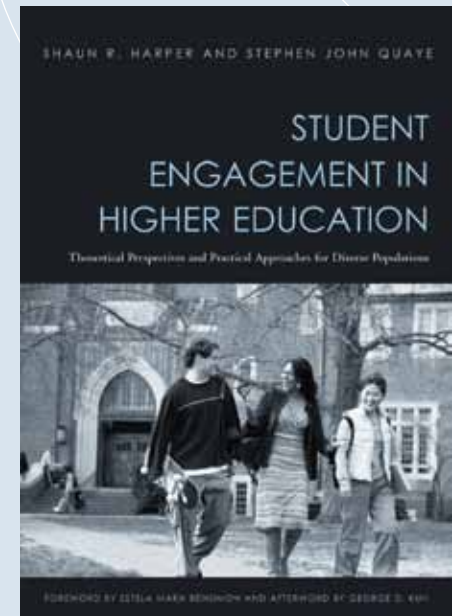
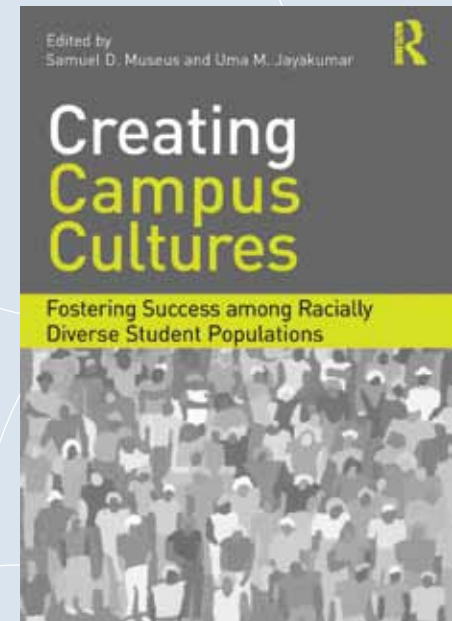
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## About the Author

### Dr. Shaun R. Harper

Shaun R. Harper is a tenured faculty member in the Graduate School of Education, Africana Studies, and Gender Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also serves as director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. He is co-founder of the Penn GSE Black Male Grad Prep Academy and a faculty fellow in the Penn Institute for Urban Research. Professor Harper maintains an active research agenda that examines race and gender in education and social contexts, Black male college access and achievement, and college student engagement. His nine books include: *College Men and Masculinities* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), *Student Engagement in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2009), *Introduction to American Higher Education* (Routledge, 2011), and the 5th edition of *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession* (Jossey-Bass, 2011). He is finishing a single-authored book titled, *Exceeding Expectations: How Black Male Students Succeed in College*.

Dr. Harper is also the author of more than 80 peer-reviewed journal articles and other academic publications. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *Review of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Men's Studies*, and *Teachers College Record* are among the journals in which his research is published. He is editor-in-chief of the Routledge Book Series on Race and Racism in U.S. Higher Education. Additionally, he has delivered over 40 keynote addresses and presented more than 125 research papers, workshops, and symposia at national education conferences. Several associations have praised his scholarly work, including the Association for the Study of Higher Education (2008 Early Career Award), the American Educational Research Association (2010 Early Career Award, Division G), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2010 Outstanding Contribution to Research Award). In September 2007, Professor Harper was featured on the cover of *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* for his National Black Male College Achievement Study, the largest-ever empirical study of Black undergraduate men. He has received grants from Lumina Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and numerous other sources to fund his research.

Dr. Harper earned his bachelor's degree in education from Albany State, a Historically Black University in Georgia, and Ph.D. in higher education from Indiana University.

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# About the Center

The Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education unites scholars from schools of education and other academic departments who do research on race, racism, campus racial climates, and topics pertaining to equity in education. Center staff and affiliates collaborate on funded research projects, environmental assessment activities, and the production of timely status reports. Principally, the Center aims to publish cutting-edge implications for education policy and practice, with an explicit focus on improving equity in P-12 schools, colleges and universities, and social contexts that influence educational outcomes.

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